

## WWII Vet Survived Night In Ocean

When Warren McLellan flew out of Alexander Airport in Moffett, he never imagined he'd end up in the South Pacific with Mae West. He'd earned his private pilot's license flying a Piper J-3 Cub out of Alexander Airport, but McLellan departed from Moffett in September 1941 as a passenger bound for New Orleans as a U.S. Navy pilot trainee.

"I went into the Navy before we ever thought about going to war ... there was no draft at that time," said McLellan, 86, of Fort Smith. But the United States was drawn into World War II before McLellan could finish his initial stage of military flight training. "I was listening to the radio and writing a letter home, Sunday afternoon (Dec. 7, 1941), when we heard about the Japanese attacking Pearl Harbor," McLellan said.

As the U.S. entered the war, McLellan's training progressed, with stops in Pensacola, Fla., Miami, Fort Lauderdale, Fla., Glenview, Ill., and then Norfolk, Va., where he became carrier-qualified as a pilot. He went on to Quonset, R.I., where he was assigned to Torpedo Squadron 16.

It was summer 1943 and Allied forces had achieved significant victories in the South Pacific, but still needed to secure islands and create airfields to launch land-based B-29 bombing raids on Tokyo. Carrier Air Group 16, including Torpedo Squadron 16, was assigned to the USS Lexington, which arrived at Pearl Harbor before steaming toward the Pacific atoll of Tarawa in September with the other vessels in Task Force 58. At the small island about 2,500 miles southwest of Hawaii, McLellan flew the first of 27 combat missions.

"It was very nerve-racking ... any time you were on an attack, nerves were in high pitch," McLellan said. His first dive was dropping four 500-pound bombs on a gun emplacement, where his TBM Avenger torpedo bomber took several hits. "The bullets knocked dust off the floor into my face as we dived," McLellan said. McLellan's plane was struck by enemy ground fire on six of his first 10 combat missions. "He got hit all the time, so I think he went in unnecessarily low sometimes." McLellan's wife, Wanda, said. "I did, I tried to press all my attacks," McLellan said.

A pressing attack at Palau, a 177-square-mile island about 500 miles east of the Philippines, and enemy gunfire forced McLellan to land his bomber in the water in the spring of 1944. After he dropped his bombs, McLellan's plane was struck by enemy gunfire from the ground, and although his aircraft was functioning, the pilots flying on his wing advised him to land in the water before he caught fire or the engine cut out. McLellan set the plane down in the water, and in less than 10 minutes an amphibious rescue plane picked up McLellan and his crew and took them to the nearby USS Wichita before returning to the Lexington. It wasn't the last time enemy fire would force McLellan into the Pacific.

On June 19, 1944, the USS Lexington and other TF 58 ships were near the Marianas Islands when the Imperial Japanese Navy unleashed wave after wave of "Zeroes," Japan's famed carrier-based fighter. Unfortunately for the Japanese Navy, U.S. forces were prepared for the attack and picked up the Japanese planes on radar about 135 miles from TF 58 and American planes were launched from the carriers and engaged the Zeroes about 70 miles away from U.S. Naval forces.

More than 400 Zeroes and two Japanese aircraft carriers were lost before Japanese naval forces escaped the U.S. Navy, following what became known by U.S. forces as "The Marianas Turkey Shoot." The Japanese escape proved fleeting. A U.S. scout plane located the Japanese Navy within two days, and Vice-Admiral Marc Mitscher, commander of TF 58, ordered the launch of more than 250 aircraft to attack the crippled Japanese naval force.

McLellan and his crew launched from the Lexington about 4:30 p.m. and arrived above the Japanese fleet about 300 miles away after nightfall around 7 p.m. They bypassed the first two groups of Japanese ships that were already under heavy bombardment and pressed toward a third group, but before they dropped their payload McLellan saw tracer rounds pass through his plane.

Zeroes had come out of the clouds beneath the TBM Avenger in defense of the Japanese fleet, and now McLellan's cockpit was filling with fire, smoke and hydraulic fluid. Communication with his crew was lost. McLellan had no choice but to bail out at 11,000 feet above a raging sea battle into the dark. "I delayed pulling the ripcord on my parachute for at least 4,000 or 5,000 feet, because I wanted to get out of the anti-aircraft fire," McLellan said.

Pilots were trained to release the harness on their parachutes just above the water, but unable to see the water's surface in the darkness, McLellan decided not to release his chute. He inflated his life vest, but the parachute quickly became waterlogged and acted as a sea anchor, preventing McLellan from riding the waves. Instead, he was pulled beneath them. McLellan finally freed himself from his anchor, but lost the inflatable lifeboat that was attached to the parachute and had to discard his survival equipment that was also waterlogged — now it was just him and Mae West. Mae West was the nickname Allies had given to their B-4 inflatable life vests, for their resemblance to the buxom qualities of the Hollywood starlet.

But McLellan and Mae weren't exactly alone, as a Japanese cruiser passed by him, close enough for him to see the color of the sailors' uniforms, and a Japanese aircraft carrier limped away while five Zeroes tried to land on it. "Then things began to settle down and quietness prevailed, even though it was smoky and you could smell the acrid smells in the air," McLellan said. "I could feel explosions in the water, for two or three hours ... I assume that it was explosions from collapsing compartments on the ships, because this was out in the Marianas Trench." The Marianas Trench, almost seven miles deep, is the deepest location on earth.

McLellan was suspended above the trench in a half-inflated life vest, more than 300 miles from his aircraft carrier, more than 300 miles from Guam, resigned to the fact at 22 years old, his life was over. "How do you fly 300 miles from a carrier that's moving all the time back to a spot in the water where there's one man, or five, like there were out there? Eventually, we picked up five," McLellan said.

While he was floating, McLellan was taking in sea water that caused him to vomit throughout the night and his tongue to swell, and the only contact with anything living was a fish his hand brushed against. McLellan said he didn't panic; instead he lamented the fact that he hadn't accomplished much in his relatively short life and had no family of his own, nothing to leave as a legacy.

But about 10 a.m. the next day, members of his squadron flew above him and dropped a life raft after he marked his location with a dye marker. In his weakened state, it was a struggle to get in the raft, but he did and went to sleep until he was picked up about 4 p.m. by an amphibious rescue plane. As he was being flown back to the carrier, he could see his gunner, John Hutchinson, and his radioman, Selbie Greenhalgh, in other rescue aircraft.

His squadron was soon released from duty on the Lexington, and by the end of July McLellan was back in the United States, and on his way to Fort Smith for a 30-day leave before returning to stateside duty in Montauk, N.Y. McLellan was greeted by a celebration at his parents' home, where he became reacquainted with Wanda Stewart, who he knew from church and Fort Smith Junior College. Before he left Fort Smith, McLellan had proposed to Stewart in Mountainburg on top of the old Lake Fort Smith dam, and on Nov. 23, 1944, the couple married. "Our legacy had started," McLellan said.

The couple and their growing family were transferred to Narragansett, R.I., until McLellan was released from active duty in December 1945, with a Purple Heart, Air Medal and numerous other military decorations. With the help of Wanda, McLellan earned bachelor's and master's degrees from Kansas State Teachers College (now Pittsburg State University) and taught industrial arts in Fort Smith and Tulsa before joining American Airlines as a pilot in 1953.

In 1954, McLellan transferred to Central Airlines, which was purchased by Frontier Airlines in 1967, and he flew until his 60th birthday in August 1981, the mandatory retirement age for commercial pilots.

But even after retirement, McLellan's "legacy" continued to grow, as his three sons married and provided him and Wanda with six grandchildren, who've borne four great-grandchildren — and No. 5 is on the way. "That's my legacy right there," McLellan said, pointing to a family photo.

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By Jeff Arnold, Southwest Times Record  
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