Early in September 1939, as Tex neared graduation from Pensacola, the world's attention was suddenly riveted to Eastern Europe when fifty-three German divisions smashed into Poland. Wehrmacht Panzers mowed down archaic Polish cavalry and completed a brief sprint to Warsaw. Shortly thereafter, the Russians invaded Poland from the east. By the start of November, as Tex received his aviator wings, Poland was neatly divided between her two attackers, in accordance with their secret agreement, reached months before.

Just as the United States had not assisted China in fighting her Japanese invaders, neither did they follow Britain and France in declaring war on Hitler's Germany. American isolationism was strong, and her Great Depression still persisted. Her surrounding oceans were wide. The U.S. Navy, which made those oceans its responsibility, was divided into Atlantic and Pacific Fleets. As Tex traveled to San Diego to go aboard the Saratoga, his counterparts in the Atlantic were ordered to keep an eye out for German submarines—just in case.

The U.S.S. Saratoga, designation CV-3, was the sixth ship to bear that name—and it would not be the last. Previous incarnations of the Sara had seen action as long ago as the War of 1812. The current edition was a nine-hundred-foot converted battle cruiser, commissioned twelve years before. She displaced 33,000 tons, and carried a crew of over three thousand. When Tex spotted her in the San Diego harbor that December, the first thing he noticed was the array of eighty-six aircraft packed onto her enormous deck. There were Brewster Buffaloes, Vought SB2U Vindicator, and—soon to be his own aircraft—Douglas TBD-1 Devastators. Shortly after Tex went aboard, the carrier steamed away from North Island and motored up to her cruising speed of thirty-four knots.

The largest water-faring vessel he had been aboard before was a rowboat, so shipboard life was a completely new experience for Tex. Aboard the Saratoga, as on all naval
vessels, space was at a premium, and all rooms were small. Tex was amazed that such a mass of humanity could eat, sleep, and work in such cramped quarters; but naviers had been making a science of this over the course of many centuries. By contrast, when an aviator and his plane catapulted off the flight deck and lifted skyward, there was as much room as he wanted.

Tex was assigned to Torpedo Squadron Three (VT-3), whose operations consisted of torpedo dropping, horizontal bombing, and gunnery. The aviators of VT-3 flew the Douglas TBD-1, a vastly different aircraft from anything Tex had handled in flight training. Put into service only the year before, the Devastator could barely reach 200 mph or 20,000 feet altitude; but slung beneath its belly, the one-ton gyro-controlled “fish,” as its torpedo was called, spelled bad news for targeted enemy ships. While Tex was looking at the aircraft over closely for the first time on the Saratoga’s deck, a friendly-looking ensign approached, and introduced himself as Bob Dosé.

“I guess I was at Pensacola a few classes before you,” the man said, clasping Tex’s hand. “Good to have you aboard.”

“Yeah, thanks. This is some outfit you’ve got here,” replied Tex, indicating the huge carrier. “What are you in?”

“Torpedo Three, same as you. Matter of fact, you’re supposed to get your orientation ride from yours truly—starting now. Ready? Okay, here’s the deal...” Dosé went straight into instruction, walking Tex through an inspection of the torpedo bomber. Tex was even more “all ears” than usual.

A crew of three normally operated the aircraft: an officer pilot, an enlisted Aviation Pilot (AP), and an enlisted radio operator. The TBD could carry a load of conventional bombs as easily as torpedoes. During regular bombing—called “horizontal bombing” in the Navy, to distinguish it from dive-bombing—the AP would climb down into a lowered section of the plane’s belly, aim through the bomb sight, and release at the right moment. On torpedo runs, though, the pilot did everything, and performed all navigation duties regardless of the mission. The TBD was an early, rather ungainly example of a multi-role aircraft.

Dosé spent some time going over the aircraft’s “specs” with Tex, then gestured to the cockpit and said the words Tex was waiting for: “Let’s fly her. After you, Tex.”

Once they were in the air, out of sight of the carrier, the older ensign began a series of loops and rolls to show Tex the performance range of the plane. Tex had to chuckle.

“Man, I’ll tell you what—we would have washed out at Pensacola doing this kind of stuff,” he said.

“Yeah, I was there, remember?” Dosé replied, grinning. “But it’s a new ball game out here in the fleet. If the plane can handle it, you’ve got to know how to do it. You can’t snap-roll or anything real fancy in this, by the way.”

In the weeks that followed, Tex settled gradually into the routine of shipboard life. He fine-tuned his skills at operating the TBD, learning the airframe and its capabilities inside and out. Sailors in the Pacific Fleet were increasingly alert, as they looked westward toward expansionist Japan. Fleet aviators honed their combat skills through competition, which took place at all levels: between aviators, squadrons, air groups, and even carriers. Day after day, the air group drilled in the tactics they would use if called upon: dive-bombing, gunnery, torpedo drops, and pursuit. Everyone strove fiercely for the coveted letter “E’s” that were awarded for excellence in a particular skill area. More than
anything else, the E’s marked the Navy’s standout performers. Once earned, E’s decra
ted the sides of aircraft and even the carriers themselves. Tex would eventually ac-
accumulate three of them—for gunnery, torpedo dropping, and horizontal bombing.
Long before he received a single “E,” however, Tex had other lessons to learn. The
first few dozen flights he made in Torpedo Three were called “bounce drills.” For these,
the runway at North Island was marked off to resemble the deck of the Saratoga, com-
plete with a landing signal officer to direct aviators during final touchdown. For his first
colors, Tex rode as a passenger in the back seat, observing the tricky operation. Then
he began to practice touch-and-gos, and soon landed the TBD itself. Eventually,
the day came when he had to put the aircraft down on the deck of the real Saratoga.
Landing a plane on the deck of an aircraft carrier was (and still is), hands-down, one
of the most difficult feats anyone attempts on a regular basis. It sounds easy: put the
plane down on the deck; catch one of the dozen or so arresting gear (metal cables) strung
across the deck with a hook protruding from beneath the plane’s tail; and let the cable’s
tension drag the aircraft to a stop. But the carrier’s motion in water made the deck gyrate
constantly, and in rough seas her rolling was even more pronounced. Landing the plane
without destroying it, therefore, was a feat comparable to spoon-feeding a two-year-old
on a trampoline. Worse still, if the aircraft’s tail hook missed all the deck cables, the only
remaining “safety net” was neither safe nor a net at all: a reinforced barrier at the end of
the deck. It would halt anything—in a pile of twisted metal. To call a carrier landing “a
daunting task” understated the case.
When Tex descended for his first landing on the Sara’s deck, everything went fine—
until touchdown. The hook beneath his aircraft half-caught the cable—but didn’t hold,
causing the TBD to skid violently to the left. It was the worst possible situation: the edge
of the deck rushed toward him, and he would never be able to climb the aircraft out to
come around again. In a second, he realized that he was probably going over the edge.
The TBD crashed along the rough side of the deck, snapping cables and demolishing
pieces of the superstructure. The nose dipped, the plane dropped, and...nothing. In an
eerie silence, Tex opened his eyes—and saw that his aircraft had miraculously dropped
partway into one of the Sara’s gun galleries, set several feet below the level of the deck.
His TBD was hanging halfway out into open space, caught and held by metal and cable.
Out the left side of his canopy, Tex had a marvelous view of the blue Pacific.
Rarely in aviation history was a more careful exit from an aircraft made than the one
Tex performed. He crept gingerly back to safety, while the crew on deck gaped and ran
for emergency equipment.
Following his inauspicious debut, though, Tex made ninety-nine more carrier land-
ings without mishap.
It did not take him long to learn what all seasoned aviators in the fleet knew: the
enlisted APs were the fleet’s best pilots. They were carefully screened to gain their posi-
tions, with only the best making it through the selection process. Fighting Two, a
squadron on the Sara’s sister carrier Lexington, routinely won pursuit competitions
hands-down; and that squadron was made up entirely of enlisted pilots. They were out-
standing as a rule, and Tex learned much from Torpedo Three’s APs. Several of them
would turn up later in China, as members of the American Volunteer Group; and Tex
would be only too glad to fight alongside them.
Torpedo bombing was, in a manner of speaking, an exact science. The cantankerous "fish" had a stubborn tendency to do whatever the pilot didn't want them to. They were often erratic, sometimes comically so. A torpedo bomber pilot had to fly right on the deck toward his target, maintaining the bomber's speed and altitude within minute tolerances. At the precise moment, he would release the "fish," which free-fell into the water and—if the stars were aligned favorably—self-activated its engine, churning toward a fiery rendezvous with the target surface vessel.

Tex had a few harrowing incidents plying this trade. Taking off from the Sara one morning near North Island, he proceeded to turn in his usual good performance on a torpedo run. When the moment to drop came, Tex hit the switch—and nothing happened. His skin crawled as he instantly recognized the symptoms of a "hung up" torpedo, one of the TBD's most hazardous situations. The danger lay in the unknown status of the torpedo. It might be "dead," or hanging by one clip, or armed and counting down to detonation at any second. Tex was piloting a flying bomb.

The regulations were clear about one thing: pilots absolutely did not return to the carrier with a "hung" torpedo, for obvious reasons. Tex banked toward North Island's runway in a cold sweat. Still the torpedo did not detonate. After some minutes, he began to believe his chances of escaping alive were increasing from "slim" to "lean." He radioed his situation to the tower at North Island. Controllers cleared the runway, and fire crews stood by. Tex saw them as he made his approach, fervently hoping that their morning wouldn't get any more exciting. He made his all-time softest landing—and high-tailed it off the flight line.

The morale aboard any ship depends greatly upon her captain; and the Saratoga's skipper was very popular with her crew. When morale is high, performance usually follows, and the Sara's crew conducted itself well in the ongoing fleet competitions. Tex got to know many of his shipmates well, in Torpedo Three and elsewhere among the crew of several thousand. The other squadrons in the air group aboard the Sara included Fighting Three, Scouting Three, and Bombing Three. Some of Tex's friends in those squadrons would surface again down the long road to China—men like Bob Neale, Charlie Mott, Percy Bartelt, Lynn Hurst, and John Overley. For the present, though, they basked in the satisfaction of knowing they were important parts of one very large, powerful, floating weapon system.

The U.S. Navy historically exercised its fleets within the framework of a series of "Fleet Problems." These were large-scale, live rehearsals involving many ships and aircraft. "Friendly" and "enemy" surface and air groups would maneuver for simulated strikes, invasions, or other operations that higher headquarters directed. The primary mission of the Hawaiian Detachment of the Pacific Fleet, to which the Sara was assigned, was in fact specifically to conduct Fleet Problems. Over time, settings for the exercises had included Hawaii, Manila, the Panama Canal, and other areas of strategic importance. During Fleet Problem XIX, held several years before Tex came aboard, the Sara had been the centerpiece for a particularly interesting exercise: she launched a surprise air attack on Oahu, from some 100 miles west of the island. The Japanese Navy had studied this with great interest.

Five months into Tex's tour on the Sara, excitement began to build among the crew. Fleet Problem XXI was coming up, to be held that year in the vicinity of Hawaii. The
annual exercise was always an opportunity for the Sara to shine; as the Pacific Fleet's first "fast" carrier, she had set the tone for Fleet Problems for several years, much as the queen commands the chessboard. The scenario for that year's Problem involved a large "enemy" fleet approaching from the western Pacific to strike at Guam, Wake Island, and Hawaii. The Navy knew that Japan was the only nation capable of really amassing such a force; and they made no secret of the fact that they intended to rehearse exactly that scenario. Three months were allotted for the exercise. On the first of April, the Saratoga arrived off Hawaii, and the "games" began.

It was high competition, and Tex enjoyed every minute of it. Torpedo Three's crews carried out simulated torpedo runs against "enemy" ships with practiced deadliness, and the squadron gave a good account of itself. Best of all, after "fighting" hard during the week, the air group would put in at Oahu for the weekend. There, the weary aviators could enjoy the idyllic island paradise for forty-eight hours, before heading out to sea once more. Even news that German armies had invaded the Low Countries, which they received one month into the Problem, did not spoil their enjoyment of the warm Pacific and the beautiful Hawaiian Islands.

Fleet Problem XXI concluded near the end of June; and the Saratoga reluctantly cruised northeast once more, toward her familiar patrol area around San Diego and San Pedro. The exercise was supposed to have convinced the Japanese that the U.S. Navy was ready for any aggression Japan might be contemplating. The Japanese understood that objective, but were not impressed. Their ambitious doctrine assumed no nation could withstand the inexorable military might of the Imperial Japanese Navy. At the right time and place, their admirals assured each other, a decisive blow could be struck. Only one Admiral of the Empire's inner circle shook his head in disagreement with the opinion of the majority. His name was Isoroku Yamamoto.

* * *

As the Saratoga returned to San Diego from the Fleet Problem, Japan was expanding her terror bombing campaign to include every major city in free China. Clouds of bombers unloaded millions of tons of incendiaries onto the helpless civilian population. Wooden and bamboo houses burned by the thousands like tinder. Over Chungking alone, one hundred fifty bombers were overhead every day. Tragically, much of the shrapnel inside Japanese demolition bombs came straight from American scrap iron shipments, until an embargo in September ended that supply.

With his flying school students killed by bombs and his aircraft destroyed as fast as he could procure them, Chennault had little success mustering aerial resistance to the Japanese. Instead, he took many pictures and made copious notes on the technical specifications and capabilities of the Japanese Zero, which was making mincemeat of anything it encountered. Chennault wanted to ensure that America, at least, would not be caught flat-footed by the nimble little fighter when the time came. He would be disappointed.

Desperate to stop the murderous fire-bombings throughout his country, Chiang Kai-Shek ordered Chennault to return to the United States in October to plead for American assistance. Skeptical, but willing to try, Chennault made the trip to Washington, D.C.
with General Mow Pang-Tsu. Once in the capital, Chennault first delivered his painstakingly gathered material on the Zero to the War Department. After looking it over, Army Air Corps engineers acidly informed Chennault that the performance specs he had recorded were impossible—such a plane could not exist. The photographs, they deemed, were fakes. His reports went into the wastebasket.

In the basement of China Defense Supplies headquarters in Washington, D.C., Chennault spent a cold and frustrating winter formulating and lobbying a plan to get an air force for China.

Tex’s Douglas TBD-1 Devastator, on the runway at Naval Air Station North Island. Note the “E” on the fuselage for excellence.

Navy Torpedo Squadron Three (VT-3) aboard the Saratoga. Tex is top row, 3rd from left.