

## *Wasp* Is Stung

It was a relatively small island surrounded by the largest ocean. Six months before, few Americans had ever heard of it. Fewer still could have located it on a globe. Now, in September 1942, it was the locus for the decisive land battle of the Pacific War.

American Marines had surprised the Japanese with their daring invasion of Guadalcanal the previous month. The Marines, with élan and sacrifice, had quickly captured the island's strategic airfield. Then, when the Navy had pulled its transport ships back from the island in the face of superior Japanese land-based air power from nearby Rabaul, the Marines had suddenly been on their own. A seesaw struggle had emerged as the Navy had toiled to keep the Marines supplied against suicidal "banzai" charges from the enemy.

Now, two Navy task forces were steaming toward Guadalcanal, escorting the transport ships carrying not only badly needed supplies and rations, but also reinforcements in the form of the 7<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment. The task forces were each built around an aircraft carrier, ships which had already emerged as the dominant vessels in this new war. One of these ships, *Hornet*, had been present at the signal events of the war in the Pacific. It was from her deck that Army Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Jimmy Doolittle had launched the morale-boosting raid on Tokyo the previous April. Her flyers had contributed to the stinging defeat of the Japanese fleet at the Battle of Midway in June. The other flat top was *Wasp*. Unlike her sister, *Wasp* had seen little of the war in the Pacific. When the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor, *Wasp* had been in port in Bermuda. After twice ferrying aircraft to Great Britain's besieged Mediterranean island of Malta, *Wasp* was transferred to the Pacific to help make up for carrier losses suffered during the Battles of Coral Sea and Midway. One of the pilots aboard *Wasp* was Ensign Thomas Center Reed, Jr., Clemson College Class of 1938.



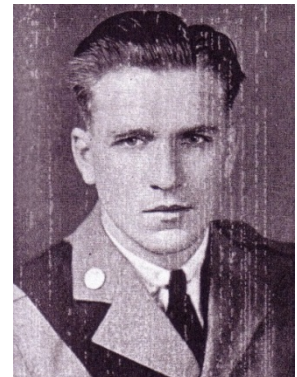
Navy Wildcat Fighters on  
*Wasp's* flight deck, 1942



USS *Wasp* at Bermuda, December 1941

"Speedy" Reed originally matriculated at Wofford College, where he was recognized with a medal as the "most efficient cadet." Transferring to Clemson after his freshman year, Reed, whose hometown was Sumter, majored in electrical engineering and joined the American Institute of Electrical Engineers.

We know little of Reed following graduation, but he was aboard *Wasp* as she steamed toward Guadalcanal that fateful September. Ensign Reed was assigned to VS 72, *Wasp's* scouting squadron. He likely piloted an SB2U Vindicator, a carrier-based dive bomber already considered obsolete and relegated to ocean scouting.



The sky was clear with a 20 knot southeasterly wind blowing over the decks of *Hornet* and *Wasp* on Tuesday, September 15, 1942. The two carriers and their task forces were sailing in sight of each other some seven to ten miles apart about 250 miles southeast of Guadalcanal. The transport convoy the two carriers were escorting was steaming on a parallel course just over the horizon to the south. The stout wind was kicking up whitecaps on the ocean surface making it nearly impossible for lookouts to spot the exposed periscope of enemy submarines. But the submarines were out there, lurking below the deep blue waters, waiting for the reinforcements the Japanese expected the Americans to attempt to land on Guadalcanal.



SB2U Vindicator sits on *Wasp*'s deck edge elevator

Commander Narahara Shogo was the captain of Japanese submarine *I-19* as it stalked the two American carriers. As his crew prepared to fire its lethal torpedoes, *Wasp* was completing aircraft launch and recovery operations. *Wasp* had turned into the wind to reduce its speed over the sea in relation to its aircrafts' velocity through the air, slightly simplifying the complex task of landing fast-moving airplanes on the carrier's pitching deck. Now, with its aircraft back on board, *Wasp* was resuming her base course of 280 degrees. *I-19* fired six torpedoes, which would shortly become the most effective Japanese submarine attack of the war. At 1445 hours *Wasp* was struck by three torpedoes in rapid succession. One of the torpedoes actually broached, like a flying fish leaping from the water, and striking the carrier above her waterline. All three torpedoes exploded in the vicinity of gasoline tanks and ammunition magazines. The second "fish" detonated just beneath an officers' galley, killing mess stewards, cooks and four ensigns, including Thomas Reed.

With black clouds of smoke billowing from *Wasp*, other ships hastened to her aid. Two of these, the destroyer *O'Brien* and the battleship *North Carolina*, were also struck by *I-19*'s torpedoes. *O'Brien* would sink. *North Carolina*, through skillful damage control and counter-flooding, would manage to remain with the task force until permanent repairs could be affected.

By 1520 hours, the gasoline-fed fires were raging out of control. Captain Forrest Sherman, commanding officer of *Wasp*, ordered "abandon ship." Wounded and injured sailors were lowered into life boats. At 1600, satisfied that no one alive was left aboard the ship, Captain Sherman departed his command. *Wasp* hung on throughout the rest of that long afternoon and finally sank at 2100 hours. 193 men died aboard *Wasp*. *Hornet* was left as the only operational American carrier in the Pacific.

The battle at Guadalcanal was the first defeat of Japanese land forces in the war. The heroism and sacrifice of the Marines, Navy and later Army reinforcements helped put Allied forces on the offensive for good.

Ensign Thomas Center Reed, Jr. was awarded the Purple Heart and is memorialized on the Honolulu Memorial, Honolulu, Hawaii.