

*“On deck, anxious eyes carefully counted the planes from each squadron as they sputtered in. The task was anything but cheerful. Apart from the frightful losses of Torpedo 6, so many of the dive bombers were gone too - 18 out of 32 altogether.*

*Most of them ran out of gas on the way back. Partly it was that long, relentless search for the enemy; partly the Enterprise’s miscalculation in estimating where she could be found again. At that, some of the pilots almost made it - Lieutenant Dickinson was picked up only ten miles from the ship. But others were gone for good. Lieutenant Charles Ware brilliantly guided his division through the attack and two melees with the Zeros ... then vanished, choosing a course home that could lead only into the empty sea.”*

Walter Lord, “Incredible Victory”

## THE LAST FLIGHT OF CHARLES ROLLINS WARE

4 JUNE 1942

BY MARK E. HORAN

Shortly after 0900 hours, 4 June 1942, the *USS Enterprise* (CV-6) launched 33 SBD Dauntless dive bombers of Scouting Squadron Six and Bombing Squadron Six under the overall command of Lieutenant-Commander Clarence Wade McClusky, Jr., USNA26. Ensign John Reginald McCarthy, A-V(N), USNR, was the pilot of the number two plane in the second division of the Scouting Six. Leading the third division was Lieutenant Charles Rollins Ware, USNA34.

These aircraft formed up and orbited the task force waiting for the rest of the strike group, consisting of fourteen TBD Devastators of Torpedo Squadron Six and ten F4F Wildcats of Fighting Squadron Six, to be launched. However, at 0950, due to delays in the launch, the dive bombers were ordered to proceed alone, setting course to the southwest to intercept and attack the Japanese carriers.

At roughly 1120, the dive bombers reached the point of interception, but there were no Japanese ships in sight. Lieutenant-Commander McClusky elected to fly a modified box search to the northwest to find the enemy fleet. Some 35 minutes later, shortly before their dwindling fuel supply would have forced them to turn towards home, a lone Japanese destroyer, *Arashi*, was sighted traveling at high speed to the northeast. Turning to follow the course of this vessel, Lieutenant-Commander McClusky was rewarded at 1205 with the sighting of the *Kido Butai* (the Japanese carrier force). At 20,000 feet as the squadrons approached the enemy carriers there was, surprisingly, no Japanese fighter opposition although as they made their unopposed run to the target it was apparent that the enemy was under attack by torpedo planes.

At 1222 Lieutenant-Commander McClusky pushed over and led the attack on the carrier below, with Scouting Six following. Ensign McCarthy was the tenth aircraft to dive. The target below, the carrier *Kaga*, was thoroughly gutted by the attack. As the Dauntlesses pulled out of their dives near the water to the northwest of the target, they flew into a veritable “hornets nest” of angry Japanese Mitsubishi A6M2 Zero fighters that had just completed mauling the TBDs of Torpedo Squadron Six that had been attacking the *Kaga* as the SBDs approached.

Pulling out of his dive at 500 feet, Ensign McCarthy saw the Zeros they had all expected since before push-over. His first thought was to rejoin his division leader, Lieutenant Clarence Earle Dickinson Jr., USNA34, but for some reason his SBD had all but slowed to a standstill<sup>1</sup>. When McCarthy’s gunner, Earl Edward Howell, Aviation Radioman Second-class, called out there was a Zero climbing onto their tail, he realized he had to take defensive action, left Dickinson, and headed for the water. When the Zero was committed to its firing pass, Howell called out for McCarthy to break left and he cut loose with his twin .30 cal. machine guns. McCarthy heard a few bursts from Howell’s guns, then Howell’s voice came over the intercom saying “*I think I got him!*” Sure enough, as he broke back to the right to continue away from the Japanese carrier, McCarthy saw the Zero, streaming fire, turning upwind to make a water landing.

Now alone, McCarthy started looking for other SBDs in the area that he could join. He soon spotted a group of up ahead, attempting to reform under heavy fighter attack, and hastened to join them. By the time he arrived, the first section was already closed up, and he recognized Lieutenant Ware in the lead.

Ware, Scouting Six’s Flight Officer, was an extremely experienced dive bomber pilot who was well versed in section defense tactics. Nominally the third division leader, he lost the second section on this mission when Lieutenant Frank Anthony Patriarca, USNA37, was unable to take off and Ensign John Cady Lough, A-V(N), USNR, was shifted to the second division. As Lieutenant Ware pulled out of the dive he realized two very important facts. First, the aircraft of his squadron would be extremely low on fuel at this point due to the long time they had spent in the air, first orbiting the *USS Enterprise*, and later searching for the Japanese fleet. Second, the two pilots in his division, as well as three of the pilots in the second division immediately in front of him, were “green” rookies who had never been in combat before, had probably used more gas than himself and, more importantly, were probably lost. Recognizing that these pilots would probably not make the squadron rendezvous point alone, he took it upon himself to slow up and act as a rally point for them.

Like a magnet, he soon drew four SBDs to him and, by the time McCarthy arrived, Ware had formed the first section with Ensign James Arnold Shelton, A-V(N), USNR, and Ensign Carl David Peiffer, A-V(N), USNR, on his wings. Recognizing that McCarthy was the next senior in both rank and experience, the other two SBDs, flown by Ensign Frank Woodrow O’Flaherty, A-V(N), USNR, and Ensign John Cady Lough, A-V(N), USNR, formed the trailing section on him. Like McCarthy, both Peiffer and Lough were part of the second division, but with Dickinson, their nominal leader, effectively out of action, they had rallied to Ware, trusting the veteran to lead them to safety<sup>2</sup>.

With Zeros swarming above the formation in ever increasing numbers, Ware led his planes down to water height and slowed to 115 knots to conserve fuel as the Japanese initiated a series of individual high speed firing passes. Whenever a Zero committed itself to the attack, Ware would respond by turning into the attacker while McCarthy slid his section to the outside of the turn, opening a clear field of fire for the six rear gunners. By staying close to the water Ware denied the Japanese pilot the option of pressing his attack close and then recovering under unprotected bellies of the SBDs. Faced with the concentrated fire of twelve .30 cal free guns the Zero inevitably broke off its attack early.

Although the division had suffered little damage, fuel and ammunition soon became critical. Using Morse hand-signals between passes, the pilots compared their fuel status. Slowing the division to 105 knots, the watch words became “*conserve fuel, conserve ammo.*” Among McCarthy’s section the fuel counts bordered on the ridiculous. After the long search to find the Japanese and the long air battle, everybody was “relatively” low on fuel. Soon they gave up conversing about it. But it was very clear that; Zeros or no, not everyone was getting back home.

Even in the face of the continuous fighter attacks, Ware managed to maintain a base course to the southwest to clear the enemy formation. After a 12-15 minute battle they had cleared the Japanese screen and the Zero attacks finally died off. Even so, Ware followed his instructions and headed southeast towards Midway until he was well away from the Japanese.

Because the Japanese Fleet was so widely disbursed, it took along time to circle the three burning carriers. While they did so, Ware led his formation up to 1,200 feet to extend the range at which they could pick up the *Enterprise* YE homing signal. Free of the weight of the bomb and most of the gasoline as well, the Dauntless was almost as nimble as a fighter<sup>3</sup>. Easing the throttle back to 1,700 RPM and 23 inches of mercury, the formation loosened up as the SBDs virtually floated along. McCarthy was in better shape than the others. Briefed for a maximum range mission, he had broken regulations by flying for long periods with his mixture set at auto-lean. This caused the engine’s cylinder head temperature to rise, but when it became dangerously high he’d set the mixture to full-rich until the temperature when down, then he’d repeat the process. Although this most certainly caused significant wear on his engine, the gamble had paid off, saving him some 20 gallons of precious gasoline. Now he gambled again, easing off his mixture even further. Although initially causing the head temperature to rise dangerously, he found a setting just before “idle cutoff” at which it came back down, decreasing his fuel expenditure and increasing his mileage still further. Free of the Zeros, it was now a matter of sweating out their gas supply to get as close to home as they could.

Soon however, they found themselves with a much more serious problem than lack of gasoline. Having finally circled to the northeast of the Japanese carriers and settled on a homeward course, Ware sighted a large formation of Japanese planes closing rapidly from eight o’clock about 1,000 feet above. He immediately nosed over, leading his planes back down to the water.

The enemy planes were an attack force from the only surviving Japanese carrier, *Hiryu*, enroute to retaliate against the American carriers. Composed of eighteen *kanbaku* (D3A1 Val dive bombers) escorted by six *kansen* (A6M2 Zero fighters), that had taken off at 1257 and came across Ware’s planes some 20 minutes later. Believing the aircraft below were vulnerable torpedo planes, the commander of the escort, Lieutenant Shigematsu Yosuihiro, felt that his fighters could safely “bag” them and then catch up to the dive bombers before they reached their target. Receiving permission from the strike commander, Lieutenant Kobayashi Michio, Shigematsu separated his six Zeros<sup>4</sup> from the formation and started diving after the SBDs.

In the earlier air battle the fuel tanks of Ensign O’Flaherty’s S-5 had been holed. With the approaching fighters still several miles astern, his tanks ran dry and he made a beautiful water landing with 0 degrees flap. Watching as his left wingman hit the water, McCarthy was amazed that the hydroplane angle made it possible for him to see the bending of the three propeller blades over the engine cowling. Howell watched O’Flaherty and his gunner, Bruno Peter Gaido, Aviation Machinist Mate First class, inflate their raft and reported that they were in good shape. Unfortunately, later in the afternoon they were sighted by the destroyer *Makigumo*, captured, and ultimately executed.

Moments later the Mitsubishis were on them with “...*fresh belly tanks and red hot to fight.*” As in the first fight, the Japanese pilots attacked in a series of individual high-speed above rear and high side passes. Keeping his plane throttled back to 95-100 knots, Ware resumed the evasion tactics that had worked so well earlier, turning into each attack with a delayed slide to the outside of the turn by McCarthy’s section, allowing the five gunners to converge their fire on the attacking fighter. For some 20 minutes the Japanese made runs on the SBDs, dropping their belly tanks one by one. Then, all of a sudden they were gone.

It was an extremely frustrated Lieutenant Shigematsu that ordered his pilots to break off the engagement. His planes had been unable to seriously damage any of the American planes, let alone bring one down, while defensive fire disabled two of his fighters, both of which had to return to *Hiryu*. Worse, he had kept up the fight too long, and was unable to catch up with Kobayashi’s *kanbaku* until after they reached their target, leaving them vulnerable to the Combat Air Patrol defending the American Task Forces.

After the Japanese departed it was anyone’s guess as to where the “*Big E*” (*USS Enterprise*) could be found. Ware was heading too far north for McCarthy’s liking, his course being some 25 degrees less than McCarthy’s best guess. Pulling up alongside Ware to discuss their course in a radio silence environment, McCarthy motioned to his right and held up two fingers indicating he felt that they should head further south. Ware nodded and motioned straight ahead for him. McCarthy repeated his course prediction and Ware responded with the hand to head break off signal, indicating that McCarthy was free to try his own course. Ensign Lough broke off as well, taking up a course some 15-10 degrees further to starboard. McCarthy and Howell watched the others, Ware with Shelton and Peiffer in close formation to port, Lough to starboard, for some 15-20 minutes until they gradually drifted out of visibility. It was the last time any of them were ever seen.

McCarthy slowly climbed to 3,500 feet in an effort to pick up the *Enterprise* YE signal, but had no luck. By now, both outboard fuel tanks were drained and the gauges on the two inboards indicated that they were virtually empty. In desperation, he instructed Howell to try to switch to the frequency for *USS Yorktown* (CV-5). Surprisingly, Howell was able to do so, and he soon picked up the *Yorktown* YE signal “*loud and clear,*”

obviously nearby. McCarthy immediately started to let down following the YE signal and they soon sighted Task Force 17 ahead. Just before reaching the screen he spotted a ditched TBD torpedo plane (CAP Wilhelm George Esders, USN, T-2 of VT-3). Realizing he had little chance of reaching *Yorktown*, he flew over the TBD at 150 feet, wagged his wings, and headed for the nearest destroyer, *USS Hammann* (DD-412). He was halfway there when his engine quit and S-15 started own. He leveled off about 25 feet over the water waiting for the SBD to “mush” in. Unfortunately, with no bombs, gas, or ammunition the SBD was much lighter than normal and S-15 maintained altitude in the ground effect until it stalled, dropped a wing, and cartwheeled into the sea. Miraculously both men survived, although McCarthy’s face slammed into the instrument panel, breaking his nose and cutting a nasty gash in his forehead. *Hammann* came up quickly, and within 5 minutes both were safely aboard, followed shortly but CAP Esders<sup>5</sup>.

#### POSTSCRIPT:

In June 1942, the U. S. Navy notified the Ware family that their son, Lieutenant Charles Rollins Ware, USNA34, was “*missing after action with the enemy on 4 June 1942*”. Over the next couple of months, condolence letters arrived from Lieutenant Wilmer Earl Gallaher, USNA31 (Commanding Officer, Scouting Squadron Six), Captain George Dominic Murray, USNA11 (Commanding Officer, *USS Enterprise* (CV-6)), and Vice Admiral William Frederick Halsey, Jr., USNA04 (Commander, Aircraft Battle Force). Soon thereafter, they also received the Navy Cross (the Navy’s second highest medal) that Charles had been awarded for “*gallantry...in the highest tradition of the Navy*” during the Battle of Midway.

Lieutenant Ware’s mother sent several letters to the Navy concerning the whereabouts of her son. Although each was answered, no word was forthcoming. One year and a day later, in June 1943, the Navy notified Mrs. Ware that, as no further word had been heard, it was presumed that her son had died in action on 4 June 1942. In 1945, Mrs. Ware was invited to sponsor a new Gearing class destroyer, DD-865, that was being named in honor of her son. On 12 April 1945, Mrs. Ware christened the new ship the *USS Charles R. Ware*.

Mrs. Ware sent several further letters concerning the fate of her son to the Navy after the war. Regretfully, as all of the combat reports were classified, the Navy had no information to give. However, even if the reports hadn’t been classified “*Confidential*”, the Navy had no records relating to Lieutenant Ware’s loss. The only two men who could have shed any light on the subject, the crew of “6-Sail-15”, had not been debriefed before being granted survivor’s leave after the Battle of Midway was over. Mrs. Ware went to her grave never knowing what had happened to her son.

However, early in 1987, Mrs. Marie Urban contacted the Navy Historical Department in an effort to find out what had happened to the destroyer *USS Charles R. Ware*. Mr. Robert Cressman, of the Ships’History Section, was happy to provide an answer. However, as such inquiries are uncommon, he asked Mrs. Urban why she wanted to know. She told him that Charles Ware was her brother. Aware that I had recently uncovered the story of Lieutenant Ware’s last flight, Bob put us in contact with each other. In May 1987, almost 45 years after her brother had died, I was able to tell Mrs. Urban this story.

As an additional aside, the U. S. Navy elected to name newly constructed warships in honor of all four of the officer pilots who were lost with Lieutenant Ware at Midway. These ships were:

*USS Lough*, DE-586, launched on 8 December 1943, was sponsored by Miss Rose Anne Lough, sister of Ensign John Cady Lough. This ship survived the war.

*USS O’Flaherty*, DE-340, launched on 14 December 1943, was sponsored by Ensign Lavada M. O’Flaherty, sister of Ensign Frank Woodrow O’Flaherty. This ship survived the war.

*USS Shelton*, DE-407, launched on 18 December 1943, was sponsored by Mrs. John Shelton, mother of Ensign James Arnold Shelton. This ship foundered on 3 October 1944 after being torpedoed by a Japanese submarine. Due to this loss, a second ship to bear this name was authorized.

*USS Shelton*, DD-790, launched on 8 March 1946, was sponsored by Mrs. Loretta Shelton Miller.

*USS Peiffer*, DE-588, launched on 26 January 1944, was sponsored by Mrs. Frank W. Peiffer, mother of Ensign Carl David Peiffer. This ship survived the war.

## NOTES:

1. During pull-out Lieutenant Dickinson had been unable (probably due to ice formation in the dive) to retract his dive brakes and, therefore, instead of maintaining the customary high rate of speed, had found himself slowing up to about 95 knots. While this probably helped him avoid the AA gunfire directed at him, he was quickly left behind by the rest of the SBDs, and had to retire alone. He did so successfully, though fuel starvation ultimately forced him to ditch some ten miles short of Enterprise. He and his gunner, Joseph Ferdinand DeLuca, Aviation Radioman First class, were picked up the next day.
2. Off the six Dauntlesses that comprised Ware's *ad hoc* division, four of the pilots had been in the squadron less than two months and were in their first action. Only Lieutenant Ware and Ensign McCarthy had previous combat experience. The six aircraft were:

1 <sup>st</sup> Section:	S-4	SBD-3	03206	Lieutenant Charles Rollins Ware, USNA34 William Henry Stambaugh, Aviation Machinist Mate, First class
	S-6	SBD-3	03225	Ensign James Arnold Shelton, A-V(N), USNR David Bruce Craig, Radioman, Third class
	S-12	SBD-3	4600	Ensign Carl David Peiffer, A-V(N), USNR Frederick Charles Jeck, Aviation Radioman, Third class
2 <sup>nd</sup> Section:	S-15	SBD-3	4615	Ensign John Reginald McCarthy, A-V(N), USNR Earl Edward Howell, Aviation Radioman, Second class
	S-5	SBD-3	03224	Ensign Frank Woodrow O'Flaherty, A-V(N), USNR Bruno Peter Gaido, Aviation Machinist Mate, First class
	S-14	SBD-3	4612	Ensign John Cady Lough, A-V(N), USNR Louis Dale Hansen, Radioman, Third class
3. Without a bomb load and some 200 of the 260 gallon fuel load at takeoff, the SBD was extremely nimble. As many carrier veterans can attest, in this state it proved extremely difficult to shoot down. During the entire battle, only three carrier-based SBDs were shot down by Zeros, one less than the number that were lost to anti-aircraft fire.
4. The composition of Shigematsu's escort flight was:

1 <sup>st</sup> Shotai:	Lieutenant Shigematsu Yosuihiro	Returned to <i>Hiryu</i> after attack on Task Force 17 circa 1540
	PO2c Totaka Noburo	Lost in action over Task Force 17
	Sea1c Yoshimoto Sueyoshi	Lost in action over Task Force 17
2 <sup>nd</sup> Shotai:	WO Minegishi Yoshijiro	Damaged by SBDs, returned to and landed on <i>Hiryu</i> circa 1430
	PO1c Sasaki Hitoshi	Damaged by SBDs, returned to <i>Hiryu</i> and ditched circa 1430
	PO3c Chiyoshima Minoru	Lost in action over Task Force 17
5. Unfortunately, Esders' gunner, Robert Boyd Brazier, Aviation Radioman second class had died of wounds received prior to being rescued.