

ENS FRANK C. ELKINS, Jr., DIARY

Fighting Squadron (VF) 26

(Written in 2003)

From my personal diary: July 18, 1943; escorted TBFs & SBDs to Kahili. We were to have 64 fighters, finally getting up there with 28. 8 of those had only 1 wing tank which meant landing at the emergency field of Segi on the way home. Segi field is not complete, very rough, soggy and muddy. There are still Japs on the island. Upon arriving at Kahili airfield we met a number of B-24s returning from a bombing attack on Kahili airfield. At the time their cover of F4Us and P-40s were mixing it up with a gaggle of Zeros. These Zeros spotted us 10,000 ft below and immediately jumped us. I counted at least 40. Our bombers continued on in and attacked some ships in the harbor which was their assigned target. I had joined my four-plane division up with Fitz Palmer's section as two of his division had to turn back early in the flight. The six of us stuck together, covering the bombers and broke up four different attacks on them. This was the fighters' mission. None of our 6 F4Fs got Zeros, for when we would scissor and turn toward them, they'd break away out of range. I did get to shoot off Fitz's tail which was confirmed. I also chased one off a crippled TBF (not confirmed). Meantime the other fighters got split up and Zeros were jumping them right and left. In the melee, Paul Thayer got two, Hal Waring one before being shot down, Dave Pope one then was shot down, Alexander one, Seale two, Jerry Clark two, Mickelwaite one, Pierson one and was later shot down and Palmerance one. We lost Dalton, Lewis and Landis. The final tally was 14 Japs to our 6 lost. Dave Pope was seen to land and get out OK. He has a slim chance of being picked up. The rest are doubtful. All of these surviving people lost sight of our bombers and straggled back to base. Fitz's section and my division stayed with the bombers all the way back to New Georgia. We then had to go to Segi, being low on gas. An F4U pilot had just landed there pretty well shot up. He had fainted upon landing and crack up. After refueling the six of us returned to the Russell Island base.

This attack was a good example of some very poor strategy on the part of the higher command, and poor tactics on the part of the fighters and bombers. 1st, the two attacks were poorly timed and totally uncoordinated, for the B-24s [were] there just enough to stir up the Zeros (approx 40) and have them at a great altitude advantage. The 32 fighters that were there to cover the torpedo bombers never did show. No one knows what happened to them. Our 28 *Wildcats* conducted a very poor stacked coverage for the bombers, got separated from each other and lost from the bombers after the first attack by the Zeros. After that it was every man for himself, the hell with the bombers! Then on the way home, the bombers proceeded to straggle over a 15-mile area making it impossible to cover them with our 6 remaining *Wildcats*. The higher command should never order *Wildcats* to Kahili with one wing tank. It was a pretty much SNAFUd mission, but a lot should have been learned. We should not have lost six pilots, tho we were lucky enough to return with all the bombers, as far as I know.* The *Wildcat* has to stay together in formation and conduct the "weave" tactic to combat the *Zero*. The F4U is no match in a one-on-one dog fight, despite superior pilot ability. I hope next time our tactics will have improved and our losses are none, even if all

attacks are driven off and no *Zeros* are destroyed. The mission is to protect the bomber, and that only.

* Possibly the crippled TBF I ran the *Zero* off from, could have been Paul Martin's plane.

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