

## FAMOUS PILOTS KNOWN

BY

WEST VALLEY FLYING CLUB MEMBERS

One of our flying club members has known, and even flown with a famous pilot from years past. One famous pilot was Ensign George Gay who flew in the Battle of Midway with Torpedo Squadron 8 and was the only survivor out of 15 pilots and 15 machine gunners in June 1942. The Battle of Midway in the Pacific took place 6 months after Pearl Harbor and only 2 months after Jimmy Doolittle's raid on Japan's homeland with 16 B-25 bombers. The Battle of Midway was a major turning point in the Pacific war with Japan. Japan lost four aircraft carriers, a heavy cruiser, 248 aircraft, and 3,057 flyers and seamen killed while America lost one fleet aircraft carrier, 150 aircraft destroyed and 307 flyers and seamen killed. Numerous other ships and aircraft fought a four day running sea/air battle in the Pacific Ocean near the Island of Midway. **So, who in the world in our flying club would know Ensign George Gay?**

Fortunately for Navy Ensign George Gay, and unfortunately for Torpedo Squadron 8, he was the only pilot who survived the torpedo attack on the second of a four day battle against the Japanese forces. Squadron 8 consisted of 15 torpedo equipped aircraft with a crew of two, one pilot and one machine gunner, who attacked the heavily defended Japanese force unassisted. Only George Gay survived for 30 hours in the water in a one man life raft watching the continuing sea/air battle after the American dive bombers arrived and later Navy ships.

West Valley Flying Club's own member and pilot, Weston (Mac) McEwan, flew with TWA pilot George Gay as his co-pilot in 1957. Mac was the lowest seniority pilot on the TWA roster and did not know George Gay's background. That's understandable since Mac was only 11 years old during the Battle of Midway. The aircraft George Gay flew was a twin engine Martin 202 unpressurized and carried about 40 passengers. The routes were mainly from New York to Pittsburg and Philadelphia. Mac only flew with George 3 or 4 times before TWA which most of the time operated under Howard Hughes in a cash loss position, was furloughed due to financial conditions. Mac said George was a quiet fellow and known for always flying his aircraft smoothly. Mac's question, tongue in cheek, "...a Navy pilot that was smooth?" On the other hand, Mac said George Gay was "...one of the best senior captains I ever flew with and I don't remember him as rough handler of the aircraft so he must have been smooth!" Mac does have stories about Howard Hughes and some of the stunts he pulled all through his flying career even though Mac never met Howard. Anyway, that's another story.

Most all information pertaining to Torpedo Squadron 8 and Ensign Gay's survival in this article was extracted from the *Life Magazine* August 31, 1942, and a partial on the Navy's "Communique No. 97, which was a terse official epitaph of Torpedo Squadron 8 saying:

“...Fifteen torpedo planes from this group, therefore, located the enemy to the westward and proceeded to attack at once without protection or assistance of any kind. Although some hits were reported by radio from these airplanes and although some enemy fighters were shot down, the total damage inflicted by this squadron in this attack may never be known. None of these 15 planes returned. The sole survivor of the 30 officers and men of this squadron was Ensign G.H. Gay Jr., U.S.N.R., who scored one torpedo hit on an enemy carrier before he was shot down.”

That might have been all we'd ever know if it wasn't for Ensign George Gay surviving the ordeal to tell his story. The squadron skipper, Lieutenant Commander John Waldron, said to the men just prior to their final mission:

**“Just a word to let you know that I feel we are ready. We have had a very short time to train and we have worked under the most severe difficulties. But we have truly done the best humanly possible. I actually believe that under these conditions we are the best in the world. My greatest hope is that we encounter a favorable tactical situation, but if we don't, and the worst comes to worst, I want each of us to do his utmost to destroy our enemies. If there is only one plane left to make a final run-in, I want that man to go in and get a hit. May God be with us all. Good luck, happy landings, and give'em hell.”**

Most amazing was how George Gay avoided capture and witnessed the sinking of three of the Japanese carriers by hiding behind his seat cushion acting as though he was dead in his one man raft while floating in the waters of the Pacific! After he recovered from his injuries at the Battle of Midway, he flew combat missions at Guadalcanal in 1943 and then was an instructor pilot at NAS Miami, Florida for his final active duty stint until 1945. He remained in the Navy Reserves after the war. LCDR Gay left the reserves July 1954 and flew for Trans-World Airlines for 30 years. He died October 1994, was cremated and his ashes scattered at sea in the Pacific Ocean where his squadron launched its attack during the Battle of Midway. This was George Gay's final tribute to his squadron.

Thanks to Mac McEwan for his input to the story.

Mac McEwan and Jim Davis  
West Valley Flying Club

**Note:** LCDR George Gay wrote a book titled *Sole Survivor* which, according to his testimony, affected the rest of his life. No kidding—floating in the Pacific Ocean for 30 hours watching the air/sea Battle of Midway taking place all around him and waiting through the night to be rescued by a PBY Catalina seaplane! This book can be purchased online.