

**Oral History**

**Rear Admiral  
Lewis R. Hopkins  
U.S. Navy (Retired)**

**Dive Bomber Operations in WWII  
Battle of Midway**

**Center for Pacific War Studies  
Adm. Nimitz Historic Site  
National Museum of the Pacific War**



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# **Admiral Nimitz Historic Site- National Museum of the Pacific War**

**Center for Pacific War Studies  
Fredericksburg, Texas**

**Interview with  
RADM. Lewis R. Hopkins (USN-Retired)  
SBD Pilot (VB-6) - USS Enterprise  
Battle of Midway**

Interview with  
Rear Admiral Lewis R. Hopkins (USN-Retired)

**Mr. Cox:** Today is January 15, 2004. My name is Floyd Cox and I am a volunteer at the National Museum of the Pacific War in Fredericksburg, Texas. We are here in San Antonio, Texas to interview Admiral Lewis Hopkins. Admiral Hopkins retired July 1, 1974 as Rear Admiral upper half, which is a two star admiral. Admiral, thank you for taking the time to visit with me today concerning your World War II experiences. I would like to start out just asking you some basic background questions about where you were born and your family.

**Admiral Hopkins:** I was born in a small community called Lutherville, Georgia in Meriwether county. It was an unincorporated area and I guess if you would draw a circle around what you would call a community there would have been about two hundred and fifty people there. It was a farming community with family farms. Everybody was very poor. We didn't know it because everybody else was that way. I grew up on this farm and I guess you could call my Dad a share cropper. His mother had owned the land and had left the community and gone to Atlanta, Georgia and he was renting the land for one bale of cotton per year. Now whatever the price of cotton was determined what the rent was. To put it in perspective, what you would make on the size of farm we had, you would make about five bales of cotton and one of those would go for the rent to his mother. It was a family farm. We had two animals, a horse and a mule and we did all the cultivation on the farm with those. I grew up in that farming atmosphere. Get up in the morning at sunrise, work until sunset, go to bed and get up the next morning and repeat the process. We had Saturday afternoon and Sunday off. Saturday afternoon we would get all cleaned up, we didn't take a bath everyday in those days. (Laughter) We'd get all cleaned up and go to what we called town, which was three or four stores in this little community. Some times my dad would buy me an ice cream. An ice cream would be a nickel. He didn't have many nickels but he would buy me an ice cream once in awhile. We would kind of visit around on Saturday afternoons. Other people would be doing the same thing. On Sundays we would go to church in the morning and Sunday afternoon you would rest. Farm work was hard work. It was manual work at that point in time with no mechanizations so to speak. Your cultivations were done with plows pulled by a horse or mule. When you worked a day it was a hard days work so at the end of the week you were ready to rest.

**Mr. Cox:** What was your dad's name?

**Admiral Hopkins:** My dad's name was Ernest Eugene Hopkins, Jr. and my brother was Ernest Eugene Hopkins III. I had a brother and a sister. My brother was

twelve years older than I was and by the time I got old enough to remember he had left home so I hardly knew I had a brother when I was growing up. I had a sister who was six years older than I was. Of course my sister didn't care a thing in the world about having anything to do with a little brat of a brother. (Laughter) So in essence I grew up almost as a single child. I learned at a very early age to do the things that you do on a farm like manage a plow. My dad would use the mule for plowing and I would use the horse.

**Mr. Cox:** That is when you would walk behind the plow.

**Admiral Hopkins:** Yes, I would walk behind the plow and there is a certain amount of skill involved in the cultivation process. During the growing season the work was from sunrise to sunset with time off for lunch except it wasn't lunch. In those days we called the main meal dinner. You would have dinner and what was left over you would eat at night for supper. We didn't have any refrigeration so what food you prepared for the day was what you ate that day. We had just plain good solid food. We always had a garden and did a lot of canning. Also we dried vegetables and fruits to use throughout the year. We raised our own farm animals for beef. We usually would raise beef calves every year. You could cure pork with salt so it would be usable throughout the year. We had a smokehouse that we kept them in. There would really be a lot of salt on them. You can get salt cured hams today from places like Virginia but you really have to soak them to get the salt out. You would do the slaughtering during the winter time when the temperature was cold so that you could do the curing while it was cold. That was always a big event because that was the first time that you had any fresh meat in a long time. The community was such that if one family would slaughter a hog they would share it with all the neighbors and vice-versa. It was a great natural community event. It wasn't planned it was just the thing to do. In killing the hog, quite often my job was putting it into hot water and scraping it after it was slaughtered. (Laughter) You learn an awful lot by osmosis. You grow up with things happening about you and you learn how to do them. It was a tough life but it was a good life.

**Mr. Cox:** Did you go to school at this time?

**Admiral Hopkins:** Yes, I went to a school where all grades were in this one school. It was an eleven grade school at that time not a twelve grade school. I made two grades the first year and since it was only an eleven grade school I was fifteen years old when I graduated from high school. I went to college and graduated from there when I was nineteen. It was 1935 when I graduated from high school and 1939 when I graduated from college.

**Mr. Cox:** What college was that?

**Admiral Hopkins:** It was Berry college in Rome, Georgia. It was a small school and still is. At that point in time you could work your way through college. I worked my way through four years of college for a total of something less than two hundred dollars.

**Mr. Cox:** What kind of jobs did you have?

**Admiral Hopkins:** I had every kind. It is just amazing at the number of jobs that I had. The basic curricular of the school was such that you had to work two days a week. That was part of your curricular. Whatever you were assigned to those two days a week that is what you did. For example, two semesters I milked cows. We had a prized dairy herd and I milked sixteen cows twice a day. We had to do it by hand because as I said it was a prized herd and they didn't use mechanical equipment. In fact they didn't have much in those days in the way of mechanical milking equipment. You had to milk the cows at exactly the same time. Two o'clock in the morning and two o'clock in the afternoon. That was my equivalent of two days of work. Another work assignment that I had was butchering. On two days each week, another fellow and I would butcher cows, hogs, goats and sheep for the student body. The school was almost totally self sufficient in so far as food requirements. They had big farms and large herds of animals.

**Mr. Cox:** You had quite a diverse education. What was your degree in?

**Admiral Hopkins:** I had a degree in chemistry. It was interesting because when I started out I didn't have any idea what I wanted to major in. I came off the farm and came out of high school and I didn't have any long range objective of any kind. I didn't know if I wanted to be a doctor, lawyer or whatever. I was just happy to be able to go to college. In my sophomore year I had a teacher who taught organic chemistry. He was so good that he inspired me to say, "Well I would like to be a chemist" so I majored in chemistry. Believe me I have not had a test tube in my hand since I left school. (Laughter) The events just never allowed me to get back in it. On the other hand I am really happy that I made it in chemistry because years and years later my granddaughter was in high school and was having trouble in chemistry. We happened to live in the same basic community so I became her tutor in chemistry. I got to know my granddaughter very well and we spent a lot of quality time together while I was tutoring her. It is kind of interesting how, when something happens in one phase of your life, it makes a difference in another phase of your life. While I was in grade school I had to walk to school every day. They did have one school bus route but you had to live beyond two miles to be qualified to ride the bus. I was right at two miles so I would be walking and here would come the bus taking the kids to school and it would pass on by me. (Laughter) You would think two miles would be a long way

but it didn't seem to be so long unless it would rain because I didn't have a rain coat. As I remember, I was in the second or third grade when I got my first rain coat and it was a slicker made out of oil cloth. The first day that it rained, when I went to school, I put that rain coat on and went out and stood in the rain. My daughter had heard me tell this story and three or four years ago she gave me this card showing a little boy in a slicker standing out in the rain. I have it in my apartment now, sitting up on a shelf. (Laughter)

**Mr. Cox:** After you graduated from college where did life take you? Did you get a job?

**Admiral Hopkins:** Yes, I got a job in Atlanta with Sears and Roebuck. The job they gave me was in their catalogue department. I had a job of writing letters to people who had purchased things on time and had not kept up their payments. I would progressively write more serious letters saying if you don't pay we are going to come and get your refrigerator or stove. We had a fictitious legal letterhead that we would send out to them threatening them with all sorts of legal actions. I did that until early 1940 and I got tired of that. You do the same thing everyday and you write the same letter probably twenty or twenty-five times a day. We would dictate the letter on a Dictaphone. It had a round cylinder and you would dictate these letters but basically you are dictating these same letters. Then a job became available with Royal Typewriter Company as a junior salesman. I took that. As a junior salesman you never got any referrals. All the senior sales people got all of the referrals. As a junior salesman you would make cold calls. Every morning I would take a typewriter and go out and knock on doors. The approach was to see if you could get a secretary to try it out for a couple of weeks. Then if they tried it out and they liked it, and they usually would because Royal Typewriter was a very fine typewriter at the time, you would try to sell their boss on buying them a new typewriter. I did that until I got in the Navy.

I'll have to tell you how I got in the Navy. I was doing this junior sales business in the spring of 1940 and I kept reading in the paper about the World's Fair being held in New York. I kept thinking I would like to go to the World's Fair. I didn't have enough money as a junior salesman to go but I read in the Atlanta Constitution, Atlanta's Daily Newspaper, one morning that the Atlanta Reserve Unit was going to take a two week cruise out of Charleston, South Carolina and layover in New York for a weekend. A light bulb went off in my head and I said, "I'm going out and join the Navy Reserve". (Laughter) I joined as an apprentice seaman. Then when they were making up the roster for people to go on this two week cruise they said they didn't have enough money for everybody for train fare from Atlanta to Charleston and back and so those who just joined the reserve would not be able to go on the cruise. But they said if we chose to, we could pay our own way. They said that if we didn't have

money for train fare, we could get on the train and take our chances that the conductor might not ask us for our ticket. I said I would take my chances so I got on the train in Atlanta and dodged the conductor all the way to Charleston. When we got to Charleston we were put on an old four stack destroyer, the USS Edwards. Being an apprentice seaman I had the job of peeling potatoes. I sat on the fantail of this destroyer peeling potatoes for two hundred men for breakfast, two hundred men for lunch and two hundred men for supper. You had to peel all of those potatoes with a knife, nothing mechanical. We got to the World's Fair in New York and I got to go to the fair. It was there that I saw the first public demonstration of television on a little three inch tube. They would show people in the audience and you could see it up on the screen. There were a lot of interesting things then we got on the ship going back to Charleston and of course we were on maneuvers and I had the glorious job of scraping paint on the whale boat all the way back. I went back to Atlanta on the train, dodging the conductor all the way. We arrived in Charleston about two o'clock in the morning. I was living in a boarding house on the second floor. I don't know if you know what a boarding house is but in a boarding house you have your own room but a common eating area. I slept for three or four hours and went down the next morning for breakfast and there on the dinning table was the Atlanta Constitution with big headlines, "Atlanta Reserve called to duty". That afternoon I went down to the Navy recruiting office and asked them what the Navy did besides peel potatoes and scrape paint. I had my college degree at that time and they told me I could go into flight training, which I did. In December 1940 I went into flight training in Opa Locka, Florida. Went through flight training there and at Jacksonville and went back to Opa Locka for advance training and so forth. I finished up in September 1941.

**Mr. Cox:** What was your class number, do you remember?

**Admiral Hopkins:** 3A41J. In Jacksonville that is the first class in March 1941. You know one thing I don't know and don't remember is my aviator number.

**Mr. Cox:** Was it at this point in time that you were selected to fly a certain type of aircraft such as fighters, bombers or the like?

**Admiral Hopkins:** They assigned it. I think now people have an opportunity saying what they would like to fly but on designation as an naval aviator I was assigned to carrier squadron on the USS Ranger which was out of Norfolk. I never got aboard the Ranger. I was in Norfolk in advanced carrier training squadron in preparation to go on board ship. When you are assigned to a carrier squadron one of the criteria and one of the things you want to get in your record is "carrier qualified". If you make eight successful landings they put in your record "carrier qualified" but they never tell you what the qualifications are for the first one. I never got

aboard the Ranger and I never got "carrier qualified" even though I was assigned. December 7<sup>th</sup> came along and they immediately transferred me and a lot of other people out to the west coast.

**Mr. Cox:** Do you remember where you were and what you were doing December 7, 1941?

**Admiral Hopkins:** I was in Pembroke, North Carolina. I had gone down over the weekend from Norfolk to Pembroke. It was about a six or seven hour drive by automobile. I was getting ready to back to Norfolk about two o'clock in the afternoon. I had gotten up from the couch and was standing in the living room and this radio message came on that the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. That is another one of those things that if that apartment was still there I could go back and say I was standing here when I heard about Pearl Harbor. I didn't even know where Pearl Harbor was but they said in Hawaii.

**Mr. Cox:** You were married at the time?

**Admiral Hopkins:** Yes, I wasn't supposed to be. (Laughter) I kept it quiet along with a lot of other people. It was interesting they relaxed that requirement in January 1942. A lot of people who had married like I had done remarried but I never got remarried. After that another fellow and I drove across country to San Francisco.

**Mr. Cox:** How many days did it take you to drive?

**Admiral Hopkins:** I think it was about five or six days. You know the national speed limit was thirty-five miles an hour because of rationing tires and gasoline. Some interesting things happened. I remember when we were going through Memphis, Tennessee and we came to this intersection. We changed drivers about that time and I was driving and ended up in Mississippi. I said to myself, "What am I doing in Mississippi?" I figured out I was going the wrong way so I turned around and went back. A few hours later the other fellow woke up and said, "Where are we?" I said, "We're in Memphis." So that added to the time that it took. We got to San Francisco and we had to get rid of this car and the people know you have to sell the car. I don't know what we got for it but certainly the minimum.

We got on this ship and I don't remember what the name of it was. The first thing they do is put us on watch. The USS Enterprise was out at that time on a raid on Marcos Islands so I was temporarily assigned to Bombing Squadron 3, which was stationed at Kaneohe in Hawaii and there is where I did all of my field carrier landing practice and qualified for carrier operations. I did all of this while the Enterprise was out to sea. I actually went aboard the Enterprise in early April 1942. I remember the



first cruise was out on the Enterprise and when we left Pearl Harbor we were heading northwest. Day one Northwest, day two Northwest, day three Northwest and I thought the only place Northwest of here is Japan. (Laughter) So I was thinking, here I am on my first combat cruise on the Enterprise and we are going to attack Japan. We went up every morning on the flight deck to check our planes and everything and I look out and see this carrier with B-25's (Mitchell bombers)<sup>1</sup> on it. Then they told us about the USS Hornet. The story is of course that there was a Japanese picket ship that apparently got off a message, telling of the location of the USS Hornet, so they decided to launch the B-25's early. That was April 18, 1942. I was sitting in the cockpit of my plane because as soon as the B-25's were launched, they were going to launch us. I could see the B-25's taking off.

**Mr. Cox:** When you were assigned to your ship were you assigned to Bombing Squadron Six right away?

**Admiral Hopkins:** Bombing Six, yes. Our orders from the Ranger read to report to the Commanding Officer Bombing Squadron 6 aboard the USS Enterprise.

**Mr. Cox:** At that time were you assigned your gunner?

**Admiral Hopkins:** No, I was just assigned to the squadron. I got to the squadron and of course the commanding officer makes up the squadron organization. That was Commander Dick Best. He was a wonderful guy. I learned so much from him and I will always remember what a good leader he was. He took all of us under his wing. For an example, one of our primary missions was scouting flights. We were always scouting out about two hundred miles ahead and to the side of the ship and even though we had navigation in school he wanted to make sure that we were skillful enough in our navigation so we could not only fly our scouting flight but get back to the ship. (Laughter) Usually the first two or three flights you would fly with somebody else and then they would say we were qualified. Every flight I was on he would have me sit down and discuss the navigation aspects of the flight. Of course we had our navigation charts, and you would say the wind was this and you flew a certain heading to compensate. We had times that we would put on our track and he would go over it with us and ask us questions about it. He was so interested in us becoming proficient. I'll always remember how much he thought about training us and he did the same thing in dive bombing. Scouting was one of our missions but dive bombing was our primary attack mission of course. He would go over every dive bombing flight and the dives. We used practice bombs that simulated real bombs that would put out smoke when your bomb

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<sup>1</sup> The USS Hornet carried 16 B-25 Mitchell bombers in anticipation of launching the first bomber strike over Toyko Japan. The strike was to become known as the "Doolittle Raid" named for the strike leader, Lt. Colonel Jimmy Doolittle.

would hit the ground or water. You could mark basically how many feet you were from the center of the target. He would go over that with you and talk about your dive, your angle of dive, your speed and release. We were, I guess you'd say, force fed. We would generally fly two flights a day. He was building up our capability. He was a wonderful skipper and VB Six was also quite an experienced squadron. There were three lieutenants, four or five junior grades and the rest of us were ensigns. There has been so much talk about the battle of Midway and the breaking of the code and all of that sort of thing so whenever I am asked to give a talk, I title my speech "Ensigns at Midway" to kind of give it a little different flavor. I point out that, yes we broke the code which enabled Admiral Nimitz to make a major decision, but somebody had to carry the bombs. That is where the ensigns came in. I think on the morning of June 4<sup>th</sup> there were twenty-nine ensigns flying the mission. There were three bomber squadrons. Bomber squadron SIX, Scouting Squadron SIX, both from the Enterprise, and Bomber Squadron THREE, which was from the Yorktown, did the damage. It all happened in six minutes. From ten twenty to ten twenty-six. At ten twenty the Japanese carriers had not been touched. At ten twenty-six three of them were headed for the briny deep.

**Mr. Cox:** Can we go back a little Admiral? You fellows are out there and you are sending out your scout planes and they finally spot the Japanese. Of course as you mentioned the reason we knew they were in the area was because we had broken the Japanese code JN-25. Prior to this when you fellows were out scouting, were you aware that the Japanese Navy was out there and what their intentions were?

**Admiral Hopkins:** Are you talking about prior to the battle of Midway?

**Mr. Cox:** Yes.

**Admiral Hopkins:** No. It is interesting how that came about. I mentioned the Doolittle Raid. After the Doolittle Raid, the Hornet and the Enterprise kind of traveled together and we went down to the southwest Pacific expecting to join the USS Lexington and the USS Yorktown. It turns out the Battle of the Coral occurred before we got there. The Lexington was sunk and the Yorktown was damaged but while we were there the ships were ordered back to Pearl Harbor. They took the radios out of our planes so that we could not make any transmissions. If we saw something that we wanted to report to the ship we had to fly back and we had what we called bean bags. We would write a note and tie it on the bean bag and drop it on the deck, which wasn't easy by the way. (Laughter) It kind of got to be a game and every time you came back you were supposed to go through the procedure whether you had a real note to drop or not. The deck crews got interested and they started keeping score. When you are flying a lot faster than a ship is moving, you have to drop that bean bag before you get to the ship

in anticipation of putting it on the deck. Almost everyone missed on the first try. The other thing is that a bean bag could hurt somebody so the people on the deck had to watch out. (Laughter) We didn't know anything about what was going on but obviously you sense something. Basically they didn't want any radio transmission because that would tip off the Japanese that the ships were going back to Pearl Harbor for whatever reason. We wanted them to believe that the ships were still down in the southwest Pacific. When we got back to Pearl Harbor there is a whole lot of activity getting everything ready to go. After we left Pearl Harbor and about the second day out going toward Midway was when they told us pilots that the Japanese were going to attack Midway and we would be north of the island of Midway in sort of an ambush situation. But that was the first that we knew about it and we also were told that we could expect the PBY's<sup>2</sup> flying off of Midway to be the first ones to sight the Japanese, which turned out to be the case. On the morning of June 3<sup>rd</sup> there were a couple of reports but at that time the carriers had not been sighted. The first indication was on June 4<sup>th</sup> when the PBY's saw the attack planes coming in from the carrier to attack the Midway. You didn't really know where the ships were. You just knew they probably were out somewhere on this line of bearing 320 degrees from the island of Midway.

**Mr. Cox:** Can you remember, as a young man at the time, how you felt knowing that some serious action was going to be taken?

**Admiral Hopkins:** I can't say that I was scared but I was certainly concerned and the atmosphere in the ready room was small talk and that sort of thing. Of course we were busy keeping track of navigation and all. On the morning of June 4<sup>th</sup> we had gotten up about one o'clock and gone down and had breakfast. I don't think anyone was very hungry and they kind of pushed their eggs around. The time just seemed to drag. Then the reports started coming. You get these reports and you start wondering, what, are we going to do. We all had our plane assignments. My plane was 6-B-12, #4684.

**Mr. Cox:** Were you assigned your gunner at that time?

**Admiral Hopkins:** Yes, his name was E.R. Anderson. I never had any kind of contact with him later on in life. I was relative new to the squadron and I don't know how they assigned the gunners.

**Mr. Cox:** Was he any good?

**Admiral Hopkins:** Well, I don't know. (Laughter) He was a good radioman. He was always there and when we did have to make a radio transmission he operated the radio and he managed that o.k. The procedure basically was most of the

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<sup>2</sup> PBY-6 Consolidated Catalina amphibian patrol aircraft.

gunners were radiomen and few of them had little in the way of gunnery training. As a matter of fact I don't think, a lot of them had any gunnery training. The same thing occurred when I was assigned to the Hornet. I didn't have any choice in selecting my crewmember. I was just assigned a gunner. It was not always the same one. There was a thing called flight status, in other words you got flight pay if you flew. The Chief would sort of rotate the enlisted men around to give everybody an opportunity to get extra pay.

**Mr. Cox:** Let's go back to June 4, 1942. You fellows knew that some action was pending, can you take it from there?

**Admiral Hopkins:** We got up about one o'clock in the morning and went down and had breakfast of a sort. I don't think anyone was particularly hungry and then went to the Bomber Six ready room. The ready room was quite nice in that they had nice chairs with an arm that swung over in front of you that you could put your navigation board on. We called them plotting boards. You could put a lot of information on there about what the wind speed was, the ships position was and the estimated ships course of speed would be after you had been away for awhile and would return. You had to take all of those things into consideration. You would put down any information that was provided by the reports that came in regarding the the number, location and estimated speed of the Japanese ships that were being reported by the PBY aircraft. There were some sketchy reports coming in early but not sufficient enough to know precisely what was happening. The first very concise report that came in was from a PBY out of Midway reporting Japanese planes coming in on a certain heading to attack Midway. That was the first concrete information we had. That was early in the morning and there we were sitting in the ready room wondering when we were going to take off. As I had said, there was a lot of small talk. Obviously, we were just making conversation. Every once in a while there would be some real significant conversation going on but it was kind of a nervous waiting situation. Of course at that time we all had our plane assignments. As I previously stated, I had plane 6-B-12. We knew where we our planes would be spotted on the deck. Scouting Six would be spotted on the deck ahead of Bombing Six. Scouting Six had eighteen planes and Bombing Six had fifteen. I was number twelve in Bombing Six, so if you look at it in take off sequence there were eighteen planes plus eleven planes that were to go before me so I was going to be the thirtieth plane to take off. Consequently, I could watch all of the others take off. The Scouting Six planes by virtue of being forward on the deck had less of a take off run than the Bombing Six planes had. As a result, they carried smaller bombs. As time went by finally at seven o'clock they said, "Pilots man the planes." It is an interesting thing on a carrier because up until that point in time the people were just doing various jobs on the carrier deck and when they say, "Pilots man your

planes" it just becomes a beehive of activity. The pilots are all coming out in a group checking their planes and looking everything over. They always kick the tires, as if that would tell you anything. (Laughter) Everybody starts their engines and you have propellers turning and everything.

**Mr. Cox:** Tell me about how you would start the engine on your plane.

**Admiral Hopkins:** It had an inertia starter, which basically is a hand crank starter. You insert a hand crank into the inertia starter and wind it up. Once it is wound up enough and you engage it, it will turn the engine and propeller enough to start the engine.

**Mr. Cox:** This is done by one person?

**Admiral Hopkins:** It can be done by one person but it is pretty hard. Most of the time the pilot would help the plane captain get it started and then the pilot would get in the plane and buckle up. Theoretically speaking when you would go out the plane it was ready to go. The bombs were on, the arming wires were in, the windshields were cleaned and the plane was fueled up.

**Mr. Cox:** Where did they hang the bombs on your plane?

**Admiral Hopkins:** Under the belly of the plane in a yoke type of device. When you released the bomb instead of the bomb going directly forward the yoke would slant down and then it would release so the bomb would clear the propeller. We had a thousand pound bomb. By the way, that was the first time I ever took off with a live bomb. I wasn't the only one either, there were lots of other pilots who had the same experience.

**Mr. Cox:** Were these fragmentation bombs?

**Admiral Hopkins:** They were penetrating bombs. They had a nose fuse and a tail fuse. The nose fuse would be the contact fuse and if it failed in any way then the tail fuse would activate. The real damage on the Japanese carriers occurred because of their own fuel and their own ammunition. Unlike the USS Yorktown in the Battle of the Coral Sea. It survived some significant hits. The Japanese carriers had all of their planes on the deck loaded with ammunition and full of fuel and once you get the explosion started it is a chain reaction. That is basically what happened.

**Mr. Cox:** After Scouting Six took off and your take off rotation came up and you took off, what altitude were you flying and did you see the Japanese fleet right away?

**Admiral Hopkins:** Oh no. When you take off from the carrier it is kind of like a ballet actually. You have the planes circling and you have all the other planes coming around on the inside of the circle. It is just a string of planes coming around as you are going up. As we joined up we climbed to twenty-two thousand feet. We had to use oxygen and that was another first. I had never used oxygen on a continuous basis other than in an oxygen chamber when they showed you how to use it. The oxygen masks in those days were pretty flimsy. As a matter of fact some of our pilots had a problem and my squadron commander, Dick Best had to reduce the altitude slightly. We went out on this mission and we get to where the the Jap fleet was supposed to be, they are not there. There was nothing. Just ocean as far as you can see and at this point in time we are just about as far as we should be if we wanted to get back to the carrier. We were at the point of no return.<sup>3</sup> Wade McCluskey, who was the Enterprise Air Group Commander, made the decision to go ahead and see if he could find them. He went about another fifteen minutes and I knew and most everybody else knew that we didn't have enough fuel to get back. He turned northwest and he ran across this destroyer hightailing it back to the rest of the Japanese fleet and he decided to follow it. We are flying in formation so we follow. I mentioned how you can be impressed with an image and I remember seeing the Japanese fleet. I am sitting here today and I can see that Japanese fleet as clear now as I saw it then. It was something else and I was clearly impressed. I'm not sure the true story has ever been confirmed as to what happened relative to the assignment of the ships. The story that Dick Best tells is that he was supposed to attack one ship, which was the Kaga, and when he gets in position to do so, McCluskey is attacking that ship, so he diverts to the other ship, which was the Akagi. At almost the precisely the same time coming from another direction was Bomber Squadron Three from the Yorktown who had better information about the ships location at the time they took off. The Japanese were amazed that an attack could be so well coordinated that two attacking forces, approaching almost one hundred and eighty degrees from each other, could converge upon their fleet at precisely the same time.

**Mr. Cox:** Did you see the torpedo planes going in or any fighters?

**Admiral Hopkins:** No, I did not see any torpedo planes and the amazing thing was there were no fighters. There were no fighters until we got down. We didn't have any resistance. They didn't even have any aircraft fire. They didn't see us. The Japanese side of this tells about people on the deck and they don't see the SBD's until some of them are actually in their dive. They see at that point in time that it is too late to do anything about it. I was twelfth position in the formation so there were eleven ahead of me in the dive. You see four or five ahead of you in the dive and you see the bombs

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<sup>3</sup> The point at which it is calculated that the remaining fuel supply is only adequate enough to return the aircraft to the home base.

dropping and they pull out. I went down at a dive angle of about sixty to seventy degrees. The plane has split flaps and you get 240 knots is about the maximum speed about with the split flaps. In those days you had what you call a gun sight that is a tube with cross hairs in it. You look through that and in the meantime you are flying the plane and you have to keep it balanced. I put the cross hairs on the leading edge of the carrier. The radioman called out the altitude, five thousand, four thousand, three thousand, twenty-five hundred because when you are looking in the cross hairs you can't see the altimeter. He calls twenty-five hundred and a Zero coming from the right. I went ahead and released the bomb and immediately turned in to the Zero in a defensive maneuver. I think post analysis showed that I didn't get a hit. Usually you can drop your bomb and make a left turn and look back over your shoulder and see your bomb hit. I didn't have that opportunity since I was busy with the attacking zero. I got down on the water as close as I could and Anderson the gunner says, "Let's get the hell out of here." I said, "What do you think I'm trying to do?" (Laughter) Basically we are in the middle of the Japanese fleet when we pull out. Now the problem is, how do I get back to the ship because our fuel is low. I was joined up by two other planes flown by ensigns, Ensign Green and Ensign Ramsey. We got about forty miles out from the Enterprise and Ensign Green runs out of fuel and so he has to ditch. There is nothing I can do but take note of the location. We get within sight of the carrier and Ensign Ramsey runs out of fuel and I make a note of that. When I get back to the carrier I found that I am one of five planes that made it back to the carrier. Why me? I guess you could say I might have managed my fuel a little better or maybe the engine itself made it possible. No two engines perform in the same way. Anyway I got back o.k.

**Mr. Cox:** I guess you could say that the Man upstairs was looking out for you.

**Admiral Hopkins:** I guess so. I told you about this Battle of Midway round table that is on the Internet. One of the questions that was asked of everybody on the round table, one time was, who was the most responsible person in the victory at the Battle of Midway. Well, you get all kinds of answers but one of the answers was God and luck. You can not say that there wasn't luck involved. Now whether God was involved, I guess that could be the subject of a lot of discussion, but certainly there was luck involved and a lot of hard work. This action occurred the morning of the 4<sup>th</sup>. I did not fly the afternoon mission.

**Mr. Cox:** Was that to give you a rest?

**Admiral Hopkins:** Well I don't know. There were two or three pilots who had not flown so Ensign Hogan flew my plane 6-B-12.

**Mr. Cox:** Did he take care of it?

**Admiral Hopkins:** I guess so, he got it back. (Laughter) That was in the afternoon and that was when the fourth carrier was sunk. The battle was over that day. The battle was over that morning although planes from the Hiryu did badly damage the Yorktown. The morning of the 5<sup>th</sup> we were kind of marking time because nobody knew where the Japanese fleet was and they kind of conjectured that there might be another carrier out there. By the way the Hornet planes never got into the June 4<sup>th</sup> morning action at all. On the 5<sup>th</sup> they got all of the SBD's that they could fly and I think there were fifty-eight of them total. We launched out to the Northwest, hoping we would find a carrier but we didn't. We went past this lone destroyer and finally decided it wasn't a carrier. We decided we would attack the destroyer and fifty-eight planes dived on it and there wasn't a single hit. We found out in a postwar Japanese report that one of the officers lay on the deck looking up watching the planes coming in and he was telling the ship's Captain how to maneuver. Hitting a destroyer is not easy.

**Mr. Cox:** Compared to a carrier?

**Admiral Hopkins:** Even a carrier is not easy. If you look at the number of dives on a carrier and the actual hits reported it is not an easy target. But anyway, fifty-eight planes missed the destroyer. This was late afternoon so now we have to find the ship at night and land in darkness. Luckily the Task Force Commander turned the lights on. I was in this group and I had never made a night carrier landing. I had never even practiced one. One other person in our squadron was also making his first night landing.

**Mr. Cox:** Do you remember your feeling at the time?

**Admiral Hopkins:** Well, I know I was concentrating but actually it really wasn't too different than a daylight landing. The Landing Signal Officer had lighted wands to guide you in and your landing pattern was exactly the same as during day light. I kind of wondered about it a little bit. (Laughter)

**Mr. Cox:** Did they lose any planes during the landing?

**Admiral Hopkins:** No. We lost one plane that was shot down during the attack on the second day.

**Mr. Cox:** On the first day during the attack were any planes lost from your division?

**Admiral Hopkins:** Oh yes. Only five planes out of my squadron got back. I don't know about Scouting Six. I think all of Bombing Three planes got back. The torpedo planes took tremendous losses.



- Mr. Cox:** Did you see any planes go in the water during the attack?
- Admiral Hopkins:** The only two planes I saw go in were the two that ran out of gas. The doctrine at that time was to make a coordinated attack. The torpedo planes and dive bombers at the same time. The fighters were for protection but there weren't any at that time. The torpedo planes took all the Zeros down to allow the dive bombers to attack unopposed. That was a major factor.
- Mr. Cox:** Did you lose any personal friends in your division?
- Admiral Hopkins:** I'll tell you a story about one person. I was interviewed on the Oliver North War Stories television series some time back and as a result of that a person who was watching the show noted that I was from Bombing Squadron Six. He got in touch with Fox News and asked them if they would give him my name. They told him they would send a message to me and I could reply if I wanted to. I sent a message to him that I would be glad to chat with him about it. We got in contact with each other and in the course of conversation, he said, "My uncle was in Bombing Squadron Six and I wonder if you knew him? His name was Ensign Vandervier." I said, "I not only knew him, I roomed with him. I also had the job of inventorying his personal effects and sending them home." Since that time he has come to San Antonio and we have had dinner together. He is a photographer and took a number of pictures. I have some of his pictures up on the wall. I heard from some of the other members of that family too.
- Mr. Cox:** I noticed in some of my research that in your division there was a D.W. Halsey. Was he any relation to Admiral Halsey?
- Admiral Hopkins:** No, not that I know of. Admiral Halsey didn't get to go out to the Battle of Midway because he had some kind of allergy or something.
- Mr. Cox:** Did you ever meet Admiral Halsey?
- Admiral Hopkins:** I saw him but I never met him.
- Mr. Cox:** Ok, now lets move on to the third day of the Midway action. What is taking place now?
- Admiral Hopkins:** On the third day it became pretty evident that there were no more carriers around but they did sight these two cruisers. One of them was damaged. I didn't get to fly on that mission either. They sank the one ship. The two cruisers had somehow collided and they were crippled. That was June 6<sup>th</sup> and we went back to Pearl Harbor. I was immediately reassigned to the Scouting Squadron Eight on the U.S.S Hornet. I had the opportunity of serving under Commander Gus Widhelm. He was a flamboyant type,

totally different from Dick Best. He was the type of guy that would have his flight scarf tied around his neck and flapping in the breeze. He would have a cigar in his mouth. He wouldn't smoke it but it would be in his mouth when he would go charging off the deck. As a matter of fact he was written up in Life Magazine with a picture of him. There were a lot of stories about him during the war and after the war.

In the early seventies the Navy sent me to Harvard Business School. As a result of that I joined the Harvard Business School Alumni. I'm at this breakfast, in San Antonio, one time and there was a fellow coming in for the first time and introduced himself as Widhelm. I asked him if he spelled it *W i d h e l m*?" He said, "Yeah, you are one of the few people who know how to spell it." I said, "I had a squadron commander by the name of Gus Widhelm." He said, "He was my father." I believe that Gus Widhelm was killed in an aircraft crash down in Corpus Christi, Texas following the war. I was assigned to the Hornet and we went down to the southwest Pacific around the Guadalcanal area. While we were down there the USS Saratoga was hit. The USS Wasp was hit and sank. I can tell you a story about that day.

When you have two carriers in the same general vicinity usually one carrier will have what you call the duty. They will be doing all the scouting and the other carrier is on standby if anything comes up that they need them. On this particular day the Wasp planes had the duty and they were away when the Wasp was torpedoed. They could not get back aboard the Wasp so the decision was made to launch the Hornet planes to the island of Espiritu Santo so the Wasp planes could land on the Hornet. It was late afternoon and there were winds and thunder storms in the area. There were five of us in my particular group. We didn't find Espiritu Santo but we did find an island. We didn't know where Espiritu Santo was but we could land along the beach, on this other island which was called, Pentecost, also in the New Hebrides, and paddle ashore in our boats or bail out. Two crews decided to bail out over the island. Three of us decided to land alongside the beach. It was now about nine o'clock at night and it was dark. My crewman and I didn't have any trouble getting out. Each one of the life rafts has what they call a Very pistol, which is a pistol capable of firing a flare. We would fire a flare and the other crews would fire one so we kind of knew where the other ones were. We go paddling up on the beach and there are ten people standing there with their hands in the air. It turns out these were French plantation owners and operators on this island and they raised coconuts. They thought they were being invaded. One of our people knew enough French and they knew enough English that we could kind of understand each other. They took us in and sat us down for a meal. There was just this little morsel of food on a plate and we thought, "Golly these people are in bad shape." Well it turned out that this was the first course of a ten course dinner. We spent the night there and the next day we hooked up with the ones who parachuted over the island. It turned out they were near another

plantation. We were still there about three days later and we figured the PBY's would be coming by. Sure enough they did come and we flagged one down. We got aboard the PBY and went back to Espiritu Santo and from there we went back to the Hornet on TBM's. They could carry two of us.

I got back to the ship and a few days later I began to feel bad having fever and chills. One day I would have fever and chills and the next day I would feel good. The Doctor said he thought I had Malaria, which I did. I guess I got it on this island. The only medication they had for Malaria was quinine. I took quinine and got over it. Malaria stays in the system so it is possible for it to come back and I kind of marvel at the fact that I've never had a reoccurrence of it. That particular strain of Malaria in that particular area is very aggressive. As a result of having Malaria I was on the sick list for a period of time. I wasn't allowed to fly so I was aboard the Hornet when the Battle of Santa Cruz occurred. I was on the ship when it was attacked and had to abandon ship. In fact they took us off by highline to the destroyer USS Mustin. [The Hornet and Mustin have a joint reunion every couple of years and I went to the last one which was held in San Diego.] I transferred to the cruiser USS Northhampton and they took us down to New Caledonia. At New Caledonia I got on an old diesel tramp steamer Rochambeau. It had a tremendous diesel engine which you could hear thumping, all the way to San Francisco. When I got back to San Francisco I told them I was perfectly willing to back to the Pacific, but they said, "No, we want you to go and train dive bombing pilots." This was December 1942. I went to Cecil Field in Jacksonville and trained bombing pilots. I had an assistant instructor and we would take ten trainees through as a training squadron. It was real interesting. I would take these ten people and from day one I would say, "We have a lot of other groups of ten coming back but when we come back I want everybody to know that this is Flight number twelve." We got real good and I got, as a result of practicing with them, where I could on an average drop bombs in an area of about fifty feet. It was ideal conditions and you knew the wind and you knew the plane and no one shooting at you. The SBD was an excellent plane, it was fantastic as a dive bomber. I took three flights through and then I was reassigned to a F4U Corsair fighter squadron in Nevada. At this time the Kamikaze factor began to appear in the Pacific and so they wanted to have some planes with fighter capability as well as well as an attack capability. They wanted to see if the Corsair could be used as a dive bomber as well as a fighter. You could but it wasn't very good. It wasn't designed for it. In the dive bombing mode, what you did was put the gear down and put the propeller in low pitch and the plane kind of wobbled around. I was so use to the SBD for it was so steady. I mean it didn't oscillate and it didn't pitch. On the other hand, the F4U would kind of ramble around and was difficult to keep steady during a dive. I spent the time there training pilots and training myself. The Kamikazes were becoming more of a problem in the Pacific in mid

1944 while I was at Cecil Field. We were trying to develop and kind of procedure that would help us counteract the Kamikazes. We wanted to see how good a fighter the SBD is so at the end of my tour at Cecil Field I did a certain amount of work to see if the SBD was a fighter. We decided it wasn't going to be very good. I guess it would be o.k. against certain types of planes. That kind of went by the wayside. When I got out to Fallon, Nevada, we are looking at the F4U as a dive bomber recognizing that it would also have the fighter capability against the Kamikazes. The F4U was also a good plane for carrying rockets. If you could get a spread of about ten or twelve rockets you could do a lot of damage. So we did a lot of training for that. While I was there I had applied for post graduate training at Annapolis. I got orders back to post graduate training at Annapolis and I went through that. I went to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and got a masters degree in aeronautical engineering so the rest of my career was really in research and development. I spent a lot of time in Washington. I spent three different tours for about thirteen years in Washington D.C. in research, development and aircraft logistics. I spent two different tours in San Diego, California with the aviation fleet side.

**Mr. Cox:** Did you go to Viet Nam?

**Admiral Hopkins:** I went to Viet Nam a number of times. I was never assigned there but we had all kinds of problems with the aviation equipment in Viet Nam. Sand for example was just a horrible problem. I was kind of a trouble shooter I guess you could say and I went over there a number of times. Also the British were pulling out of Singapore about that time and they had quite a few aviation facilities that we thought that the US Navy might be able to use. It turned out that we could so I went down there with the ambassador and a couple of Air Force people to make a survey of the Singapore facilities. Eventually, we ended up with an agreement with the Singapore government for the use of their facilities. Right after the war we began to work with the Japanese because they really had some very nice aviation facilities. We began to work with them relative to their doing repair and maintenance work for the Navy aircraft. They did a good job. I had an opportunity to spend time in the Philippines and Taiwan doing the same thing. I never had any duty so to speak with the Atlantic side. It was always the Pacific.

**Mr. Cox:** When did you get your first star?

**Admiral Hopkins:** You would think I would know that right off the bat. It was 1970. I was Commanding Officer at the Missile Center at Point Magu. I got the second one in 1973.

**Mr. Cox:** Did you ever have any shipboard duty after the war?

**Admiral Hopkins:** No. I became an Aeronautical Engineering Duty Officer so I was not qualified for a command at sea. I was qualified for a command on shore and I commanded the Navy Missile Center, which was a very interesting assignment because we were right on the cutting edge of technology.

**Mr. Cox:** Once you started concentrating on the engineering part did you fly anymore?

**Admiral Hopkins:** I flew until the late 1950's. At that point in time, the people were paid what they call "flight pay". The powers that be said if they are not going to be operational and if they are not going to contribute to the operation why do we burn fuel just so they can get flight pay. The big question was if you were going to take a reduction in pay so eventually they said if you are an aviator and you're qualified you don't have to fly four hours a month just to get your flight pay. In the late 1950's, I flew for the last time. I flew a desk from then on.

**Mr. Cox:** Did you miss flying?

**Admiral Hopkins:** Yes, I did. When I retired, I was Chief of Research and Development, Naval Air systems Command, in Washington DC. A lot of things that we were working on at that time, I could see were going to be existence later on. Of course now I am totally out of it. I read about it in the paper just like everybody else. There are some marvelous things taking place in aviation and as you know this is the 100th year of the Wright Brothers flight at Kitty Hawk. If you think about them making their first flight which was less than the wing span of a 747 Commercial airliner and then you think about what has happened since then and what is going to happen, one wonders what the future will hold. They are talking about going to Mars and a having a colony on the moon. I often think how much I have seen in my lifetime. All the way from following a plow in a cotton field or corn field to seeing some major historical events like the Doolittle raiders taking off from the Hornet, the battle of Midway. Seeing all of the things that have taken place in technology, I say to myself, "How lucky can one be to have seen all of that." Of course the same thing is happening to people today. The kids of today are seeing all of these things being developed and things that are being forecast for the future. It is hard to fathom what they will see in their lifetime.

**Mr. Cox:** Probably inner planetary travel.

**Admiral Hopkins:** That's right. Some people talk about how we've seen more in technology in the last hundred years than has been seen in the history of man and than is most likely true.

**Mr. Cox:** Is there anything you would like to add before we wrap this up?

**Admiral Hopkins:** Well I don't think we ought to close without saying a good word about the National Museum of the Pacific War and all the people like yourself who are contributing to keeping history alive, so to speak, and that is what you are doing. I know my family has often accused me of not telling them about certain things so they are going to be very interested in the transcript of what we've said here today.

**Mr. Cox:** Admiral I would like to shake your hand and tell you thank you for your service to our country.

**Admiral Hopkins:** Well thank you. I appreciate that.

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