GROWING UP IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Fred Dungan’s favorite holiday was July 4. After he managed to land on the USS Hornet on July 4, 1944, and survived life-threatening wounds he sustained while shooting down four Japanese Zeros, Dungan came to think of Independence Day as something more—a second birthday.

Like other boys of his era, Dungan fell in love with planes because of Charles Lindbergh’s historic flight, and had his first ride at the age of eight in an open-cockpit Fleet biplane. Dungan was a twenty-year-old attending Pasadena College in the spring of 1941 when he was accepted into the Civil Pilot Training Program established by Congress to create a cadre of civilian pilots who could become military pilots in a national emergency.

Dungan flew a 65-horsepower Aeronca Chief with a yoke. He defrayed the plane’s $6-an-hour rental cost by charging college friends to take them up for rides. He wanted to be a naval aviator and tried to enlist, but at that time there were only rumors of war and the Navy had more flyers than there were places. He recalls Southern California military installations having to stage fund-raisers to buy gasoline for training planes. He remembers Southern California military installations having to stage fund-raisers to buy gasoline for training planes.

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The morning after the attack he drove to the Long Beach Naval Air Installa- tion. When he got there he saw the film star Wayne Morris, also a naval recruiter, pull up in a yellow Cadillac with a gorgeous blonde in the passenger seat. Dungan told Morris, who himself would become an Ace in the Pacific later in the war, that he was a qualified pilot and wanted to get into combat. “Follow me,” Morris said, leading him into the recruitment center, where he became a naval cadet.

Cramping two years of training into five months, Dungan was sent to Project Affirm, a top secret program headquartered in Quonset Point, Rhode Island, to develop a night fighter with radar. (As part of the program, he made the first ground-controlled approach blind landing late in 1943.)

In late-night bull sessions with other pilots, Dungan laid out a futuristic vision of the role flight would play in American life once the war was over. After one of his speeches, another flyer said dismissively, “Aw, that sounds like Buck Rogers stuff!” The nickname “Buck” stuck.

It was during this time that “Buck” Dungan had a chance meeting with his childhood idol Charles Lindbergh, who arrived at Quonset Point one afternoon in the cockpit of an F4U Corsair, which he was promoting as a night fighter alternative to the F6F Hellcat. Lindbergh looked around the project he was returning to his plane, and Dungan tagged along and explained why he thought the Hellcat was a better plane. Lindbergh argued with him for a moment, and then, when he saw that Dungan’s mind was made up, shrugged, climbed into the Corsair, and disappeared into the clouds.

Dungan was ordered to the Pacific Fleet in January 1944, part of a five-man unit flying Hellcat night fighters, first off the USS Yorktown and then the USS Hornet. But soon he maneuvered himself into daytime missions because that was where the action was. He got his first kill near New Guinea on April 19 when he chased a Mitsubishi G4M “Betty” bomber down to two thousand feet and destroyed it. There was only one survivor from the plane’s crew. He was rescued and brought to the Yorktown, where he insisted on seeing Dungan and congratulated him for his victory according to the samurai code.

On June 19, Dungan was taking photos of Japanese installations on Guam with another pilot. After the reconnaissance mission was over they descended through the cloud cover and saw roughly forty Japanese aircraft—an equal number of bombers and torpedo planes—in a landing pattern above an air-field. Dungan dove down and began firing. He had destroyed a bomber and strafed a torpedo plane when a formation of Zeros appeared. Dungan engaged the flight leader of the Zeros—identifiable by the markings on his fuselage—in a wild, spinning dogfight that took them out to sea. Dungan got on the Zero’s tail and shredded the plane with a burst of his machine guns. The Japanese pilot opened the cockpit and saluted Dungan as his plane fell into the sea.

Two weeks later, on July 4, Dungan and his wingman, Johnny Dear, launched early for a mission aimed at the well-fortified enemy base at Chichi-Jima, north of two Jima. They saw an enemy destroyer escort in open water. “Let’s make a low run,” Dun-gan radioed Dear. “Shoot at the water line.” Then he called for a high run, raking the deck. “One more,” he called. “This time aim for the stack.” The destroyer escort began to sink.

By this time the two American planes had run into a formation of “Rufes”—Zeros with floats. When one of them passed in front of Dungan he shot it down with a short burst. When three of the enemy followed him, Dungan radioed Dear, “Hey, Johnny, I’m bringing some with me.” Dear shot down two of them, and Dungan rose to take out the other one. Then he destroyed his fourth Rufe in a head-on firing match.

The dogfight had taken him over an enemy antiaircraft battery. He felt his plane taking hits and then a 30-caliber went through the buckle of his parachute harness and hit him in the neck. Bleeding badly, Dungan headed back to the Hornet. To keep from passing out, he shouted insults to his “guardian angel.” As he managed to land on the Hornet he heard a crewman shout, “Get a stretcher. This man is dying.” Dungan’s guardian angel saw him through after all. Within a few months he was out of the hospital. He left the Navy with a Navy Cross, a Distinguished Flying Cross, a Purple Heart, status as an Ace as a result of seven enemy kills, and a feeling that he had been born again on the Fourth of July.

**Special Thanks to Wings of Valor author Peter Collier and photographer Nick Del Colzo.**

**Wings of Valor** beautifully immortalizes the stories from these brave Americans.