

WING TALK



Newest nightmare for the Nipponese is the Grumman F6F Hellcat, a bigger, faster, more lethal carrier-fighter than the famously successful Wildcat

HELLCAT, daughter of battle, answers all the prayers of Navy pilots. She's a low-winged Navy fighter—F6F—the Navy's newest and the world's best. Pilots prayed for speed. Hellcat's got it—to spare. They prayed for climb and maneuverability. Hellcat has both. She can take it—on her tough armored hide. She can hand it back with rapid fire that can sink a destroyer.

A year ago last April, while presenting Lieutenant Commander Edward H. "Butch" O'Hare with the Congressional Medal of Honor, President Roosevelt inquired, "Butch, what kind of a fighter plane do you need to beat the Japs?"

"Something that will go upstairs faster," Butch replied.

O'Hare detailed his needs some time later to engineers of the Grumman Aircraft Engineering Corporation at Bethpage, Long Island, producers of Wildcat, known to the Navy as F4F.

Grumman officials, including William T. Schwendler, chief engineer and designer of the F6F, consulted other Navy pilots. Sky-fighting experience was transformed into an airplane. Hellcat is the war's first combat-born American fighter.

The birth of Hellcat, her progression from blueprints to experimental aircraft, to plane in production, is easily the best naval aviation story of the war. But the story could not be told to the American public until the flying men of Tojo learned that Yankee birdmen now fly the toughest, scrappingest naval fighter yet to be flown into battle by either side.

F6F is the answer to Navy pilots' prayers for a ship that can fight the Jap Zero on the Zero's own terms, a plane that can stand up and slug, that can bore in with those terrible body blows.

As much as they loved Hellcat's predecessor, the Wildcat, Navy fliers had to admit she had limitations. She couldn't climb as fast as the Zero. She couldn't duplicate the Zero's quick turns. She packed tremendous firepower in six .50-caliber guns, but hadn't room for enough ammunition for sustained six-gun fighting.

For this reason, Navy fliers seldom tossed six guns at Tojo at once. They'd use center guns first, until ammunition for them was exhausted, then they'd throw

wing guns. Because of the Wildcat's performance disadvantages, Navy pilots avoided dogfights with Zeros. Under the leadership of such masters of air tactics as Lieutenant Commander John Smith "Jimmy" Thach, they evolved ways of beating Zero without dogfighting.

In two articles written for Collier's last December, Commander Thach told how superior marksmanship and air-battle tactics were making it possible for Navy pilots to overcome plane performance deficiencies in combat with the Japanese.

They flew against Zero in two-plane teams. To attain maximum speed, they came at him in a dive, making a sudden turn when they came within range, giving him a blast and then running. They fired on the Japs from the side, rather than from the rear as had been traditional fighter practice since the first World War.

Navy fliers made an art of this type of shooting. "Deflection shooting," as it is called, is something like duck shooting. You throw your shots ahead of Zero, as a hunter leads a fast-flying mallard. Superior tactics, rather than aircraft performance, accounted for the Navy's five-to-one plane score against Tojo.

Hellcat's performance and design features remain Navy secrets. But it can be said that her engine, powerful enough to pull a half-mile freight train, gives the Hellcat all the speed she needs. She can provide Tojo's showy pilots with lessons in fancy turns. She's thousands of pounds heavier than the Wildcat. Her improved armor means greater pilot life expectancy. Her new flexible-type gas tank is superior to earlier punctureproof tanks. Her roomy interior will carry more ammunition for any one of her guns than the Wildcat was able to provide for all her weapons. Finally, the Hellcat's designers have arranged for maximum pilot visibility, as "Jimmy" Thach once said: "You can't hit 'em if you can't see 'em."

WITH admirable enterprise, a Massachusetts woman is working to accumulate \$20,000 through various community enterprises—to buy a Spitfire for the R.A.F.

The \$20,000 unquestionably will be welcome, but it will be a good deal short of the actual purchase price of a fighter plane by today's standards.

On the basis of official War and Navy department figures, \$20,000 would about buy a fighter-plane engine and propeller, with a small amount left over.

Here are some government-approved costs of present-day military aeronautical equipment:

A fighter plane (1,200 horsepower) \$70,000; fighter plane (2,000 horsepower) \$125,000; torpedo bomber, \$150,000; twin-engined patrol bomber, \$250,000; Flying Fortress, \$450,000. ROBERT DEVORE