

Conspicuous Bravery

The remarkable life of Lt. Col. Lloyd F. Childers

By Laurie Snyder



Lloyd Childers (left) joined his brother, Wayne, aboard the Yorktown in March 1942. A third brother, Lyon, served as a cadet in the Army Air Corps. Photo courtesy Lloyd Childers

"Japan was on a roll. The Philippines had fallen ... Bataan and Corregidor ... the supposedly 'impregnable fortress' of Singapore.... Japanese forces were advancing into Burma and might proceed to India. Even Australia appeared to be threatened. American naval forces, significantly weakened by the attack at Pearl Harbor, appeared vastly inferior to the armada that Japan was gathering to advance eastward ... possibly to the Hawaiian Islands or even the West Coast." - James R. Schlesinger, U.S. Secretary of Defense (1973-1975)

It all started for one 20-year-old sailor Dec. 7, 1941. Reading a newspaper in the radio shack of the USS Cassin, Lloyd Childers was propelled from his chair at 7:55 a.m. by several explosions. The 18-month Navy veteran raced topside in time to witness a Japanese zero scream by as Imperial Japanese Navy pilots rained

death on America's Pacific Fleet. A post-attack photo shows the Cassin capsized onto the other destroyer after fires spread between the ships. (See "Mickey Ganitch - a True Man of Honor" at <http://www.lamorindaweekly.com/archive/issue0718/pdf/page%2013.pdf>.)

After the dust settled, he made a beeline for his battered ship. "I went back aboard to get my wallet," recalls Childers, now a resident of Moraga. Stuffed with 30 days' pay, it was the sum total of his wealth. "The Cassin was at about a 45 degree angle. I was literally walking on the walls."

By March 1942, Childers was serving with the USS Yorktown's Torpedo Squadron Three as a rear gunner and radioman. His brother, Wayne, was also on board, but their time on the famed flattop was no pleasure cruise. They struck enemy troops on New Guinea and the

Solomons, and helped sink the Shōhō.

By May 8, they were fighting in the Battle of the Coral Sea. As USS Yorktown and Lexington planes laid waste to the Shōkaku, the Japanese sent an armor-piercing bomb through the Yorktown's flight deck, killing 50 men.

Meanwhile, code breakers back at Pearl saved the day by deciphering Japan's plans to attack Midway - and possibly the West Coast. Told repairs to the Yorktown would take three months, Admiral Chester Nimitz gave Pearl crews just three days to fix the flattop.

Midway, June 4

Reveille sounded at 3 a.m. Breakfast was steak and eggs - proof commanders knew many would die. "We were hopelessly outnumbered," muses Childers. Even with the Yorktown engaged, Nimitz and his staff expected only 1 out of every 5 planes to return.

"Finally, we got the call. Boy, you never heard such activity in your life." Childers' Devastator "dropped off the end of the carrier - 100 feet above the water," struggling with its 2-ton payload.

Yorktown's 12 torpedo bombers and six fighters faced a sky filled with Japanese zeroes - dreaded for their 12 to 1 kill ratios. They aimed for the Akagi, flagship of Vice Admiral Chūichi Nagumo - commander of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor. Planes from the USS Enterprise and Hornet hunted others from the day of infamy - the Kaga, Hiryū and Sōryū.

Ten Yorktown aircraft were destroyed at the outset. Two Japanese bullets pierced Childers' left thigh. A third struck his ankle, shattering his right leg. A shipmate's plane hit the water in flames.

As his pilot wove their strafed plane in and out of flak, Childers' gun jammed - just as two more zeroes were approaching from both sides. He pulled out his pistol and fired - three quick shots at one before ripping another four at the other. The zeroes banked away quickly.

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"TBD in Drink," wrote Lloyd Childers on this photo taken by fellow crewman, Lieutenant Kait. "Too damaged to land aboard carrier, we land in ocean alongside the USS Monaghan." Photo courtesy Lloyd Childers



Photo courtesy Lloyd Childers

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