

ONLY DEATH WAS CHEATED

A SHORT BUT HARROWING FLIGHT DURING A NORTH ATLANTIC ANTI-SUBMARINE PATROL

BY ROLAND BATES



Beginning of the end for Fox 5. A number of things had come together to end Lt. Brownstein's mission. Note how the very large swells had soaked the carrier's deck, making the surface slippery. Then, another big wave caused the carrier to pitch up and this launched the F4F-4 into the air before it was ready to fly. In a full stall, the pilot has the left aileron all the way up in an attempt to bring the wing down but the controls were not responding in the stall.

For the men of the US Navy's Composite Squadron VC-13, it was just another day of hunting U-Boats in the frigid North Atlantic. Flying a mix of Grumman F4F-4 Wildcats (these would soon be replaced with Eastern-built FM-2s) and Grumman TBM-1C Avengers, VC-13 pilots and crews found that most of their flying consisted of hours of boredom as they patrolled the dark and unsettled ocean but that boredom could well be punctuated by moments of sheer terror when they found and attacked Hitler's undersea warriors. On the surface, the U-Boat was much more exposed to aerial attack but the German gunners were extremely good and, obviously, highly motivated to defend their U-Boat.

The squadron was operating from USS *Core* (CVE-13) and life aboard the escort carrier was not particularly easy since quarters were cramped, the deck was short (465-ft), top speed was a relatively slow 16.5 knots, and the carrier was usually pitching up and down in the rough North Atlantic waters. The Wildcats and Avengers in hunter-killer pairs would be launched and then formed up to go searching for the enemy subs. The planes were finished in North Atlantic Sea Search camouflage which meant they were painted overall white with the top surfaces sprayed in gray. In the usually gray skies, this camouflage worked quite well.

Allied air and sea power was growing increasingly more effective in combating the U-Boats and German losses were rapidly rising. One of the prowling U-Boats in the area that *Core* was patrolling during August 1943 was *U-185*. The sub was under the command of *Kapitanleutnant* August Maus and the Type IXC boat had left Bordeaux, France, on 9 June for a war patrol. On 14 June, the sub encountered *U-564*, a Type VIIC boat, that had been damaged on the previous day. The sub had been attacked by Short Sunderland GR Mk. III DV967 from No. 228 Squadron and the four-engine Royal Air Force flying boat was under the command of F/L L.B. Lee and operating out of Pembroke Dock. The Sunderland immediately



Lieutenant Julius Brownstein with Fox 6. Note the large VC-13 insignia next to the cowl flaps.

went after the U-Boat and began dropping depth charges that damaged the sub but the deck gunners shot the Sunderland down in flames and the crew of eleven was killed.

U-185 came across *U-564* as it was limping home. Unable to dive, it was decided that *U-185* would escort the damaged *U-564* back to France. Coming alongside each other, the two U-Boats were attacked by Armstrong Whitworth Whitley GR Mk. V BD220 of RAF No. 10 Operational Training Unit. Piloted by Sgt. A.J. Benson, the lumbering Whitley had been shadowing the U-Boats but, running low of fuel, Benson decided to attack and made numerous passes and hit *U-564* several times with depth charges. However, the combined anti-aircraft fire from the U-Boats riddled the Whitley and it turned to head back to RAF St. Eval in Cornwall with one engine on fire. The damage was too great and the aircraft was forced



VC-13's distinctive insignia.

to ditch at sea but the five crewmen managed to get into their life raft and were eventually picked up by a French fishing boat. The fishermen returned to France and handed the crew over to the Germans and they became POWs. While the attack was taking place, Handley Page Hampden X2961 from No. 415 Squadron RCAF arrived in the area. The obsolete bomber was flown by S/L J.G. Stronach but the *Luftwaffe* had been alerted to the attack and dispatched several long-range fighters to the area. Included among them was a Junkers Ju 88C fighter from 15.KG 40