

## ***BEST DAMN WAVER IN THE FLEET***



**Landing Signal Officer ROBIN M. LINDSEY**

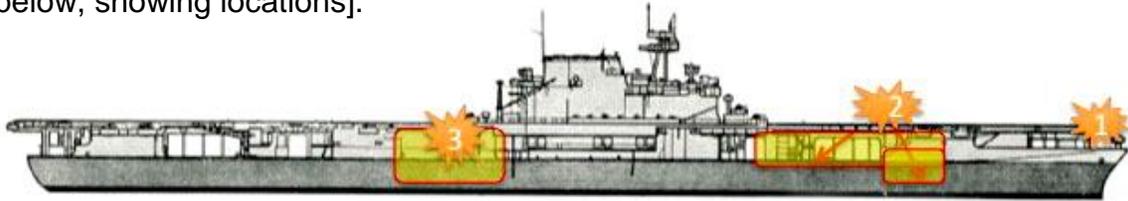
On October 26, 1942, at a crucial stage in the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands and the war in the Pacific, Lt. Robin Lindsey, USN gave a masterful performance that remains unparalleled in Navy history. Through his efforts, irreplaceable aviators and aircraft survived to later have a major role in winning the war.

Although he was an experienced naval aviator, what he did that day was not accomplished in aerial combat. Instead, while standing on a small exposed platform at the aft, port corner of the flight deck of the USS ENTERPRISE (CV-6) he used signal paddles to direct an unusually large number of aircraft to safety.

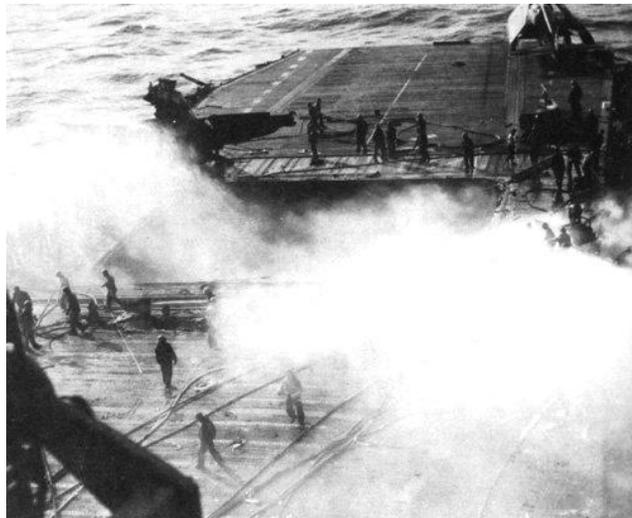
During the battle, the ENTERPRISE's sister ship, the USS HORNET (CV-8) sustained severe damage which ultimately proved fatal. Unable to retrieve her airborne aircraft, their pilots were instructed to try to land onboard ENTERPRISE.

However, ENTERPRISE, fondly called the *Big E* by her crew had also been badly damaged. As the HORNET's orphaned air group approached at midday, the *Big E*...still on fire...was zigzagging at high speed to avoid enemy bombs and torpedoes. Those desperate but ultimately successful maneuvers delayed recovery of a number of aircraft woefully short of fuel. But by the end of the day, the majority of both carriers' pilots and their aircraft had been saved.

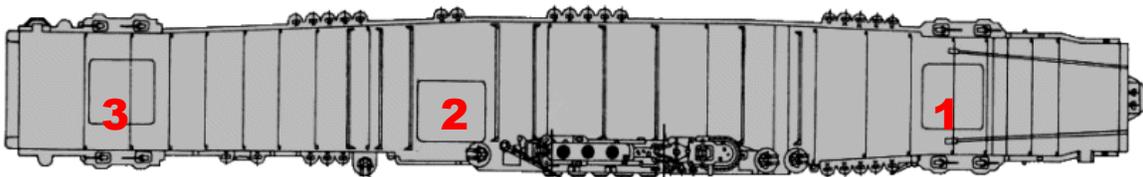
It all started shortly after sunrise on Monday, October 26, 1942. Both American and Japanese carrier-based aircraft attacked. Hits were scored by both sides. ENTERPRISE suffered damage from three bomb explosions [see drawing, below, showing locations].



Hit #1 was just a glancing blow and did relatively little damage to the forward, port corner of the ENTERPRISE's flight deck. Hit #2 struck squarely on the ship's centerline, just aft of aircraft elevator number one. A bomb penetrated into the hangar bay and exploded there, causing additional explosions and large fires in numerous compartments. Plus, it destroyed aircraft elevator number one's machinery while the lift was in its down position, leaving a huge opening [right] in the flight deck.



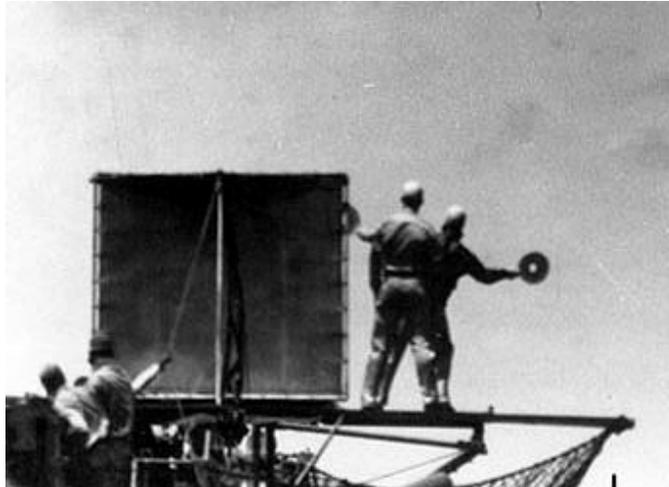
The third hit was on the starboard side, near aircraft elevator number two. It created additional serious damage and fires. As a result, the adjacent aircraft elevator became stuck in the down position. That left the ENTERPRISE with just one operable elevator. But it was elevator number 3, located far aft, which could not be utilized while aircraft were landing [see elevators' locations, below].



With fires still raging forward and amidships, and with her flight deck cluttered with aircraft that had previously landed, ENTERPRISE turned into the wind to recover additional aircraft. Despite sporadic Japanese attacks, the crew of the *Big E* worked desperately to save as many pilots and aircraft as possible.

While aircraft could ultimately be replaced if they ran out of gas and were forced to ditch in the open sea, the loss of experienced combat pilots that might be injured, or killed during such dangerous events was a matter of great concern...especially to those pilots still aloft!

Shortly after noon that day, Robin Lindsey, the ship's Landing Signal Officer (LSO) took up position on his small platform which was suspended over the side of the ship from the aft, port corner of the flight deck. With a windscreen and an assistant at his back, and open netting below his feet...in case he had to dive out of the way of any errant aircraft...he swung into action.



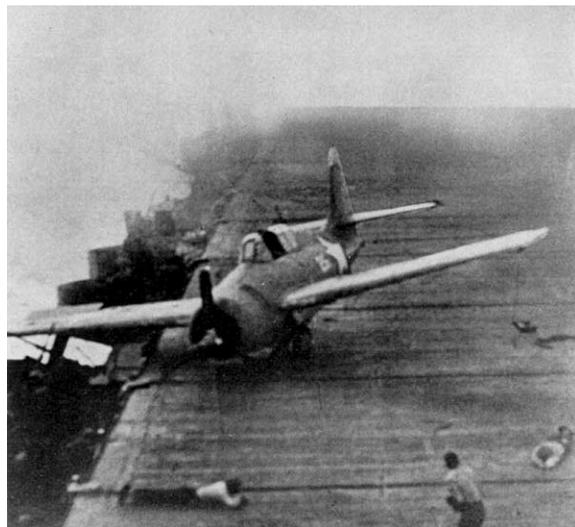
Equipped with only a set of brightly colored signaling 'paddles', the talented naval officer, later heralded as *'The Best Damn Waver in the Fleet'* skillfully directed dozens of aircraft to make arrested landings on an incredibly crowded flight deck. Each aircraft that Robin Lindsey safely directed onboard the *Big E* caught one of the wires stretched across the stern portion of the carrier's flight deck.

Desperate pilots nursing aircraft whose fuel gauges sometimes registered below empty approached the stern of the carrier separated by distances much less than authorized under normal conditions. Undaunted, Robin Lindsey lined them up one by one, waving them safely onto the deck to be trapped [naval aviator jargon] before turning to help the next one...already on final approach.

It was controlled chaos. When it was all over the damaged flight deck of ENTERPRISE was crowded with 95 aircraft that had been originally embarked in both carriers. A number of other aircraft were in the *Big E's* hangar bay; some of them destroyed or damaged during the enemy bomb hits suffered that morning.

Only one plane made less than a normal landing. A F4F Wildcat, perhaps damaged in aerial combat, experienced collapse of its landing gear upon touching down on the *Big E's* flight deck. The aircraft's tail hook and the arresting cable it had snagged kept it from going over the side.

Flight deck personnel scrambled to evade the plane when it skewed out of control to starboard, before coming to a stop. None of the *Big E's* crew was injured. The shaken but uninjured pilot walked away.



As each aircraft snagged one of the ENTERPRISE's eight wires, aircraft handlers rushed in to disengage its tail hook from the cable that had prevented the landing aircraft from crashing into parked planes. Once each plane came to a stop, its wings were folded and it was manually pushed forward.



Trouble was...as more and more aircraft landed, the Big E's flight deck crew was unable to reposition them very far from the landing area. The forward third of the ENTERPRISE's flight deck and hangar deck were still in flames. Aircraft elevator numbers one or two were still out of service.

Inevitably, this situation and the overflow of HORNET aircraft resulted in the necessity of parking some of the recovered aircraft unusually far aft...so far so that some of the arresting gear wires could no longer be used. Eventually, only the one, two and three wires remained available for use. These cables were numbered progressively from the stern forward...just as they are today.

Robin Lindsey had to adjust his signals to additional incoming aircraft to allow them to be trapped safely in a greatly foreshortened area in order to avoid crashing into the mass of planes that had already landed. He did so skillfully and successfully. But the additional aircraft that made it safely onto the *Big E's* flight deck had to be parked atop the number three wire...and then the two wire.

That left only the number one wire clear and available for use. It was located aft of the number three elevator and seldom used...never before intentionally. The slightest miscalculation on Robin Lindsey's part could have resulted in a major flight deck accident or...possibly...caused a plane attempting to land to suffer a 'ramp strike'.

Aircraft coming in too low to land safely had occasionally hit the rounded-down aft end of the flight deck of aircraft carriers with often fatal results. This structural feature was nicknamed 'the ramp'. Under normal conditions, a LSO would bring aircraft in high enough to be well clear of the ramp and catch...hopefully... either the number four or five wire. The other wires would normally take care of a plane that might land too short or too long. All of which was impossible that afternoon.



At that point in the aircraft recovery evolution, the admiral embarked in ENTERPRISE issued an order to cease flight operations. He didn't want to risk a major accident that might cause the last available...albeit damaged...flight deck in the US Navy's Pacific Fleet to be put out of action. The admiral told the carrier's captain to 'put any remaining planes in the water'.

When that order was issued, Navy legend has it that Robin Lindsey ignored the order and told his telephone talker to pull the plug on his sound-powered headset; thus effectively isolating those on the LSO platform from the admiral.

There is no record of what the ship's commanding officer thought about this situation. But it is known that when Robin Lindsey continued to bring planes in for landing, risking a courts martial, and the ship's skipper...a qualified naval aviator himself...kept the ENTERPRISE on a steady course, heading into the wind



The few aircraft still aloft were fighters that had maintained a Combat Air Patrol (CAP) for hours over the Big E, keeping the Japanese at bay during the recovery operation. Their leader, Lieutenant Stanley W. 'Swede' Vejtasa ordered the other CAP aircraft to land first. Robin Lindsey guided them into the very small deck space still available.

When at last it became his turn, Swede Vejtasa [right] was 'flying on fumes'. To make things more difficult, only the center portion of the number one wire was available. In addition to the limited deck area forward of that wire, the other CAP aircraft had been parked to either side of the center of that vital arresting device...and also on top of it...because there was no place else for them to be situated.



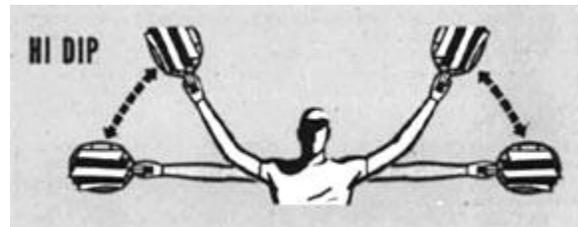
There was a very real danger that Swede Vejtasa's aircraft would stall out on final approach due to lack of fuel and crash into the ship's stern or in its turbulent wake...possibly even damaging the ship's rudder or propellers. Or overshoot that last wire and set off more explosions and fires amidst the mass of aircraft parked on the flight deck; many of which still had ordinance hanging from their wings.

It appeared to be an impossible situation to many present that day. But not to Robin Lindsey or Swede Vejtasa...

The latter was a superb combat flyer, considered by many as the finest carrier aviator in the fleet in 1942. Earlier that day he had shot down seven Japanese aircraft during a single mission, setting a record for naval aviators. More importantly, he had total confidence in the LSO 'waving' abilities of his close friend and fellow aviator, Robin Lindsey.

As Swede Vejtasa flew up the carrier's wake with wheels, flaps and tail hook down, and cockpit canopy pushed back, he glanced briefly ahead to see that an impossibly small open space available for him on the *Big E's* flight deck. His aircraft, flying at its normal landing speed of 70 knots was closing fast on his intended landing spot as the carrier steamed into the wind at 30 knots.

Quickly, he refocused his eyes on the individual perched on the LSO platform, waving two brightly colored paddles. At just the right moment, Robin Lindsey gave Stanley Vejtasa the 'hi dip' signal. The pilot responded by dropping the nose of his aircraft slightly, then resumed a 'nose high' attitude. That caused his aircraft to reduce altitude by about ten to twenty feet without a reduction in power.



Then the LSO's paddles flashed quickly into the classic 'cut' signal. The pilot instantly responded, cutting his throttle. Later, as Swede Vejtasa recalled: "At that instant, I was looking right at the ramp."

His stoutly built aircraft literally dropped out of the sky, smartly snagged the number one wire...and made a very short run forward until the arresting gear stopped its progress...without hitting anything! With absolutely no place to go, its wheels were chocked right where it had stopped.

In the catwalks lining both sides of the *Big E's* flight deck, sailors applauded and cheered the virtuoso performance by Robin Lindsey which they had just witnessed. Shortly thereafter, the two friends shook hands on the flight deck.

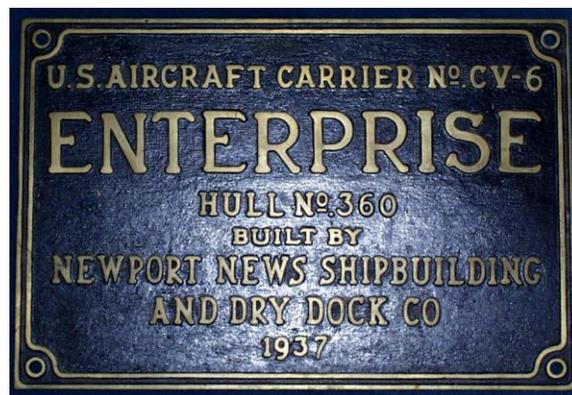
But on the flag bridge, Robin Lindsey's feat was not as well appreciated as on the flight deck. He was ordered confined to his quarters for defying authority. While contemplating his career, he received a visitor. Commander John G. Crommelin, the ENTERPRISE's Executive Officer came to congratulate him, bearing an 'unauthorized' beverage.

John Crommelin, a bit of a maverick himself, who once ignored a superior's order and got away with it, promised Robin Lindsey his punishment would be light. Truth be told, the XO wanted his gifted LSO back on duty as soon as possible.

He also asked Robin Lindsey what else he could do in appreciation of the LSO's amazing achievements. The LSO audaciously declared that he'd like to have the battle flag that flew over the *Big E* that day. The flag was duly delivered to him, no doubt without the admiral's knowledge.



Robin Lindsey, US Naval Aviator #5739 continued to serve through the rest of the war, both as a Landing Signal Officer and also flying in combat. He remained in the Navy after World War II and served as a squadron commander onboard carriers during the Korean War. He retired in 1960 with the rank of captain. At some point in time thereafter, he donated the well worn 48-star battle flag that flew over ENTERPRISE when he became "The Best Damn Waver in the Fleet" to the Naval Museum in Pensacola. It remains on display there today, behind a huge model of CV-6. Robin Lindsey passed away in 1984 at age 71.



ENTERPRISE (CV-6) survived the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands. After being quickly repaired, she returned to combat operations and served throughout the rest of the war in the Pacific, becoming the Navy's most decorated ship during World War II. Declared surplus in 1947, this stout ship languished at the Brooklyn Navy Yard while dedicated former crew members vainly tried to raise enough money to turn her into a memorial. Instead, the *Big E* was scrapped in 1958.



Swede Vejtasa continued to fly combat during World War II. Awarded the Navy Cross three times, he finished up his wartime career as an instructor. During the Korean War, he was the Air Officer in the Newport News-built USS ESSEX (CV-9). After a series of other naval aviation assignments, he served as the second skipper of the USS CONSTELLATION (CVA-64), followed, appropriately enough, by a tour of duty as the Commanding Officer of Naval Air Station Miramar...home of the famed 'Top Gun' school for fighter pilots. Swede Vejtasa retired in 1970 with the rank of captain. He passed away in 2013 at age 98.

The Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands was considered a tactical victory for the Japanese, since they lost fewer ships in that engagement than the US Navy. But two of their carriers were heavily damaged and spent months out of action. When they returned to the fight, they were met by ENTERPRISE and several newer American carriers. After that, the carrier war in the Pacific was never in doubt.

In addition to hundreds of combat-experienced Japanese pilots lost during the Battle of Midway four months previously, the action in late October of 1942 resulted in the deaths of an additional 150 Japanese pilots; many of whom were unable to land on their carriers. Japan's naval aviation corps never recovered from those losses.

American casualties were far less during the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands, despite the inability of HORNET to recover her own aircraft.

A total of ten American pilots were killed during the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands.

Had it not been for Robin Lindsey's skill and determination, who knows how many might have been lost...



# ***Legend and Legacy of the LSO***

Twenty years before Robin Lindsey's singular achievement, the idea for someone being stationed onboard an aircraft carrier to help guide pilots to a safe landing came about more through frustration than design.

A nervous pilot who had not landed on a carrier previously made several futile attempts to land onboard the Navy's first carrier; the USS LANGLEY (CV-1). The LANGLEY's acting skipper, a qualified naval aviator, was standing on the aft, port corner of the carrier's flight deck to assess such landing attempts.

Impatient, at one point he grabbed the white hats from two sailors and held them above his head...to signal to the errant aviator that he was always coming in too high. Then he lowered them, guiding the novice to his first carrier landing.

Additional signals were soon created to indicate if a pilot was coming in too fast or too slow, not lined up properly, or not in proper (i.e., nose high/wings level) configuration. Signal flags...and later...brightly colored paddles replaced the sailor caps. A precarious platform at the edge of the LANGLEY's flight deck [right] was built for this purpose.



Thus was born on the deck of the LANGLEY the Landing Signal Officer (LSO) concept. The practice of waving flags or paddles led to LSO's being nicknamed 'Wavers'. Refinements over the next three decades...well into the jet age...included a published set of standard landing signals. LSO's at first verbally critiqued landing attempts, then later evaluated them in writing. In addition, landing attempts were first recorded by motion picture cameras...later by video.

These refinements allowed pilots to improve their skills...and also to record any accidents resulting from the always dangerous practice of landing high speed jet aircraft on the rolling/pitching deck of a fast moving aircraft carrier. In the dramatic example shown on the right, a LSO can be seen running for his life as a plane makes a fatal ramp strike.



By the mid-1950s, American aircraft carriers were being built with angled flight decks and outfitted with optical landing systems [example depicted on the right]. Initially, it was thought this invention would allow a pilot to land without help from a LSO. However, accident rates actually increased when the human factor was removed from the equation.



Once the optical landing system was augmented by a LSO in direct radio contact with each pilot attempting a carrier landing, the accident rate dropped significantly. That combination proved especially effective during night operations.

The US Navy maintains a formal school for prospective LSOs. Located at NAS Oceana in Virginia, it is the only institution of its kind in the world. Students from the Navy and Marine Corps that are already qualified carrier pilots, as well as flyers from several foreign countries receive hands-on, real time training using a computerized system called the Landing Signal Officer Trainer (LSOT).

The LSOT is a fully functioning, full-size mock-up of an actual shipboard LSO platform and associated equipment. Instructors can adjust this sophisticated device to simulate all types of naval aircraft, different carrier flight deck configurations, rough sea conditions and other environmental extremes to maximize student training.

When graduates of this school go back to the fleet to practice their newly acquired skills, they proudly wear this US Navy LSO patch with its rather unique and impolite motto. To the best of my knowledge, the Navy's LSO School has no other identification. Too bad.

In my opinion, I think they should give the school a proper and appropriate name...say, something like:

**THE ROBIN M. LINDSEY LSO SCHOOL**

*Bill Lee*

June 2018

