



# NIGHT PATROL



My U.S. Navy career involved years of flying as an enlisted air-crewman and a lot of aeronautical engineering and squadron-management work as an officer. Here is one story about the flying. There are many more to tell.

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**CHARLES WRIGHT**  
**10 MAY 2004**



*NAVY AIRCREW BREAST INSIGNIA*

## **NIGHT PATROL**

It is 2 AM as the Aircraft Carrier U.S.S. Mindoro CVE-120 (named for Mindoro Island in the Pacific Ocean) slices through the Mediterranean Sea with its one air squadron aboard, VS22. The ship is at flight quarters---working and flying around the clock. Nearly everyone is exhausted. The night is black (and only black) outside. No outside lights are lit on the ship (except one tiny dim red light at the top of the highest mast). Now, it is time to roll out of my bunk, don my flight gear, go to the dining area and have some breakfast. I had learned to eat light because ham and eggs are really messy when they are puked out on the inside of an airplane loaded with electronic equipment---so I ate lightly and took an orange with me. When I arrived at the squadron's flight ready room, the briefing for the mission had just started. We---two aircraft and crews---were to fly back and forth over a square patrol pattern about 100 miles across. We were to relieve two aircraft that had been on patrol for the previous 4 hours---the planes carry only about 5 hours of gas. Since we were an anti-sub hunter-killer squadron, we would be looking for submarines. Since the era was during the "cold war", we would not be sinking any Russian submarines---just locating them and tracking them. And to keep us alert, and make it interesting, one of our own submarines was out there somewhere, trying to keep us from finding it. The night air was chilly coming off the sea, across the flight deck, as we checked the airplane for any obvious problems before starting the engine. Each plane had a crew of four---pilot, radar observer, an electronic-counter-measure operator (*who searched for submarine radar signals to find where they were originating from*) and a searchlight operator and bombardier (*who dropped depth charges*). We **did** drop depth charges when we located a submarine, but the charges were not large enough to do much damage-----large enough just to let any sub know that we had found it. (*we also carried real rockets and 50-caliber machine guns---just to protect ourselves in case of a confrontation*)

Although we were looking for subs, we had to investigate anything that we detected on the ocean---it could be a ship, a fishing boat, a submarine on the surface or just its periscope or snorkel (*a small pipe-like air-intake-and-exhaust device that floats on the sea surface*). Of course, the night is **blacker than black** and the only way to actually visually see anything when it is found by electronics equipment is to turn on the 70-million candlepower carbon-arc searchlight that is carried on the wing (*we were told that someone could read a newspaper a mile away with its light*).

On this particular night, we finally have been catapulted off the front of the carrier into the dark---that operation is always a thrill because some planes erroneously drop down after being catapulted and crash into the sea in front of the carrier (some come very close to touching water). But now, we luckily are airborne and joining-up alongside the other plane---we can see only his wing lights and his blue exhaust flame. Inside the cramped red-lighted cockpits of the airplane, there is little comfort (*e.g., the planes had no facility for a bowel movement*)---plus, the airplane is being buffeted around by the wind (*even though it weighs 7 tons*), and the exhaust fumes always filter back through the fuselage of the plane. There is no way to keep from getting queasy and feeling like a vomit is coming on. Along with this discomfort comes the constant thought of unexpectedly flying (*crashing*) right into the sea going at 150-200 miles per hour---*it has happened more than once in our squadron*.

Now, about 3:30 AM, our 2 airplanes are on patrol-----one (*the hunter*) flies high about 5000 feet in a fixed pattern and searches the sea with high-power radar, while the other one (*the killer attack plane---my plane*) quickly drops down to about 200 feet off the water to investigate any targets (*where a submarine's radar cannot detect it as the plane "creeps-up" on the sub---possibly catching it on the surface*). **The hunter plane** stays on course so the sub (*that also has Radar*) will not think the "hunter" is a threat---the hunter directs my skimming unseen killer plane by coded voice signals, guiding it to the sub's location. Since the night is pitch-black, we never really know how high we are above the water (*we are flying strictly by instruments that often do not work correctly*). Plus, there is only one engine---and it could fail completely, or temporarily falter, at any moment (*at low altitude, an engine problem is the end*). More than once, I have seen an engine just stop instantly in flight---in one case, about 100 feet above the sea. So, all things considered, there is always the feeling of being very close to death.

It is all slightly scary as we try to concentrate on operating the electronics equipment properly and playing cat-and-mouse games with submarines---while trying to keep from puking. Tonight, as we investigate a target, we skim across the water and put the searchlight on a large ship that is churning through the blackness. We make note of its identity, and go elsewhere to investigate other targets----one, an old man in a fishing boat fifty miles from shore, another a bunch of barrels floating together (*remember, during all this time, the hunter plane is thousands of feet higher, flying away from the scene, so that any sub will not feel threatened---because of the Earth's curvature, a sub cannot see my plane on the sub's radar*). Then, we are directed by the hunter to investigate something else, and know that we now have found a submarine (*the target disappeared from our small Radar screen just as we came close to it*). We drop small radio-listening devices (*called "sonobuoys"*) in a large circular pattern (*something like that of the bases on a baseball field, plus the pitcher's mound in the middle*) in the water and fly around as we listen to their different transmitters, and decide where the submarine actually is (*we can hear its propellers and running noises at varying intensity, depending where it is in the sonobuoy pattern*). In the pitch darkness---or even in daylight---deciding exactly where a submerged submarine is located takes a lot of listening experience (*and a little bit of luck*). The pattern in the sea (*which we also plot on a grid-board in the cockpit*) can be easily seen from the air because each sonobuoy is marked by a small visible light (and also smoke for daylight operations). As we keep tracking the sub, it is a personal relief when the streaks of dawn appear in the sky and we know that we have *luckily* lived through another scary night---and since it is now day, we can see the submarine furtively sliding through the sea, just under the surface---it does not know we have found it. We can't identify its nationality, but we drop audible explosives on it to let it know its hiding place has been detected----the worst that might happen to the sub is that an antenna may be blown off, or there may be some other minor damage.

We had summoned a Destroyer (*from the main task force of ships*) when we initially detected the sub---that ship will eventually arrive and continue to track the submarine by Sonar. (*in the event that a violent attack would be necessary, the Destroyers have much more effective weapons than those that our aircraft carries*).

Soon, it is time to be relieved by other aircraft from our squadron-----and there they are, squawking their radios and letting us go back to the ship 50 miles away. We will find our way back by coded beacon (called Racon). Now there is time to just relax and enjoy the bright Mediterranean morning while we cruise at 5000 feet. However, it is like being inside a soap bubble and there is not much to see---we can't tell where the sea ends and the sky begins. Then, finally, there below in the bubble is the majestic aircraft carrier and accompanying ships of the Hunter-Killer Task Force. We soon slam onto the carrier deck as a steel cable catches our tail-hook, jerking the plane to a quick stop, and splattering my orange against the front of the cockpit---the orange that I had put beside me at 3 AM and forgotten about. On deck, it is time for some food, and then we must get to work doing our collateral duties aboard the carrier. It feels sleepy, but it also feels so good to be safe again away from instant death----and maybe there will be time to write a letter home and sit in the sun for a while, watching the smooth blue Mediterranean and the dolphins and sharks swimming with the ship.

We will be in France in a few days to relax and tour the countryside, and maybe find a girl. But not long after that, we will be back at sea again, playing cat-and-mouse games in the black nights.

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*I went through such nights over and over again, in all kinds of weather and various venues---and I was just as scared every time. Why did I volunteer to do it? Because I wanted to live life with gusto---and I wanted to be on the cutting edge of the Navy's fleet-air operations. Naval aviation is high adventure, and I wanted it. But, as I look back on it now, I think that I must have been out of my mind. However, as I ponder the many dangers of carrier flight operations, I compare myself to the infantry soldier that was crawling around in the mud, and living in terror in some stinking, rotten jungle---face to face with a cunning, ruthless enemy. Compared to him, I had it easy.*

*We were in the Mediterranean Sea at the time of this story because the carrier Mindoro was ferrying a load of excess Navy fighter planes to Italy on a special treaty arrangement----to cement friendship with that country. The story above shows what took place after we had off-loaded the planes in Italy. The ship normally carries only one air squadron (that's all it needs)----that squadron at the time was Air Anti-Submarine Squadron Twenty Two, U.S. Atlantic Fleet.*

*I had been assigned to Composite Squadron Twenty Three (VC-23) before transferring to VS-22 (VC-23, also an anti-sub patrol squadron, was being sent to the South Pacific Fleet---I transferred to stay in the Atlantic area).*

*The carrier Mindoro was an escort carrier (CVE). It was designed for escorting other ships---to protect them from submarines. As I recall, it had a crew of about 1100 men, including 150 in its air squadron. Life aboard a carrier was not pleasant----men at sea for months are difficult to live with. With everyone's nerves on edge, it was easy to get into a fistfight---and the regular crew did not have good feelings toward the air squadron. The food was very good but berthing was very marginal. Regulations were strict. Compared to living on a smaller ship, however, carrier life is much better. I have flown from carriers Mindoro, Palau, Kula Gulf and Siboney---all were escort carriers.*

*Most of the time, the Navy air squadrons to which I was attached were land based ---patrolling the vast Atlantic from the Norfolk Naval Air Station. It was only during many short 2-week cruises for pilot-training, and occasional extended cruises (examples: Mediterranean Sea, 3-months; Caribbean Sea, 5-weeks) that we became sailors. It was pleasant visiting France, Italy, Cuba, etc., but such visits were only a very minute part of the operation. Most memories are not good ----they mainly involve long working hours, ragged nerves, death of friends, and patrolling far-away seas and the freezing Atlantic on darkest nights.*

*To My Lost Friends  
Swift on nocturnal missions they fly,  
Their radios squawking each signal,  
Their radars tracking each dolphin sly.*

*And high on the wings of darkest night,  
Their engines wail, and cannot fail,  
For each course is set, and eternity is their sky.*



**Charles Wright. Captain, United States Navy, Retired.  
(I was also assigned to three long-range patrol VP squadrons during my career)**



*AIR ANTI-SUBMARINE SQUADRON TWENTY TWO  
UNITED STATES NAVY*



*WRIGHT--AIRCREWMAN*

Shortly after this Mediterranean cruise, our VS-22 squadron was given completely-new aircraft---the AF Grumman Guardian. Its advanced electronics equipment was much more sophisticated, and a homing torpedo had been developed which---when dropped into the water relatively near a submarine----would find the sub and sink it. The new aircraft was specifically designed for anti-submarine detection and warfare. It was great operating on the cutting edge of naval aviation. Even the smell of the “brand-new” cockpits was great. However, death still rode with us every night through the black void. In freezing winter, we wore sealed rubber suits under our flight gear, but (even then) we could last only 30 minutes in the ocean without freezing---if we had to parachute-out or ditch (crash land) our aircraft at sea. Then, even under favorable weather conditions, finding a downed flight-crew on a vast ocean would have been a rare occurrence.

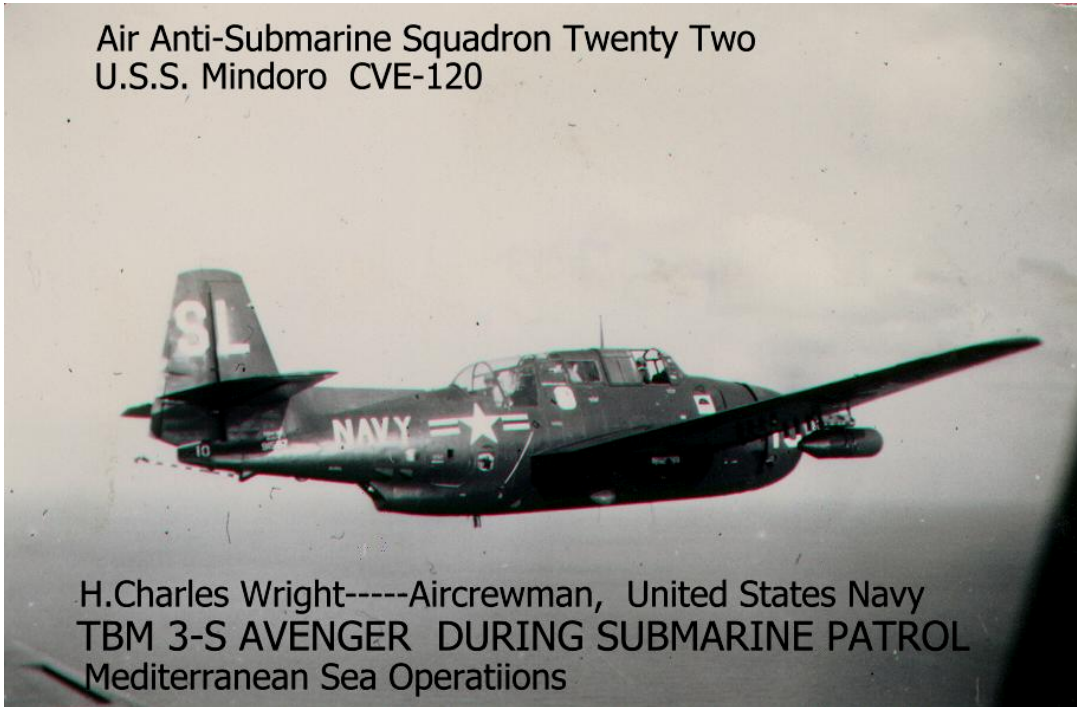
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Try to imagine what these flight-jacket patches mean to me.





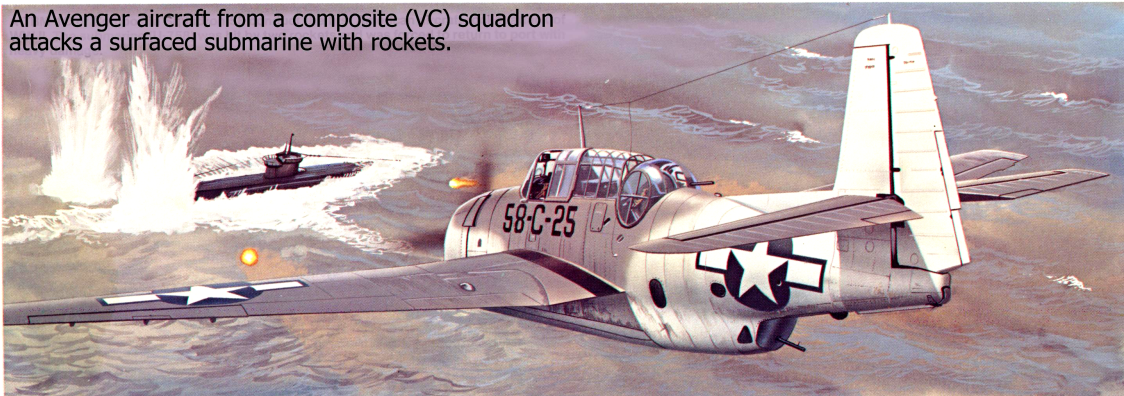
Air Anti-Submarine Squadron Twenty Two  
U.S.S. Mindoro CVE-120



H.Charles Wright-----Aircraftman, United States Navy  
TBM 3-S AVENGER DURING SUBMARINE PATROL  
Mediterranean Sea Operatiions

A KILLER AIRCRAFT ALONGSIDE THE HUNTER

An Avenger aircraft from a composite (VC) squadron  
attacks a surfaced submarine with rockets.



A WARTIME SCENERIO FOR WHICH WE OFTEN PRACTICED  
AT A SECLUDED STRIP OF BEACH ALONG THE COASTLINE  
SOUTH OF THE NORFOLK AREA---WHERE A LARGE BULLS-  
EYE WAS OUTLINED ON THE SAND AS A TARGET. WE ALSO  
PRACTICED ATTACKING WITH ROCKETS AT SEA, USING A  
TARGET THAT WAS TOWED BEHIND THE AIRCRAFT CARRIER.



## AN ANTI-SUB HUNTER-KILLER TEAM OF AF GUARDIANS

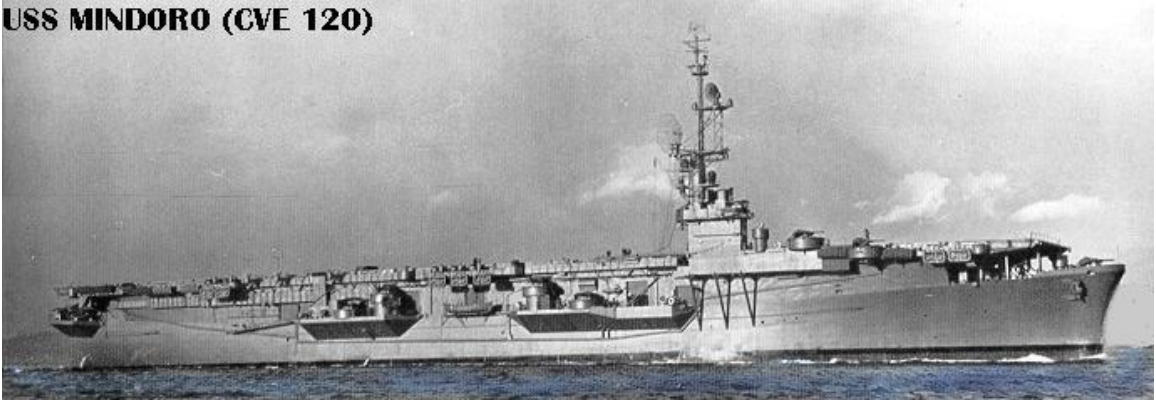
*The hunter aircraft has high-power Radar with a 200-mile range. From a shorter distance, it could detect almost any part of a submarine that broke the surface of the sea. The killer-aircraft has smaller less-powerful Radar, sensitive Electronic-Counter-Measure equipment, undersea-tracking equipment, an ultra-bright searchlight, and enough sophisticated firepower to destroy any submarine.*

*The Guardian aircraft lasted only a few years in the fleet. It was soon replaced by the twin-engine S2-Tracker. The tracker was popular and effective, but it gave way to the S3-Viking, a twin-engine jet-powered patrol plane---it is in use today. The squadrons are now called Sea-Control Squadrons instead of anti-submarine squadrons.*

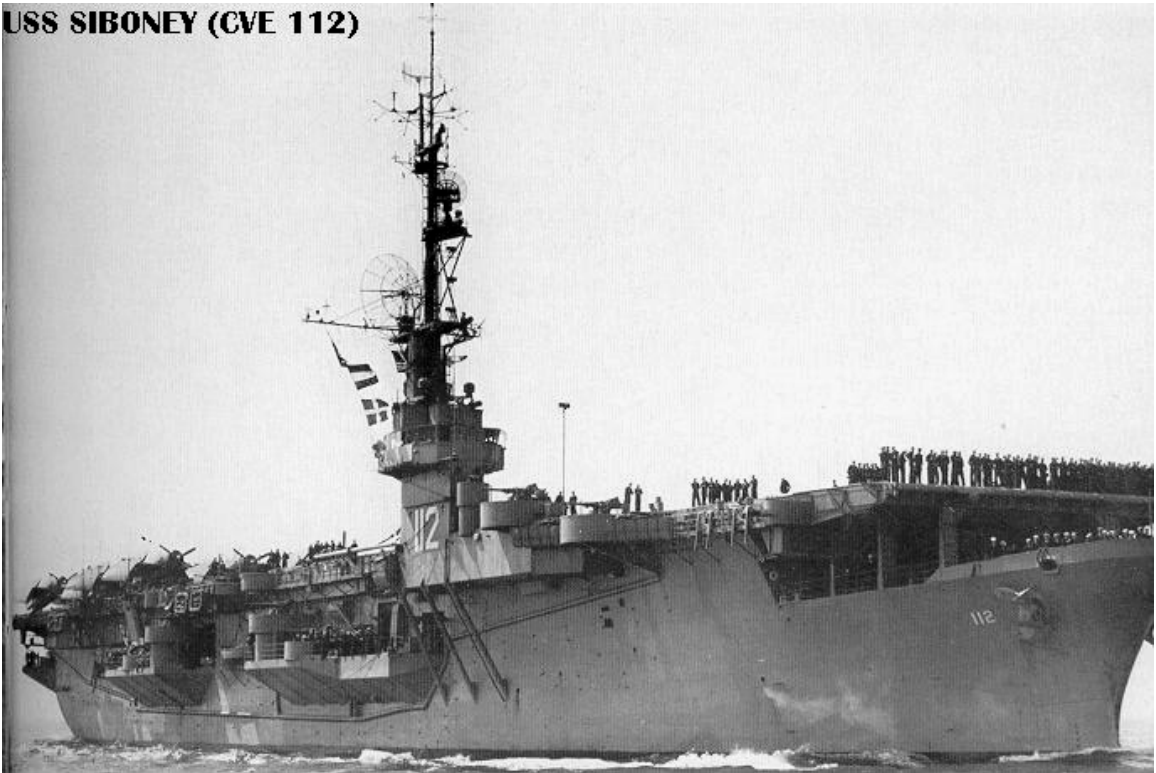


S3 VIKING PATROLLING AT SEA

**USS MINDORO (CVE 120)**



**USS SIBONEY (CVE 112)**



Remember, even on blackest nights, there was only one tiny red light on top of the mast. When a plane miraculously found its way to the point immediately behind and above the carrier, shielded lights (at long intervals on both sides of the flight deck---and visible only from above) came on just for an instant, so the pilot could get his bearings before cutting the engine.



*VS-22 ANTI-SUBMARINE PATROL AIRCRAFT*



**CVE-120, U.S.S. MINDORO WITH AF-GUARDIAN AIRCRAFT**

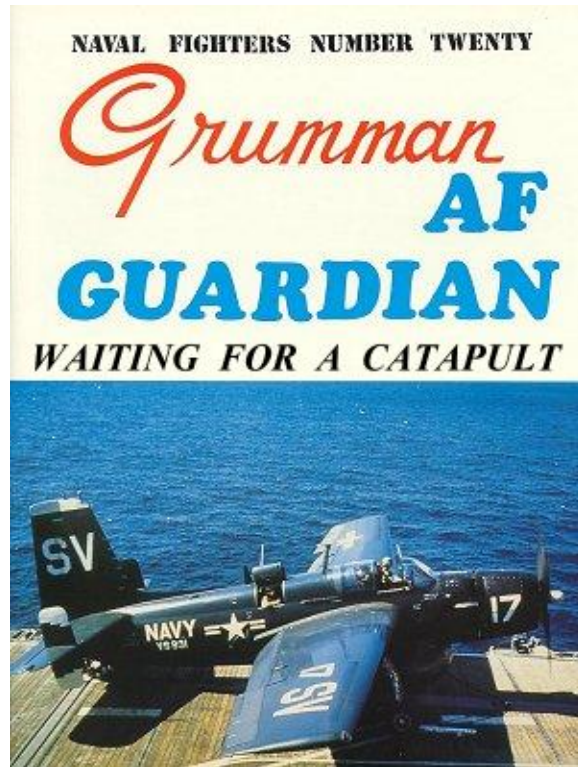


**CVE-120, U.S.S. MINDORO UNDERWAY**

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**SEE POST SCRIPT BELOW**

# POST SCRIPT



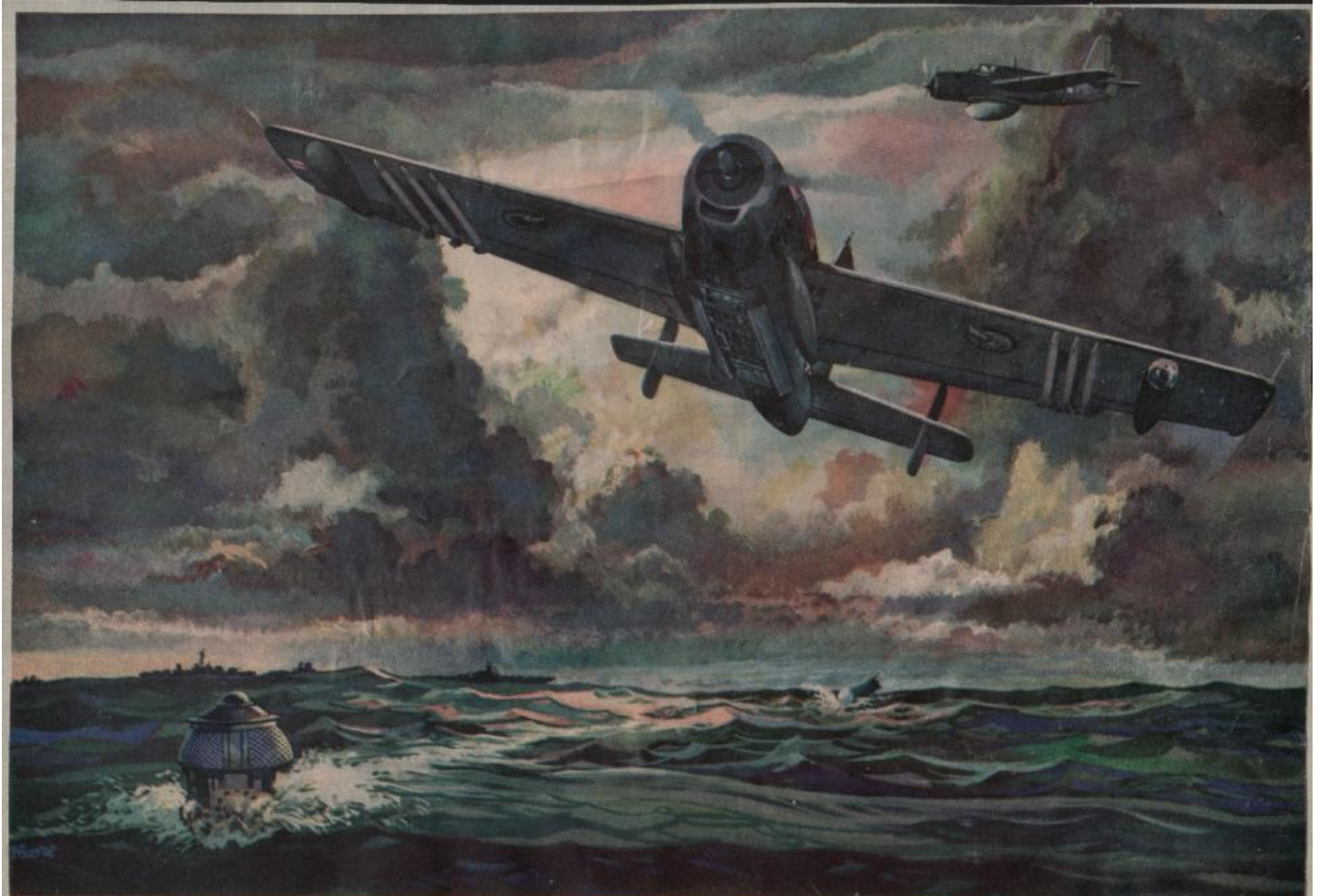
Imagine yourself sitting there in that patrol aircraft, getting ready for a serious venture in Naval Aviation. After you have done it many times, you will yearn to do it more---and you will not forget any moment of the long scary flights down near the water, as you deal with submarines in the vast oceans and seas. The intrigue is almost like an addiction that you know will eventually kill you.

In a few minutes, this hunter (search) plane will be on the catapult and will be thrown into the sky to play the game of hide and seek. It, and another aircraft, its killer-partner, will return to the carrier at dusk, after another hunter-killer team has relieved them---and the searches will continue in shifts throughout the dark night.

*The above picture is on a book cover---the book, about AF Guardians, can be ordered by e-mailing Steve Ginter, [nfbooks@pacbell.net](mailto:nfbooks@pacbell.net).*

*The website is <http://www.mozeyoninn.com/ginterbooks.html>*

## A HUNTER-KILLER TEAM



**A GRUMMAN AF-GUARDIAN “KILLER” AIRCRAFT ATTACKS A SUBMARINE WHILE THE HUNTER PARTNER PATROLS OVERHEAD.**

***In the foreground, note the submarine’s snorkel; in the background, note the homing torpedo that has been dropped by the aircraft.***

## **ANTI-SUBMARINE AVENGER TYPE-3S "KILLER" AIRCRAFT**

*MODEL OF AN AVENGER AIRCRAFT*



*MODIFIED FOR ANTI-SUBMARINE WARFARE*

**NOTE 70-MILLION CANDLE-POWER CARBON-ARC SEARCH-LIGHT ON RIGHT WING. A PERISCOPE PROTRUDES FROM THE BOTTOM OF THE AIRCRAFT SO THAT A CREWMAN CAN SEE WHAT THE SEARCH-LIGHT ILLUMINATES ON THE SEA SURFACE. THE POD ON THE LEFT WING IS A SHORT-RANGE RADAR UNIT; IT CAN BE READILY DISCONNECTED AND TAKEN INTO A REPAIR SHOP FOR MAINTENANCE. THE AIRCRAFT HAS WING-MOUNTED ROCKETS AND MACHINE GUNS. BAY DOORS ON THE BOTTOM OF THE FUSELAGE CAN OPEN FOR RELEASING DEPTH CHARGES AND OTHER ORDNANCE. THE AIRCRAFT HAS A CREW OF FOUR---PILOT, RADAR OPERATOR, ELECTRONIC-COUNTER-MEASURES OPERATOR AND BOMBARDIER. THE WINGS OF THE AIRCRAFT FOLD BACKWARD TO REDUCE STORAGE SPACE ON AIRCRAFT CARRIERS. THE SL LETTERS IDENTIFY ITS SQUADRON.**

**END OF OVERALL FILE**