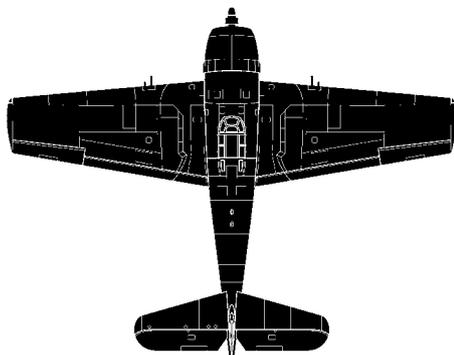


Airpower Classics

Artwork by Zaur Eylanbekov

F6F Hellcat



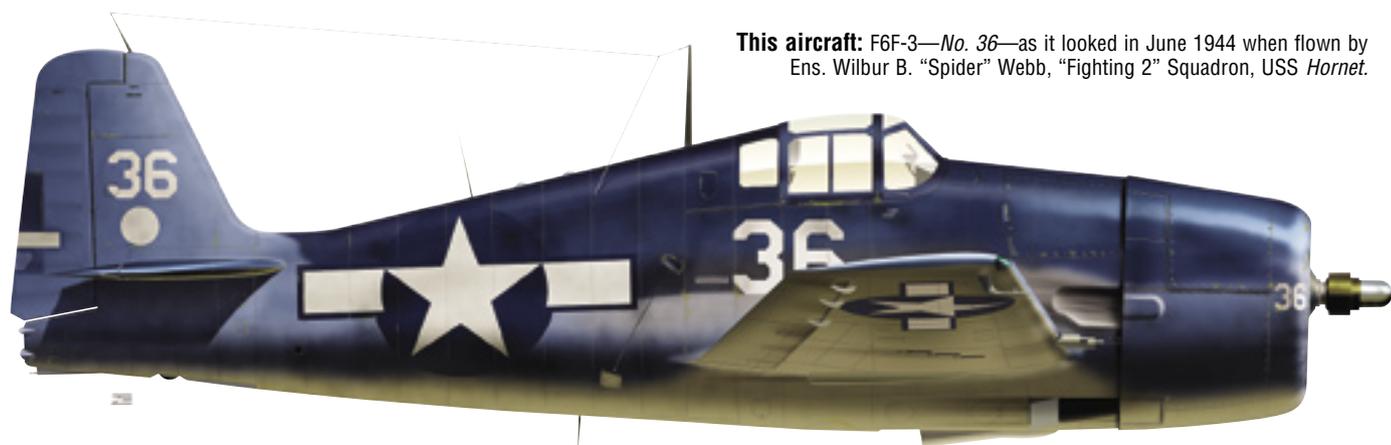
The F6F Hellcat may well be the most important fighter in US Navy history. For the critical final two years of World War II, it served as the US fleet's primary carrier combat aircraft, and it had a decisive impact on the Pacific war at sea.

For the Navy, initial contact with superior Japanese fighters such as the Zero was a shock. The F6F, which began as an improved model of Grumman's smaller F4F Wildcat, soon became a major new design. Like the Wildcat, the Hellcat was simple, rugged, and easy to build, fly, and maintain. However, it had much more power than the F4F. It had heavy cockpit armor, a bullet-resistant windshield, self-sealing tanks, and an armored oil tank. It could take severe damage and keep flying.

The Hellcat was fast, maneuverable, and heavily armed and had stable flight charac-

teristics. The design was such a hit that it went straight to production. Starting in 1943, Grumman delivered 12,275 Hellcats. There were two major variants—the F6F-3 and F6F-5. The Navy produced the final "Dash Five" airplane in November 1945.

This new fighter entered the combat arena on Aug. 31, 1943, in a series of raids showing that US pilots now had a fighter able to overmatch the best Japan could muster. The Hellcat's most successful day in combat came on June 19, 1944, in an air battle over the Mariana Islands. Japan lost more than 270 fighters, compared to 26 Hellcats lost. So lopsided was this battle that it is called "the Great Marianas Turkey Shoot." Over all, the F6F is credited with destroying some 5,156 Japanese aircraft—4,947 by Navy aviators, 209 by land-based Marine Corps pilots. It turned the tide of Pacific naval action.



This aircraft: F6F-3—No. 36—as it looked in June 1944 when flown by Ens. Wilbur B. "Spider" Webb, "Fighting 2" Squadron, USS *Hornet*.

In Brief

Designed, built by Grumman ★ deployed principally on Navy carriers ★ first flight June 26, 1942 ★ crew of one ★ number built 12,275 ★ one P&W R-2800 18-cylinder radial engine ★ armament, six wing-mounted .50 cal machine guns ★ later models carried bombs, rockets ★ **Specific to F6F-3:** max speed 375 mph ★ cruise speed 160 mph ★ max range 1,590 mi ★ weight (loaded) 12,441 lb. ★ span 42' 10" ★ length 33' 7" ★ height 13' 1".

Famous Fliers

Cmdr. David McCampbell, Medal of Honor, Navy's top ace with 34 victories ★ Lt. Cmdr. Cecil E. Harris, 24 victories ★ Lt. Cmdr. Eugene A. Valencia, 23 victories ★ Lt. Richard Loesch, first F6F pilot to claim a victory (1943) ★ former enlisted pilot Ens. Wilbur B. "Spider" Webb, an ace.

Interesting Facts

Achieved astounding 19:1 victory-to-loss ratio ★ flown by 305 aces, most of any US fighter in World War II ★ nicknamed "the Ace Maker" ★ 605 Hellcats produced in a single month (March 1945) ★ flown by Britain, France, Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay ★ briefly equipped Blue Angels after World War II.



"Aura" forms around prop of Hellcat aboard USS Yorktown.

USN photo