

Knocking Down a Japanese Fighter —The Hard Way

By LtCol Donald K. Tooker, USMC (Ret.)

In the early morning darkness of 10 May 1945, four F4U-4 Corsairs rolled down the airstrip at Kadena, Okinawa...their mission one of the most unique in World War II. Just off the recently acquired island of Okinawa lay one of the world's largest assembly of fighting vessels, a U.S. armada consisting of every conceivable type of ship, from the largest carrier and battleship to the smallest picket ship.

The Japanese were only too aware of the Americans' plan to invade their empire in the very near future. They had suffered extremely heavy losses at all fronts, but the decimation of their aircraft and experienced flight crews had necessitated a drastic change in their island defense strategy. The ever-dwindling supply of aviation fuel and lubricants compounded the problems facing the Japanese military planners. Pilots with as little as 30-40 hours were no match for the well-trained American pilots. The resultant new strategy, as the world would soon learn, was the introduction of the "one-way ride to glory," with immediate entrance into heaven: The kamikaze had arrived.

But in order to attack an American ship of significance, its location must be known. To achieve this knowledge, the Japanese turned to their twin engined long-range fighter, the Kawasaki Ki-45 Toryu Dragon Killer, which was called *Nick* by Allied forces. The *Nick* was originally designed in 1939 and remained in production until July 1945. Many versions were manu-

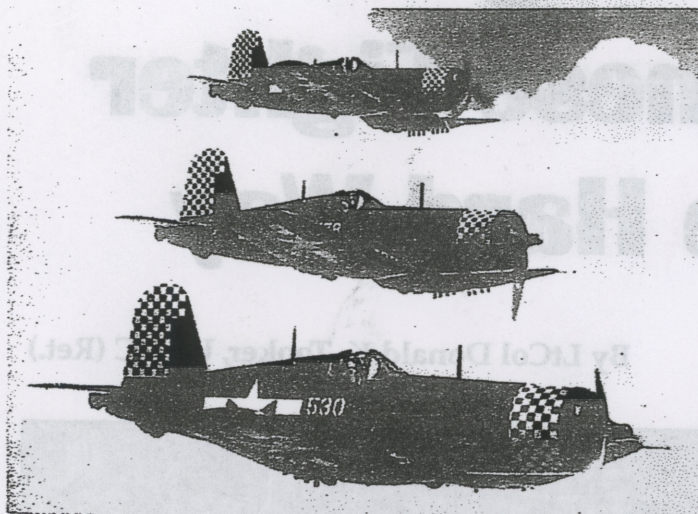


Capt Ken Reusser, USMC describes his unusual tactics for knocking down a Japanese *Nick* to squadron mates in Kadena, Okinawa, May 1945. (left to right) 1stLt Jim Cox, 1stLt Bob Klingman, Reusser, 1stLt Frank Watson and 1stLt Jim Reece. Photo courtesy Col Ken Reusser.

factured. They included day and night fighters, ground attack, anti-shiping, and high-altitude reconnaissance types. Its top speed, listed in Janes' Aircraft, was 340 mph with a service ceiling of 35,200 feet. For a photographic high-altitude mission the aircraft was lightened by eliminating the forward-firing armament. Only the tail gunner/radio operator in the rear enclosed cockpit was retained. The gunner manned a swivel-mounted 7.7mm machine gun which could be rotated on a metal track.

Information, sometimes sketchy, obtained after the war, revealed that by removing all armor and the forward-firing guns, and modifying the engines' supercharger ratios, an altitude in excess of 40,000 feet could be obtained. This was ideal for a photo aircraft as it could now fly above all anti-aircraft fire and most enemy fighters. The exact number of *Nicks* thus modified is unknown but was at best only four or five.

For several days prior to 10 May and always at



VMF-312's Checkerboard Corsairs operating from Okinawa's Kadena Airfield, April 1945. Photo courtesy Robert L. Lawson.

first light, the modified *Nick* would appear over the fleet anchorage off Okinawa. After leisurely filming the mass of assembled ships, sometimes completing two great circles, the pilot would confidently head back to the Japanese home islands with film of the latest U.S. Navy ship positions. With the daily approach of dusk, every man aboard his vessel was aware the *kamikazes* would soon be on their way toward their certain death and often taking with them many U.S. servicemen. History has shown how terribly effective the dreaded *kamikazes* were.

Several changes in U.S. tactics resulted, and perhaps the courageous and sacrificial actions of the perimeter-guarding picket ships received the most notice. Yet another change in tactics was instituted and this story concerns that response to the U.S. Fleet's predicament.

Capt Kenneth L. Reusser, USMC, led his four pilots of VMF-312 in a running rendezvous, his position lights temporarily providing visual aid for the join-up. Flying on his wing was 1stLt Robert Klingman. The second section of *Corsairs* was led by 1stLt Jim Cox, and on his wing flying as "tail-end-Charlie" was 1stLt Frank Watson. Their standard early morning Combat Air Patrol mission had been modified at Ken Reusser's request and approved by his C.O. Ken's flight, designated Red Flight, was going after the Japanese intruder. Red Leader's idea was to

be on station at maximum altitude when the high-altitude photo plane was first sighted. Otherwise, he would be long departed by the time any U.S. plane could take off, climb to altitude and give pursuit. Reusser was aware that the *Corsair* could not match the *Nick's* altitude, but he'd made some preparations earlier that he hoped would improve their chances of getting close enough to shoot down the photo plane.

He had lightened the F4U in every way possible. This included a drastic reduction of the .50-caliber machine gun ammunition to less than 100 rounds per gun. He had also endured the smiles of the ground crews who watched as he

had carefully waxed and rewaxed his aircraft the two previous days.

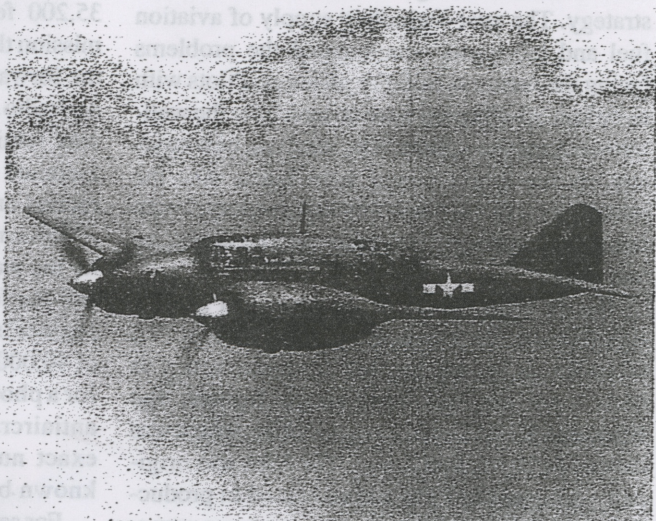
As the flight gained altitude and the light improved, ground control advised of an incoming bogey.

"Right on time," Reusser radioed his division. "We'll stay on the inside of his turn. I don't think he can see us against the dark sea below."

"Tally ho the bogey," this from section leader, Jim Cox. "He's conning." The vapor trails were now clearly visible to all in the flight.

"Red Flight, max power, jettison tanks," Reusser ordered.

After a few moments, "Red Leader from Red



Kawasaki type 2 Ki-45 *Nick*, captured (with U.S. markings) photographed in 1945. Photo courtesy Robert L. Lawson.

Three. Tanks away but can you ease power a bit? My cylinder head temp is almost pegged.”

“That’s a negative, Red Three. We’ll never catch him without full power. Red Two and Four, check in.”

“This is Red Two. I’m okay but behind you a little. Engine is overheating but not too badly.”

“Roger, Two. How about you, Red Four?”

“Sorry, Ken, this bird just can’t take this power climb.”

“Okay, Red Three and Four, return to base. Acknowledge. Over.”

A “Roger” from each wingman and now the odds were two to one. Still climbing and in high blower (supercharger), the two *Corsairs* in trail were turning inside the *Nick* as the Japanese pilot began a second orbit over the giant fleet far below. The pilot was apparently oblivious of the two Marines trying desperately to overtake him.

“Red Two, I don’t know. I’m only showing about 200 fpm climb. It’ll take a month to catch him at this rate.”

“Roger, Red One,” from Klingman. “I’m about a mile in trail behind you. You’ve sure got the best engine.”

“But not enough, I’m afraid, Red Two. I’m going to try something. If I can pull enough lead angle, I’ll



Capt Ken Reusser, Page Field, Parris Island, 1943. Reusser was the first experienced combat fighter pilot assigned to VMF-312 upon its organization. Photo courtesy Ken Reusser.

spray the .50s. Maybe he’ll do something stupid.”

So saying, Ken leveled off slightly to pick up a little more speed. After a few moments, he eased back on the stick and squeezed the trigger. His lead angle was, in his words, “about two city blocks.” The tracers arced out moving as if in slow motion to a spot well in front of the *Nick*. Several telltale glints on the surface of the Japanese plane announced some hits.

“I think I hit him! Did you see those strikes?”

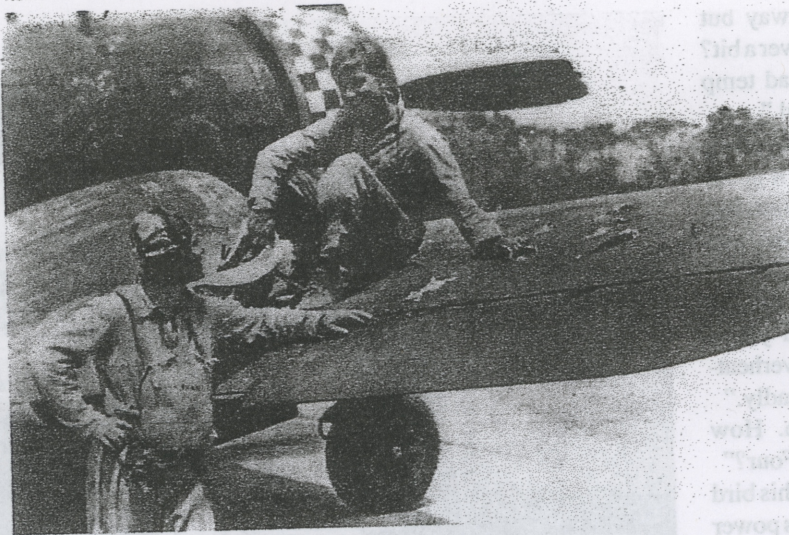
“Affirmative, affirmative,” from Red Two.

The two pilots watched with fascination, waiting for something to happen. Slowly the *Nick* turned and headed north for Japan and almost simultaneously began a very gradual descent. This was, of course, what the two Marines had been hoping for, and so did the entire fleet below. Unbeknownst to Red Flight, the Combat Information Centers on each ship that carried the appropriate VHF crystal were breathlessly following the aerial action going on above.

As Capt Reusser closed in on *Nick* from directly behind, he could see a hole in the top of the right wing and some fluid or smoke trailing from the left engine. At point-blank range he again pressed the trigger. Nothing happened. His



Reusser, Klingman, and his VMF-312 squadron mates at Ewa, Hawaii, 1943. (left to right) Jim Cox, Frank Watson, Reusser, Klingman and Jim Reese. Photo courtesy Jim Cox.



Capt Ken Reusser, standing, and 1st Lt Bob Klingman, on the wing of Klingman's Corsair. Note the damaged prop tips and damaged wing, 10 May 1945. Photo courtesy Col Ken Reusser.



A re-enactment of the above photo which was taken 50 years later, 10 May 1995. Photo courtesy LtCol Don Tooker.

guns had finally frozen from the intense cold of the high altitude. This was not an uncommon occurrence, and Reusser had already worked out an alternate plan.

Carefully maneuvering his *Corsair* directly under and behind the *Nick*, where he was sure he couldn't be spotted by either the pilot or the gunner, he inched closer to the enemy's tail surfaces. Adding throttle carefully, he closed the gap until the propeller began to neatly chew away the trailing edges of the tail surfaces. Immediately, the *Nick* pilot made several quick turns.

The element of surprise was gone now, but not enough of the elevator and rudder control surfaces was damaged to cause sufficient loss of control.

"This is Red One. I tried to chop off his tail

after my guns froze. Red Two, shoot him down—he's all yours."

"Roger, Red One, but my guns are frozen, too. I just tried them."

Reusser now pulled up on the right wing of the Japanese aircraft, and the two pilots along with the gunner stared at each other, eyeball to eyeball, less than 50 feet apart. The Japanese crew's thoughts would be unknown forever, and Reusser wondered afterward how many U.S. and Japanese pilots had actually flown formation together in World War II.

"I think this guy's convinced I'm alone, Red Two. Why don't you give it a go while I keep him occupied? He seems fascinated with my nice tight wing position."

Then, Reusser moved into a position where his

left wing actually overlapped the *Nick's* right wing, effectively blocking any evasive turns. While the Japanese pilot seemed mesmerized, the gunner was not, as he frantically beat his fists on the machine gun while attempting to recharge and fire his weapon.

The cold air had affected all of the combatants equally in this high-altitude drama. Reusser watched as Klingman closed from underneath in the astern six o'clock position. Shortly, small amounts of flying debris told the same story as before. Red Two had gently and clinically done the same superficial damage as Red Leader. The Japanese pilot again banked away momentarily but then resumed his resolute course toward his home base. The Japanese mainland was getting closer by the minute.

"Let me try again, Red One. If I hit him too hard, we're both in the drink. Why didn't they give us better training for this tail-chopping maneuver?"

"Roger, Two. I'll stay on his wing and keep his attention if you want one more try. He must think his gunner is going to get that gun working. If he does, he won't miss at this range. We may not have enough fuel to get back from here, you know."

"That's a Roger," from Red Two. "Okay, here goes nothing!"

Klingman added power and climbed upward, aiming for a point just aft of the gunner's cockpit. The huge Hamilton Standard four-bladed prop ripped through the tail surfaces and on into the greenhouse.

The machine gun and its geared track disintegrated, as did the helpless gunner. Parts of the gunner and of both aircraft trailed out behind Red Two into the slipstream slowly falling toward the ocean.

"I'm headin' for home, Red One. It's vibrating pretty bad, and I've only got about 50 gallons left. I don't think we'll make it"

"Okay, Red Two, I'm right behind you. Got you in sight. Set up the best glide at the lowest RPM you can manage. The Japanese is in a graveyard spiral and pieces are still flying off in all directions. Oh yeah! There goes a wing. Cancel one Japanese photo mission. Nice going, Bob!"

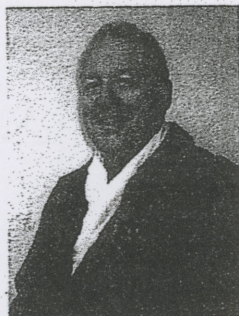
The long ride home was exciting, exhilarating and satisfying for both pilots. Klingman's aircraft ran out of fuel on the long straight-in approach, but he managed to land "dead-stick." The plane was a total strike. Ken landed with only a few gallons of gasoline remaining.

The Japanese daylight photo missions were

ended. The *kamikaze* pilots' briefings were no longer complete, as the enemy could not now pinpoint the exact locations of the U.S. capital ships.

Both Capt Reusser and 1stLt Klingman were subsequently awarded the Navy Cross for their gallant and heroic actions. ➔

LtCol Don Tooker, USMC (Ret.) received his wings and commission in April 1947. He served briefly with VMF-223 at MCAS El Toro, and then joined the Marine Corps Reserve "weekend warrior" program with VMF-123 at NAS Los Alamitos. He graduated from the University of California at Santa Barbara in June 1950.



Thirty days later his unit was recalled to active duty.

In Korea he flew with VMF-214, VMF-212 and VMF-311 in F4Us and F9F-2s. Of his 133 combat missions, 13 were flown on the wing of then Maj Ken Reusser. By flying at extremely low altitudes their section, with the second section covering above, were successful in locating and destroying many tanks, trucks and supply depots.

In 1952, LtCol Tooker again served with VMF-214 at MCAS Kaneohe, introducing the first operational jet fighters in those islands. In 1953 he transitioned to helicopters, later serving with VMO-1 and VMO-6. In 1962 he returned to jets flying the F8U Crusaders with VMF-323, where he ultimately served as C.O.

Following a tour at the USMC Development Center at Quantico, his last tour of duty was C.O. of VMO-5, Camp Pendleton, flying the UH-1E and OV-10A Bronco. His decorations include two Distinguished Flying Crosses, 10 Air Medals, two Navy Commendation Medals and the Presidential Unit Citation.

After retirement in 1968 he worked for Lockheed Aircraft Corporation on the Cheyenne Attack Helicopter for three years. Since 1972 he has been in sales and management in the chemical business. He currently resides with his wife Peri in Orange, Calif.



C. Kenneth G. Reusser