

Major R. Bruce Porter

USMC Night Fighter Pilot

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"Tally-ho!" the radio crackled, "Zeroes at eleven o'clock. Angels 25." Capt. Bruce Porter charged his Corsair's six fifties and turned on his reflector sight; seconds later he saw the silvery glints in the sky. Seventy Zeros were coming up to challenge the Allied air coverage over Guadalcanal. The opposing air forces rushed at each other at a combined closing rate of over 500 mph. In seconds, Porter saw a large brown smudge where a Zero had blown up.

A Zero, intent on another Corsair, was going to pass in front of him, from right to left. The Japanese pilot fired his .30 caliber machine guns and 20mm cannon before he passed in front of Porter's F4U. Boresighted at 300 yards, the machine guns on Porter's Corsair outlined a deadly cone of fire; anything within that cone would be ripped to shreds by half-inch, steel-jacketed slugs. Porter fired, but the Zero zipped by the bullets. He pulled left and tried a deflection shot, giving the Zero a good lead, he opened up again. Then the Japanese pilot demonstrated the awesome aerobatic capabilities of the Zero; he just pulled straight up and disappeared. Porter's tracers reached out into empty space.

The sky was filled with weaving airplanes, smoke and flame, and flashing guns. He pulled hard left again and suddenly spotted his quarry again, now at extreme range and climbing away. The Zero pilot forced him into a loop, and Porter followed, straining to maintain consciousness as the G-forces built up. As he pulled out of the loop, he spotted the Zero, still far off and pulling away. He fired and the cone of bullets sawed into the Zero, from the left wing through the cockpit and into the opposite wing root. When the gunfire hit the unprotected fuel tanks, the Zero just blew up.

Porter zoomed through the exploding cloud of detritus and instinctively ducked his head. He rubbernecked all around, and was relieved to find his wingman, Phil Leeds, still with him. Another Zero flashed by; Phil was in better position and dove after the him, now with Porter locked onto *his* wing. A third Zero briefly joined the fray, and Phil scored some solid hits on it before it disappeared. Porter and Leeds pulled another tight loop, and when coming out of it the second Zero was right there, in front of Leeds' guns. Leeds instantly fired; the next thing Porter saw was a parachute and the empty Zero spiralling down into the sea. The whole action had taken about ten seconds. Both pilots had used a fair amount of ammo. Porter decided to head for home before they were completely empty. They climbed back up to 18,000 and made for Guadalcanal, about thirty minutes away. When they flew over Cape Esperance on Guadalcanal's western tip, they spotted a Zero slowly circling, down at 5,000 feet. Leeds dived right on him, coming out of the sun. It was all over in seconds; the Zero dived straight into the sea without even flaming. When they landed, they checked out the minimal damage to their airplanes, accepted hearty congratulations from the ground crew, and compared notes with the other fliers of VMF-121. June 12, 1943 had been a very good day: six kills and four probables against no losses of their own. (*You can read the full account of Porter's first aerial victory at the [Pacifica Military History](#) website - publisher of his autobiography, "Ace! ...".*)

Only that night did it occur to Porter that he had killed a man. But that was part of being a fighter pilot, something he had aspired to since December, 1939.

Training

Then a freshman at USC, Porter's interest in flying first stirred when he and his good friend, Roy Margrave, saw the movie, *Flight Command*. In January of 1940, a couple US Navy ensigns came recruiting at Porter's fraternity, and pitched the benefits of the Naval Aviation Cadet program. Not the least of which was the \$500 annual bonus, payable at discharge, which would help pay Porter's college tuition. The next week he and Roy signed up with the Navy at their recruiting station in Long Beach. As they left the Navy office, a Marine Corps recruiter from the adjacent office cornered them. "Wouldn't they like to be Marine aviators?" "Sure," they stammered. The officer asked them their names, knocked on the wall, and slid open a frosted glass window panel. "Give me the paperwork on Porter and Margrave," he ordered the Navy CPO. "Yes, sir," and some papers slid through the opening. The Marine captain tore them up and dumped them in a wastebasket. "Boys, you look like Marine Corps material to me."

Thus, in September 1940, R. Bruce Porter reported to the Long Beach Elimination Base, where budding Navy and Marine aviators began their training. He flew an N3N, a fabric-covered bi-plane, nicknamed "Yellow Peril" Although he was not a "natural," Porter eventually soloed, thus moving up from Elimination School to flight school at Pensacola Naval Air Station (NAS). In February 1941, Porter and his friend Margrave said good-bye to their families and boarded a train that took them through the Deep South where Porter saw for the first time in his life the segregation and racism there. Each stop brought more shocking images to him: segregated restrooms, waiting rooms, restaurants, railroad cars, and even segregated water fountains.

Pensacola

With the war in Europe raging, the U.S. was building up for its expected involvement, which included more naval aviators. So the course at Pensacola had been compressed from fourteen months into six. Porter and his classmates of 162-C had to absorb the full syllabus of navigation, power plants, and radio code as well as advanced instrument flying in that time. The class included college kids like Porter, and also Navy Aviation Pilots (NAP), enlisted men who were learning to fly. The first six weeks was all academic, on-the-ground training, with no flight time at all. All that kept them sane were Saturday night liberties, and the women they could meet on those occasions. During the long weeks of ground school he struck up friendships with Jeff Poindexter and Jack Amende.

Immediately following ground school came the Squadron-1 phase, still with N3N's, starting with a ten-hour pre-solo program. Porter's buddy from L.A., Roy Margrave, washed out of Squadron-1, but the Army Air Corps snapped him up, and he flew with the Army in the war. After soloing, the naval aviation cadets had to land on a small field with a dead engine, a realistic simulation of an emergency. Then they moved on to basic aerobatics: the snap roll, wingover, cartwheel, split-S, Immelmann, etc.. The final requirements of Squadron-1 included night flying and formation work. Graduation was marked by a 90-minute flight in which the cadets demonstrated all they had learned. Most of the cadets got an 'up' to the next phase. To celebrate his graduation Porter purchased a brand-new cherry-red Ford convertible, which did wonders for his social standing.

When they advanced to Squadron-2, they progressed to SNJ's (the Navy's designation for the famous AT6 Harvard trainer) and began to perfect their formation flying. The move up to more powerful planes taught the fliers how to handle torque and other different flying characteristics. A few more cadets washed out or got killed, but most went on to Squadron-3, which was devoted wholly to instrument flying. After a few hours in a Link Trainer, a mock-up of a fully instrumented airplane cockpit (an early version of the simulators that were so essential for astronaut mission training), the young aviators did their blind flying and learned to ride a radio beacon back home. More pilots were killed or washed out of Squadron-3 than in the previous two phases combined. Porter and many of

his friends (Jeff Poindexter, Jack Amende, and Phil Crawford) successfully completed Squadron-3 and were assigned to the fighter school at Opa Locka, Florida.

Opa Locka

The atmosphere at Opa Locka was much different than at Pensacola; the cadets were treated as officers and the training moved at the individual's own pace. Here Porter first flew the front-line Navy fighter of the day: a Grumman F3F, a biplane with fabric-covered wings, open cockpit, an 850 HP engine, retractable landing gear, and two machine guns. While practicing Immelmann turns, a few pilots were inexplicably killed in the F3Fs until one cadet Ashcroft went into an inverted spin, and managed to bail out to tell the tale. As an Immelmann essentially required the F3F to get into an inverted spin attitude, the pilots needed instructions on how to pull the F3F out of that particular situation. Armed with correct procedures, the fliers went back to their dogfighting lessons, aerial gunnery, and simulated carrier landings. One day in late July, Jumpin' Joe Clifton, the top instructor at Opa Locka, challenged Porter to a mock dogfight. The goal was not for Porter to win, but just to see how well he could do against Clifton. But after a few minutes of twisting and turning over the Everglades, Porter found himself on Clifton's tail, and was able to stay there long enough.

Soon after, on **July 25, 1941**, Porter won his long-awaited Wings of Gold and his Second Lieutenant's commission.

That summer Porter drove his red Ford convertible back home to Los Angeles and then back again to New Bern, North Carolina in September. Here he reported to Marine Fighting Squadron 121 (VMF-121), commanded by Major Samuel Jack. The squadron received its first copies of the latest naval fighter, the Grumman F4F-3 Wildcat, with its notorious hand-cranked landing gear. This gear required the pilot to turn a crank twenty-eight times to retract the landing gear just after take-off, which action unavoidably translated to the stick, thus causing the plane to wobble up and down until the landing gear was fully up. He and his tentmate, Bob Fraser, practiced the intricacies of the Wildcat, and were proficient flyers by the time of the Red-and-Blue war games in November, 1941. The Red-and-Blue games, the largest exercises ever held by the U.S. military to that date, took place in Knollwood, North Carolina. The Marine flier got headaches flying over the featureless pine forest terrain, trying to spot landmarks. For Porter the games were primarily memorable for the cold weather and resultant engine troubles. VMF-121 returned to New Bern in late November.

War

Immediately after Pearl Harbor, VMF-121 hurriedly departed New Bern for Quantico, Virginia. In the haste, Porter had to leave his beloved red convertible with his plane captain, in the distant hope of recovering it later. From Quantico, the squadron was ordered to fly out to San Diego, for possible deployment in the Pacific. While taking off at Quantico, the variable-pitch props on Porter's new Wildcat malfunctioned, and the plane spun out of line, badly damaging the aircraft. But the mechanics fixed it up, and within 48 hours he was flying cross-country, by himself, to catch up with the squadron, which he did in New Mexico.

They arrived in San Diego on December 16, 1941, fully prepared to repel the expected invasion, with at least six planes always at the ready (engines running!). The carrier *Saratoga* put in to repair some torpedo damage, and before she sailed the authorities decreed that she should take VMF-121's fine new Wildcats, leaving the Marines to make do with *Saratoga's* obsolescent Brewster Buffaloes. Amidst all of this excitement, Porter short-sightedly plunged into a whirlwind romance and marriage, which proved to be short-lived.

He transferred to VMF-111 (an F4F squadron) in February of 1942 (*The first of many unit changes for Porter. This brief article is somewhat selective on these details. The reader who wants to follow his unit assignments precisely should refer to [Porter's autobiography](#). - SS*) They sailed for Samoa in March, disembarking at the port of Pago Pago, en route to the newly-built U.S. airbase at nearby Tafuna.

Samoa

Here they were on the front line, expendable, ready to die in a delaying action while the American war production machine got moving. When their Wildcats arrived a week behind the pilots, they began to fly sector searches from the new 2500 foot, crushed-coral runway the Seabees had built. The early 1942 sense of impending doom and 'expendability' was hardly dented by the American victories at Coral Sea and Midway in May and June. The pilots continued training and waiting.

One of the Marine infantry officers, Captain Jake Meyers, had wanted to be a pilot and was always bugging the pilots for "a little stick time." One of the pilots finally took pity on him and brought him up in an SNJ trainer, which inexplicably fell into an inverted spin on this occasion. The pilot hollered for Jake to bail out, which he did. Jake landed safely in the water, but the wind and waves kept pulling the chute under. Eventually a rescue boat pulled him to safety, and the pilot was brought up on charges, which never came to anything. The other pilots took note that officialdom could not afford to ground or punish a competent pilot for minor infraction, so great was the demand for skilled fliers.

In August, the recently promoted First Lieutenant Bruce Porter moved with VMF-111 over to a new airstrip at Faleola in Western Samoa. With the U.S. invasion of Guadalcanal leaving Samoa 1,000 behind the front lines, the Marine aviators there were left to practice flying and to enjoy the hospitality of Aggie Grey's renowned hotel in Apia.

One September evening, Porter, Jeff Poindexter, Louis Gordon and another aviator were partying with four young Samoan ladies when a fight broke out between Gordon and some enlisted Marines. All the men soon joined the melee, which only stopped when Poindexter sent one of the enlisted men sprawling, with such force that he literally broke his back. The four fliers narrowly avoided being sent to Leavenworth for 20 years, again because of the desperate need for skilled pilots. On another day in October, the excitement came in the form of a scramble to intercept a large number of bogeys that the radar picked up. They turned out to be B-17s, which the jumpy Marine fliers refrained from shooting down. Meanwhile the news from Guadalcanal in mid-October was very gloomy.

A new Marine fighter squadron (VMF-441) was formed in October, 1942; Porter was promoted to Captain, and selected to be a division leader in the new squadron. After a brief stay on the tiny island of Funafuti, Porter and several other senior pilots went to Espiritu Santo in **February, 1943**, about 450 miles from the front line in the Solomons.

Corsairs with VMF-121

After a few more frustrating weeks ferrying airplanes up to Guadalcanal, these pilots were introduced to the new Chance-Vought F4U Corsair and re-assigned to VMF-121. The powerful gull-winged fighter bounced when it landed and had other quirks that caused the Navy to adopt the more manageable Grumman F6F Hellcat as its primary carrier-based fighter. Consequently, the land-based Marine Corps received the windfall benefit of the new fighter, which could outrun a Zero.

While getting up to speed on the Corsair, Porter met the legendary [Pappy Boyington](#). As might be expected their meeting involved some heavy drinking, Pappy getting in trouble with his superiors,

ramming around in a jeep, and Pappy breaking his ankle during an impromptu wrestling match. Two days later, VMF-121 left for Guadalcanal.

The Solomons

Porter's squadron arrived at Henderson Field in June, and suffered through the nighttime visits of "Washing Machine Charlie" and the dysentery caused by their crummy food and unsanitary conditions. He witnessed a P-38 making a successful night attack on their regular nocturnal visitor, and vowed to take up that challenge if he ever had the chance.

He flew his first combat mission and scored his first kill on **June 12, 1943**, as described above. Shortly, VMF-121 moved up to the Russell Islands, Advanced Base Knucklehead on Banika. From there, the squadron could support Allied operations further up the Solomons, including the anticipated landings on New Georgia. Before the war Banika had been a cattle-feeding station for Lever Brothers. Since hostilities had come the island, the cattle roamed free, and were frequent victims of Japanese air raids. An enterprising old navy chief set up "South Pacific Joe's Hamburger Spot," supplied with the butchered carcasses of the Emperor's bovine victims. He offered excellent burgers and passable powdered-milk shakes, which attracted many pilots, who mysteriously developed engine troubles over Banika, and made 'emergency' landings there. The best part of "South Pacific Joe's Hamburger Spot" was that he offered his treats for free to the pilots.

One day during the quiet late June period, Porter and Captain Bob Baker were in the long shower stall when "a couple of old geezers" came in, started showering and chatting, completely ignoring the large prominent sign, "CONSERVE WATER! ONLY USE TO RINSE OFF!" Annoyed, Baker hollered out, "Hey Sawtooth and Pinhead, can't you read?" The two old gents meekly shut off the water, got their towels, and padded out. The next day at lunch, "Ten-hut!" was called out, and as Porter and Baker got to their feet, in strode "Sawtooth" - with three stars on his uniform, and "Pinhead" - with two. Generals Vandegrift and Geiger smiled and passed them by. A year later General Vandegrift was inspecting Baker's unit (then in California), and when he got to Baker, he simply asked, "Captain, do you have enough water here?"

June 30 - Combat over Rendova

Porter always hated pre-dawn take-offs from the soft, primitive, cramped airstrip at Banika, none more so than the one on June 30, when they went up to fly cover for the day's invasion of Rendova. Porter and Captain Louis Gordon each planned to lead a four-plane division. But two aircraft were grounded with engine trouble, and a third crashed on take-off. Altogether 29 Marine planes from four squadrons got up to meet the Japanese bomber strike that came down from Kahili. Suddenly about 50 Zeros emerged out of the morning sun. In seconds, one passed below Porter, on the tail of a smoking Corsair. Porter yanked around instantly and found the Zero about 300 yards in front. He squeezed his gun button for a long three-second burst and saw the tracers fall into the Jap's engine cowling. Then pieces flew off the engine and the Zero blew up. It was just seven seconds since he had seen the first Zero that morning.

Before he could recover from that action, he spotted a Zero on the tail of his wingman, Phil Leeds. Porter reversed course to the left and sprayed the Zero with .50 caliber bullets, damaging him enough for Leeds to escape, but he didn't explode. In the next instant bullets were raining all over Porter's Corsair and Leeds had to return the favor, clearing Porter's tail. Sadly, Louis Gordon, Porter's friend from flight school, went down that day and Porter saw his body in the surf off the beach at Munda Point. Porter and Leeds both made it home that day, although the damage to Porter's Corsair

angered his plane captain. Overall, it had been a rough day for VMF-121 fliers, losing four pilots, while claiming 19 kills in defense of the landings.

Three kinds of missions dominated the Marines' flying during July: dumbo, escort, and strafing. Dumbo missions were rescues of downed pilots, the Corsairs flying cover for the slow PBY Catalinas or Grumman Ducks. They were difficult to fly because of the 125 MPH maximum speed of the rescue planes and were usually boring. But in understandably strong sympathy for the purpose of the missions, the pilots welcomed dumbo flights. Escort missions involved staying with TBF or TBD bombers on strikes at Jap bases further up the Solomons. The least favorite missions were strafing, where typically a four plane division was sent to shoot up an identified spot on the map, where someone had seen something. Usually the strafing pilot felt like he was just machine-gunning the jungle, while exposing himself to sudden and deadly anti-aircraft fire.

Lieutenant Colonel "Sad Sam" Moore briefed VMF-121 on an escort mission set for **July 17, 1943**, the largest to-date in the Solomons. 78 bombers, escorted by over 100 Allied fighters, would strike the large Jap air base at Kahili. Porter was flying high cover at 27,000 feet, and as usually the case in aerial combat, the scene changed instantly from a clear, empty sky to a deadly, swirling melee. Porter shot down one plane (his third confirmed kill) and cleared another from Leeds' tail. He was scoring some solid hits on the second plane when its fine pilot snapped it up and away, instantly out of Porter's view. The maneuver denied Porter another confirmed kill, he had to settle for a 'damaged.' On the way home, he and Leeds spotted a Zero on the tail of a Navy Wildcat, and they flew in to the rescue. Once again, Porter clobbered the Zero heavily, when the pilot pulled the standard evasive maneuver, up and away. The Wildcat made it home, and Porter had to settle for another 'damaged', but he couldn't help but admire the skill of the IJN pilot.

Five days later VMF-121 was relieved. Porter and the other pilots went to Australia for 'rest and recreation', which basically amounted to lots of booze and women. In today's politically correct, gender-blind, and AIDS-conscious environment, the notion of charged-up fighter pilots descending on Australia to spend as much time as possible at the bar and in the sack, with evidently [willing women](#), seems a little ... disreputable. But all the fliers tell the same story, so I guess that's the way it was. (*Actually, it sounds like a good time - just don't tell my wife. - SS*) After ten days supposedly "resting" and definitely "recreating," Porter had the unenviable task of rounding up all the pilots of the squadron for the flight back to the Solomons.

After briefly sharing quarters with [Kenny Walsh](#), the Medal of Honor winning Marine ace who shot down 21 Japanese planes, Porter was shipped stateside.

Home

He sailed under the Golden Gate Bridge, "the Pacific warrior's symbol of home," caroused with other Marine fliers at some of San Francisco's fine hotels, and then headed home to Los Angeles for leave. His parents met him at Union Station, but not his wife. She was in San Diego. A little puzzled, he went there to see her, where she told him the marriage was over. She was as decent as possible about it, and Porter had known that their relationship was a "little superficial," but it was still quite a blow to him. (She also delivered the keys to his prized red Ford convertible, so the visit was not a complete loss.)



After some more "R&R," he arrived back for duty with Fighter Training Command at El Toro in **November 1943**, reporting to his old friend, Bob Fraser, a Major and a six-kill ace. This was a 'finishing school' for newly commissioned fighter pilots on their way to the Pacific. Porter had to

impart to them all the knowledge he could about the realities of fighter combat. He really enjoyed training the uniformly excellent pilots in the school, although he nearly killed himself one day pulling too many G's while showing off for his trainees. Normally his training tour would have lasted about a year, but he cut it short when he applied for night fighter duty, something he had aspired to ever since he saw the P-38 shoot down the Japanese bomber that night over Guadalcanal.

In **February, 1944**, he drove back East with Wally Sigler to join his night fighter squadron, VMF(N)-544, in Cherry Point, NC. On Porter's way through various Marine bases, he met Lt. Col. Hugh Brewster, who had stolen him and Roy Margrave from the Navy "a world war ago." Brewster then offered Porter (who was slated for promotion to Major in any event) a spot as the Exec of his Vero Beach-based squadron, with an eye to move him up to CO shortly. Dazzled again by the persuasive Marine officer, Porter agreed, but the bureaucracy did not, and he went ahead with his night fighting assignment.

At Cherry Point, they did an enormous amount of instrument flying (which is what night fighting is all about) in Grumman F6Fs and also spent a lot of time on the Link trainers. In April, 1944, near the end of the training, Porter's promotion to Major came through. His friend Louis Gordon, who had died in the Solomons, had family in Miami, and they contacted Porter, to tell them about Louis' last days. But he handled it badly, and could not bring himself to face the family, their pain, or his own.

Both the Navy and Marine Corps had selected the F6F Hellcat as their primary night fighter, its smoother landing and handling characteristics being big factors. The F6F night fighter was distinguished by the bulbous APS-6 radar pod on its starboard wing and also by its all-over matte black paint. The APS-6 weighed only 70 pounds, was relatively simple to operate, and featured a secondary blip on the radar screen that showed the target's altitude relative to the Hellcat.

VMF(N)-544 was commissioned on **May 1, 1944**, with Majors Jim Maguire as CO and Bruce Porter as exec. Their Hellcats arrived slowly, as the mechanics up at Quantico had to fit each one with radars, extra radios, and other specialized NF gear. While flying his customized plane back to Cherry Point one rainy night, Porter got lost and had to set down on a small airstrip in a small Virginia town. As he unbuckled his harness and opened the canopy, the local sheriff (a character out of the movies with big hat, jodhpurs, belts, and braids) stopped and pointed his huge .45 caliber revolver at him. Porter brazened his way through the situation, introducing himself as a Major of the USMC, and generally exaggerated his own importance. The sheriff bought it and soon was tucking in his gut, saluting away, and eagerly offering to guard Porter's aircraft. Porter laid it on thick, referring to his "top-secret" airplane and classified gear in the cockpit. Porter called his base, got directions, and flew back safely, undoubtedly having made that sheriff's month.

The night fighter pilots trained for months, logged hundreds of training hours, and didn't depart Cherry Point for the West Coast until November. Once there, the training continued, emphasizing simulated carrier landings out on a desert airstrip. Porter got into a few scrapes with the bureaucrats over dangerous and unauthorized flying by him and his pilots, but these problems did not prevent the authorities from offering him command of a nine-plane detachment that would be a part of a new USMC force to provide round-the-clock air cover for amphibious operations. He and the nine-plane detachment were assigned to the small escort carrier *Block Island II*, the type of small carrier that could stay in close to the landing beaches and offer close air support.

As December, 1944 came around, Porter took some leave at his home in Los Angeles. During this leave he met his future wife, Pat Leimert, and managed to get thrown out of a party at Jack Benny's (by Jack's wife Mary Livingston). It was a bit ironic that for all Porter's hell-raising in those days, the one time he was asked to leave he was doing nothing more objectionable than chatting with Tyrone

Power and Clark Gable (also both in uniform). He and Pat became engaged in January, 1945, but this time he held off on a quickie marriage.

Despite their protracted training, Porter's team had to qualify with actual landings on *Block Island II*. He and his pilots completed the five required carrier landings, with all the stresses involved. They followed the Landing Signal Officer's (LSO) instructions, trusting his signals, instead of their own perceptions. But tragedy struck the team on February 14, 1945 when the Captain insisted in running an air exercise in terrible weather. Eighteen Marine airplanes (F6Fs, F4Us, and TBMs) from all the air departments went up that day, only eleven landed safely. Eight fliers were killed and nine put in the hospital. The board of inquiry concluded "pilot error" and absolved the Captain of any blame.

Ace!

Porter was anxious to get back into combat; the war was going well, and he hoped to achieve the coveted ace status by adding two more victories to the three he already had. In the **spring of 1945**, he reached Hawaii, where he mastered the ultimate operational challenge: *night* carrier landings. (He lost a number of close friends in early 1945: Bob Maze off Okinawa, Jack Amende shot down over Japan, and stuttering Bob Fraser in a training accident.) He eventually reached the Pacific war zone, while being shuffled from one squadron to another. While on Iwo Jima he visited the American cemetery and Mount Suribachi, another overwhelming, emotional experience in a war filled with such moments.

Okinawa

He finally reached the front in May, when he landed at Yontan airfield on Okinawa. From here the Marine night fighter groups were launching combat missions; some pilots had even scored kills. Porter flew his first night combat mission on the 10th, and made more sorties in the next week. While the challenges of night operations were exciting enough, he met no Japanese planes.

On the morning of May 22, he was suddenly ordered (*It seems like all orders were "sudden" in those days.* - SS) to take command of **VMF(N)-542**, also based at Yontan. His old friend Wally Sigler was the squadron exec, and helped him overcome the morale problems left by the previous CO. But VMF(N)-542 had been doing a good job before Porter's arrival, having downed eleven enemy aircraft. Porter started his new assignment with his best impersonation of a hard-nosed Marine officer, barking out orders to his ground crew to re-paint the nose art on his personal Hellcat with the words "Black Death" and a picture of a Schenley's bottle. Two nights later, he led a night CAP (Combat Air Patrol), a boring mission, until it was over. When Porter landed at Yontan, all Hell had broken loose. The Japanese had launched a desperate suicide commando attack on the base, landing bombers loaded with raiders on the American airstrip. Most of their planes were shot down or crashed on landing, but enough Japanese soldiers emerged to create quite a fire fight. Porter grabbed his pistol, organized the few men in his area, and determined to stay put defensively, rather than foul up the melee down at the airstrip. Miraculously, only three American died in the raid; all 70 of the Japanese raiders died - none were taken alive. The most spectacular loss was 70,000 gallons of aviation gasoline that went up in a towering blaze.

Following three weeks of uneventful missions, Porter flew night CAP on **June 15, 1945**. Having just received a letter from his fiancée, he was in a positive mood. He took off into a completely black night, with thick cloud cover and no moonlight. He evaded gunfire from some jumpy naval AA crews, and checked out his radar, machine guns, and fuel. He reported in to his ground control office (GCI) on Ie Shima, whose ground-based radar had the range to pick up distant bogeys. He ("Topaz One") and the GCI ("Handyman") stayed in contact as he circled lazily for almost an hour. Then "Topaz from

Handyman, I have a bogey for you. Range 30 miles at 10 o'clock. Angel 13." The bogey had 3,000 feet of altitude on Porter, so he dropped tanks, firewalled the throttle, and armed his guns. The GCI kept reporting the closing distance, "Fifteen miles ... Ten miles ... Six miles"

At range three miles, Porter turned onto the course that "Handyman" indicated would bring him up behind the bogey. When he flipped on his Hellcat's radar, the bogey was still out of its range. Trusting in the GCI's guidance, Porter flew on; in a few minutes a tiny orange blip appeared at the top of his radar screen. He was right on target. "Contact" he reported to "Handyman." He looked to see if he could spot his target; in a few seconds he saw the bogey's exhaust flames and he satisfied himself that he was looking at a Ki-45 Nick twin-engine fighter, about 350 feet ahead. He opened up with all .50 caliber machine guns and the slower-firing 20mm cannon. As his machine guns used up ammo quickly, he let up on them, but continued with the 20mm, wanting to flame the Nick for a sure kill. Soon enough flames swept over the fuselage and the Nick lurched heavily to the right. Porter's tracer fire swept through the canopy. It was all over in about 2 seconds; he doubted that the pilot ever knew what hit him. "Handyman" radioed that the bogey had disappeared from his radar screen. Porter had scored his fourth confirmed kill.

That same night, an hour later: "Hello Topaz One from Handyman. I've got another bogey for you. Boeigy at Angels 14. Indicated 180 knots. Vector 145 at Angels 13." Porter started the stern chase and altitude climb needed to close on the bogey, hoping that he could get in range before the bogey reached the fleet and its indiscriminate AA fire. The stern chase seemed to take forever, as "Handyman" radioed the closing range and altitude. Convinced that he was behind a Betty bomber, with its tail machine gunner, Porter had to be careful. He approached the Betty from just underneath and repeated his deadly gunfire. Once again the combined .50 caliber and 20mm rounds found their target; this time the Betty exploded in an expanding ball of exploding fuel. "Handyman" confirmed this kill as well. Porter was an ace!

He never again shared the sky with a Japanese aircraft. He commanded VMF(N)-542 until August 31, 1945. He was back in the States by December and promptly married Pat Leimert. He stayed in the Marine Corps Reserve until 1960, reaching the rank of Colonel. He wrote in his autobiography that "the proudest of all my possessions are two: my Navy Wings of Gold and my title of Ace."