

# “IF THERE IS ONLY ONE MAN LEFT...”

## LIEUTENANT COMMANDER JOHN C. WALDRON, USN — Hero of The Battle of Midway, June 4, 1942

by Barrett Tillman

John Charles Waldron was born into a ranching family near Fort Pierre, South Dakota, on August 21, 1900, the youngest of five children. He was part Oglala Sioux via a maternal great-grandmother.

Waldron entered the U.S. Naval Academy in 1920 and graduated four years later, academically standing 424th of 522 in the class. His first assignment was the armored cruiser USS Seattle (CA-11), a prestigious assignment as it was the flagship of the Pacific Fleet.

Following the minimum two years in surface ships, Ensign Waldron was accepted for flight training in 1926 and received his wings of gold at Pensacola, Florida, the next year. During that period he married Adelaide Wentworth, who became the mother of Waldron's two daughters.

While based on the West Coast, Waldron also attended law school, and though he passed the California Bar he never practiced as an attorney.

Interspersed with various squadron assignments, Waldron served in the Bureau of Ordnance, taught at the Naval Academy, and returned to Pensacola as a flight instructor. He became the Navy's observer at the Norden company which built bomb sights, mainly for the Army Air Corps.

In July 1941 Lieutenant Commander Waldron was assigned to establish Torpedo Squadron Eight, which was assigned to the new aircraft carrier Hornet (CV-8) in October. Though equipped with the Douglas TBD-1, “Torpedo Eight” also introduced the Grumman TBF-1 to fleet service. However, the Pearl Harbor attack that December prevented the squadron from completing transition to the new bomber. Hornet left the East Coast in March 1942, never to return.

A detachment of six TBFs proceeded independently to Hawaii, and eventually to Midway Atoll in time for the fleet battle in June.

Meanwhile, Waldron's TBD crews remained part of Hornet Air Group, which received little training while Lt. Col. Jimmy Doolittle's Army B-25 bombers were embarked for the Tokyo raid in April. Upon return to Hawaii, Hornet Air Group deployed with USS Enterprise (CV-6) in Task Force 16 while USS Yorktown (CV-5) operated independently as Task Force 17.

As the senior squadron commander, Waldron had been slated to become air group commander, but Hornet's Captain Marc Mitscher retained a Washington crony in that position.

On the morning of June 4, Hornet launched 15 TBDs, 35 SBD dive bombers, and 10 F4F Wildcat fighters against reported Japanese carriers. The SBDs and F4Fs followed a course to the target that Waldron believed was seriously in error, and led his Devastators farther to the southwest. The other planes returned empty handed or ran out of fuel.



Dakota Warrior  
Douglas TBD-1 Devastator as flown by  
LtCdr. John C. Waldron  
VT-8, USS Hornet  
The Battle of Midway, June 4, 1942

Waldron's navigation was excellent: he found the enemy task force and led his squadron in a doomed attack on the carrier Soryu. Japanese flak and fighters thinned the TBDs during their long stern chase, resulting in no hits on the target. Yet every Torpedo Eight pilot pressed ahead, recalling the skipper's final briefing: “If there's only one man left to make a run, I want him to go in and get a hit.”

None of VT-8's Devastators returned to base, with 29 of 30 men lost. John Waldron was awarded a posthumous Navy Cross, and his memory was honored in naming the destroyer Waldron (DD-699), launched in March 1944. The ship's sponsor was Ms. Nancy Waldron, John's daughter. USS Waldron remained in service until 1973.

## ...GO IN AND GET A HIT.”

*Barrett Tillman is an internationally respected American author specializing in military history. Tillman has received numerous writing awards including the second Admiral Radford Award for Naval History and Literature and is an honorary member of three Navy squadrons. He has been honored by the Air Force Historical Foundation, the American Aviation Historical Society, and the U.S. Naval Institute. He is also received the Lifetime Achievement award from the Tailhook Association.*

Text ©2016 Barrett Tillman, artwork ©2015 John Mollison - all rights reserved. Waldron photo: U.S. NAVY