



*'Mostly what you did was smoke cigarettes and drink coffee and wait to go out.'*

*—John Leslie on his life aboard the USS Bennington*

"At some point in 1943 in one month, there were more students killed at Barin Field who were being instructed there, than there were in the Pacific at the same period of time. Everybody was in a big hurry, it was partly the press of wartime, and I also think the instructors weren't up to what they should have been," he says. "By the time I got there in 1944, not very many got killed. They had tightened everything down."

He spent four months at Barin flying the SNJ, and after earning his wings and commission, was anxious to see action. He signed on as a bomber pilot, training in Ft. Lauderdale in the Grumman TBF Avenger, which could haul a single 2,000-pound torpedo or comparable load of mixed bombs.

"The TBF was just short of 2,000 horsepower, weighed over seven tons and was the biggest single-engine airplane at the time that was flown with a stick," he recalls.

After training in Chicago, practice-landing on the Wolverine and Sable—old ships stationed in the Great Lakes for training purposes—they were sent to

Southern California for assignment to the fleet. It was another round of hurry up and wait. The young pilots spent long days setting the lumbering Navy planes down again and again on dusty fields painted out like carrier decks.

It had been nearly two years since Leslie had climbed into a cockpit for the first time. He was impatient to put his training to use, but found a silver lining in the stateside stint when friends sent him on a blind date with a pretty young woman named Audrey Dimberg. John and Audrey were married on September 15, 1944.

Here are his memories of the months that followed.



"We weren't married for very long when they shipped all of us TBF pilots to San Diego in a truck to put us on a carrier and qualify us. When we got there, the weather was iffy and the ship was out, so they decided to have a weather hop. The head guy said, 'Send the closest plane to a catapult,' which was me.

All these carrier landings we'd practiced,

nobody ever said one word about a catapult shot.

The plane captain was telling me what to do, and he's the one who tells them to shoot the catapult off. He said, 'When you're all set, you put your head back against the head rest and the catapult officer will signal to shoot you off.'

I put my head back and waited. Nothing happened. So I turned my head to look back at him and about the time I did that, that's when he shot it off.

That catapult shot felt like I'd left part of my body back there, and that was the weirdest thing, that first time.

I flew out and back, told them the weather was good enough. Then I came around and made a good landing. They unhook you and you take off the deck after that. After you did it once it was easy, it kind of came naturally.

Of course the most dangerous part is landing, especially during rough weather, which a lot of times you got caught out in. It's all up to the landing signal officer and the timing is critical.

That was one of the reasons they started training us more, the farther along the war got, because there were an awful lots of deaths on the landing approaches and wave-offs.

After we qualified, we got assigned to an air group that was reforming—Air Group One—and we were going to be in Torpedo Squadron One. We trained in the states for three months, then went to Hawaii. We were in Maui for another two months.

Then we got on a troop ship and went to

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