Victor Charles Taber (1924 – 1944)

Victor Taber listed his home of record as National City, California. And he entered the service from the state of California. His parents, Mr. and Mrs. R. H. Taber lived at 659 Del Mar, Chula Vista, CA, and his father is an electrical engineer with San Diego Gas and Electric. Victor graduated from Chula Vista Junior High in 1939, and was a graduate of Sweetwater Union High School in June 1942. He was an outstanding athlete and student. During his senior year, he was the vice-president of his class and was given the American Legion citizenship award. He played tackle on the champion Sweetwater football squad in 1942 and also earned a letter in tennis.

Victor Taber was an Aviation Machinist Mate Third Class (AMM3C) in the United States Navy (E4) and assigned to VC-65 aboard the USS St. Lo.

He died on 25 October 1944, stationed aboard the USS St. Lo (CVE-63), and was involved with the second invasion of the Philippines. His name appears on the "Tablets of the Missing" in the Manila American Cemetery at Manila, Republic of the Philippines. The USS St Lo was sunk, and he is listed as Missing in Action (MIA) or Buried at Sea. He was awarded the Silver Star in fighting the raging fires on the deck of the USS St. Lo, "refusing to leave when chance for survival in that area became exceedingly small".

Victor Taber had been in the U.S. Navy for 18 months and was 20 years old. He was awarded the Silver Star and the Purple Heart. A street in the Sunbow community of Chula Vista honors his name and as well as a memorial to the USS St. Lo and VC-65 has been erected at entrance to the Ft. Rosecrans National Cemetery in San Diego.

A description of the battle that occurred to Taffy 3 on 25 October, 1944 follows:
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"Steaming about 60 miles east of Samar before dawn on October 25, Taffy 3 had launched the day's initial air strikes by 0530. At 0637 RADM Sprague, aboard flagship FANSHAW BAY, received word that a large Japanese fleet was approaching from the northwest. Comprised of four battleships, eight cruisers, and eleven destroyers, Vice Admiral Takeo Kurita's IJN Centre Force steadily closed the unsuspecting Americans and at 0658 opened fire on the ships of Taffy 3.

So began the Battle off Samar, one of the most memorable engagements in U.S. Naval history. Outnumbered and outgunned, the relatively slow ships of Taffy 3 seemed fated for disaster, but they defied the odds and gamely accepted the enemy's challenge.

Partial credit for sighting the Japanese fleet went to ST LO's Composite Squadron VC-65. The initial contact report is summarized in her Action Report....
"0650 - An LASP plane from the ST LO piloted by Ensign Bill Brooks of VC-65 reported contact with a Japanese Surface Force bearing 330 degrees twenty to thirty miles from Task Unit 77.4.3. This report was made to Commander Task Unit 77.4.3. The Japanese Force was estimated by Ensign Brooks as consisting of four BB (battleships), four CA (heavy cruisers), two CL (light cruisers) and ten to twelve DD (destroyers). Almost immediately thereafter visual contact was made from the signal and open bridges. General Quarters was sounded on the first report of contact. Although visibility was very poor, the pagoda-like masts of the BBs could be seen astern. The unit course was 090 degrees. Shortly thereafter the first report from CIC gave the force at "30,000 Closing". C.T.U. 77.4.3 ordered all aircraft launched immediately for attack."

Under fire and fleeing, the six escort carriers took the brunt of the heavy caliber fire....*"0658 - The splashes of the first salvoes were observed. The WHITE PLAINS was under fire. At least three salvoes were observed. Two straddled the WHITE PLAINS and one was short. The splashes of the exploding shells were dye-marked red, blue, yellow, etc. At least three salvoes were observed short of the FANSHAW BAY."*

ST LO immediately launched her planes ordering the pilots to attack the Japanese task force and to proceed to Tacloban airstrip, Leyte, to rearm and refuel. Four Avenger torpedo bombers and fifteen FM-2 Wildcat fighters were prepared and

launched during this period....all from within a driving rain squall. During the launching the range of the enemy main body closed rapidly to 25,000 yards and on down to 22,000. Main battery salvoes from both the battleships and heavy cruisers had continued to land among th fleeing CVEs. As salvoes fell "...with disconcerting rapidity...." increasingly nearer the ST LO, the aircraft of VC-65 went aloft and inflected heavy damage on the closing enemy warships.

ST LO's Action Report continues....*"0816 to 0910 - During this period the entire formation was under particularly continuous fire. At about 0820, the GAMBIER BAY reported being heavily hit, and that she had lost one engine. She rapidly dropped aft and was not seen again. About this time the ships of the screen were ordered to shift from the starboard to port side of the formation. The HOEL was observed to drop back and was not seen again. The group of Jap ships, off the starboard quarter now, believed to consist of one CL and eight DD was observed still closing. About 0830 the KALININ BAY turned quite sharply right passing aster of the ST LO and then came back to course, after shifting from the port to the starboard quarter of the ST LO. Units of the Jap Force were reported at various ranges. The closest reported range was 6900 yards off the starboard quarter at about 0844 - other reported positions at this time were 090, 9400 yards; 115, 11,000 yards. At 0851, 085, 10,100 yards; 025, 12,500 yards. A VHF report was received at 0851 that a cruiser had taken a fish on the bow."*

At 0830 five enemy destroyers opened fire from about 14,500 yards. As the screening ships engaged the heavy cruisers and laid down a concealing smoke screen, ST LO shifted her fire and for the next hour traded shots with guns of Japan's Destroyer Squadron 10.

At 0858 two Jap ships could be seen off the port beam. They were reported bearing 134 degrees, 10,400 yards. During this time the group on the starboard quarter had closed to 6,900 yards, nearly point-blank range. Considerable fire from that direction was noted, presumably from 4.7" guns. From the splashes, it appeared that KALININ BAY was their primary target, with ST LO also receiving considerable attention. The ST LO was repeatedly straddled particularly around 0900 by 4.7" gunfire coming from a ship, or ships, which had closed, under cover of smoke, on her port quarter.

Under heavy attack from task unit composite squadrons and harnessed by incessant fire from American destroyers and destroyer escorts, the enemy cruisers broke off action and turned northward at 0920. The surface action of the Battle Off Samar had concluded...

About four minutes later, an Avenger torpedo bomber of ST LO's VC-65, piloted by LT Waldrop, called and reported a torpedo approaching from the port beam, also many torpedoes approaching from the starboard quarter. Shortly thereafter a number of them were sighed from the ship and apparently nearing the end of their run, were porposing near the surface. LT Waldrop strafed one which exploded in the wake of the KALININ BAY, another exploded a short distance on the port quarter. The wakes were numerous and both ST LO and KALININ BAY brought their 40mm and 20mm AA guns to bear.... no success was obtained. The ship was also maneuvered to parallel the wakes as closely as possible.

With the main surface action complete, the task unit continued southward, placing as much distance between themselves and the Japanese as possible.

Loss of USS ST LO (CVE 63)

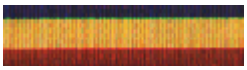
At 1010, about forty minutes after the surface action had concluded, the ship secured from General Quarters. Ten minutes later condition watches were set and personnel were allowed to get coffee and a chance to relax. Relatively undamaged from the surface action, ST LO took aboard several aircraft from the other CVEs. All planes were struck below to clear the flight deck for further landings and also to expedite refueling and rearming three of the torpedo bombers with torpedoes.

At about 1051 AA fire was seen and heard forward and General Quarters was sounded. Almost immediately thereafter, number planes, believed to include both friendly and enemy, were seen at 1000 to 3000 feet ahead and on the starboard bow. These planes moved aft to starboard and one of them, when about abeam to starboard, went into a right turn toward the ST LO. The after starboard guns opened on him, but with no apparent effect. A "Zeke 52" with a bomb under each wing continued its right turn on its suicide run against the ST LO.

Approaching the ramp at very high speed, the "Zeke 52" crossed over the aft end of the ship at less than fifty feet. He appeared to push over sufficiently to hit the deck at about the "number 5 wire", fifteen feet to the port side of the center line. A tremendous crash followed quickly followed by an explosion as one or both of the enemy s bombs exploded. The aircraft continued up the deck leaving fragments strewed about and its remanents went over the bow.

The Captains first impression was that no serious damage had been suffered. There was a hole in the flight deck with smoldering edges which sprang into flame. Hoses were immediately run out from both sides of the flight deck and water started on the fire....smoke soon appeared on both sides of the ship, evidently coming from the hangar. Within one to one and one-half minutes an explosion occurred on the hangar deck, which puffed smoke and flame through the hole in the deck and bulged the flight deck near and aft of the hole. This was

followed in a matter of seconds by a much more violent explosion, which rolled back a part of the flight deck bursting through aft of the original hole. The next heavy explosion tore out more of the flight deck and also blew the forward elevator out of its shaft. Shortly before 1100, the Captain decided that the ship could not be saved.

ST LO, with a very heavy list to port, sank at about 1125. The remaining screening ships of Taffy 3 were dispatched and rescued all of the survivors.

USS ST LO (CVE 63) received the Presidential Unit Citation for the heroism of her crew in the Battle off Samar and four Battle Stars for her service in World War II.