

well as by his keenness as an outdoor observer. Yet his old interests continued: he made a collection of French plum seeds and sent it home; as he had done with a fine old Florentine ship's figurehead he found in the wreckage at Bizerte; he stuffed and mounted three small barn owls that had been killed in a bombardment. Of them he wrote, with characteristic humor: "I carry them with me as I go about my business much as an old lady does her knitting."

In October, 1944, Birckhead had reached Northeastern France, which he described as "a country of pale magenta autumn crocuses, plum orchards, small vineyards of wine grapes, flat-roofed plaster houses: all run together, moderately wooded and rolling, with mountains, Catskill type, to be seen on clear days, to the east: wild boar and roebuck common in the woods."

At about this time he wrote:

"This starlight night I pass in slow review
Some twenty-five long months in retrospect
Of service overseas, and I reflect
How often orchards sheltered us from view!

Though while in England our battalion's crew
Them and their gear in order to protect
From the wet winter weather would elect
To lodge in some cantonment old or new,

Cactus and olives served in Africa,
Olive and almond groves in Sicily;
Two summer months have passed in France of war
Among the apple trees of Normandy
And now plum orchards serve our purpose far
And what may we expect in Germany?"

On November 13, 1944, in the town of Montigny in the Vosges Mountains, Hugh Birckhead was killed in action.



SHELDON ELLSWORTH PRENTICE

1932

Sheldon Prentice spent five years at St. Paul's. He became a very good hockey player, rowed an excellent race as stroke of the second Shattuck crew, occasionally contributed to the *Horae*, belonged to the Library Association and the Cadmean Literary Society, and he was a Supervisor in the Lower School. He was an active, intelligent boy with many interests and a great deal of charm.

On graduating from Harvard in 1936, Prentice went abroad for a year, then entered the firm of Dominick and Dominick in New York, and became a partner in 1939. He was a fine horseman and played a very good game of polo. In 1941, he entered the Navy.

Commissioned Lieutenant (j.g.) at Quonset, April 1, 1942, he was assigned as Intelligence Officer at the Pensacola Naval Air Field until May, 1943, when he went to the Pacific. He served through the Solomons-Bougainville campaign, returned to Quonset in March, 1944, was promoted Lieutenant Commander and assigned as Air Combat Intelligence Officer to Bombing Squadron 86. He went back to the Pacific in November, 1944.

On March 16, 1945, the new and untried Air Group 86, of which Prentice's squadron formed a part, relieved Air Group 81 aboard the carrier *Wasp*. The embarkation was carried out at night at an advance base and within an hour the new planes were in the air. Within two days they were engaged in combat with the enemy. The *Wasp*, as part of Task Force 58, was taking part in the operations that led to the invasion of Okinawa. Her target was some air bases and facilities on the island of Kyushu. On the morning of March 18, she arrived

in position off the main islands of Japan,—she came within 37 miles of Kyushu,—and although the ship was spasmodically under attack all that day, the planes were launched and the mission carried out. The *Wasp* was to have begun her return trip to the advance base on the 18th, to refuel before making a second attack on the same targets on Kyushu. During the 18th, however, a Navy search plane sighted some units of the Japanese fleet in the inland sea and the tactical command decided to attack and destroy these units.

“To do this,” wrote a fellow-officer of Prentice’s aboard the *Wasp*, “we were compelled to close in nearer to land . . . so at about 2 A.M. the morning of the 19th we started our approach. At about 3 A.M. Jap search planes picked us up and followed us, dropping numerous flares. We were all ordered to General Quarters stations and remained there until we were able to launch. The Japs started their attack about 6 A.M. making various runs on our task group. We decided to hold up launching air craft and fight them off with ships guns. It was quite a sight. At 6:30 A.M. we had repulsed their first attack and the Radar screen was clear, so we received orders to launch air craft. The pilots were ordered to their planes and in 15 minutes, at 6:45 A.M., all planes were airborne. Sheldon’s job was done for the time being, but he remained in the Ready Room with his squadron skipper and other pilots.

“At 7:10 A.M. with no warning at all,—our Radar failed to pick them up,—several enemy planes approached in a vertical dive from an over-cast sky, at approximately 5,000 feet. One made a near miss on the *Hornet* and the other dove on us, releasing its bomb and pulling out at about 500 feet. The bomb crashed through the flight deck just forward of Ready Room #4, which was Sheldon’s, proceeded through the hangar deck, Mess Hall and Galley, and detonated on the 4th deck and in the #4 fire room. After the explosion, the ship shook violently, causing a terrific percussion in restricted or confined spaces. . . . Five planes on the Hangar deck caught fire and exploded . . . quantities of black smoke spiralled up and out the side of the ship. . . . After putting out the fire and repairing our flight deck, we prepared to launch our second strike, which we did about fifty minutes after the bomb hit us. . . .”

The plane which attacked the *Wasp* was shot down by a cruiser as it tried to get away. Its one 500-lb. bomb inflicted heavy casualties: 286 officers and men wounded, 20 missing and 102, including Sheldon Prentice, killed. The percussion caused by the explosion threw him against the steel bulkhead of the ready room and knocked him

unconscious, and then the ready room filled with smoke and flame from the gasoline fires. A sailor, who risked his own life in an attempt to save the men who had been overcome, found him, but it was too late.

“Throughout its period on board,” wrote Captain O. A. Weller, Commanding Officer of the *Wasp*, “Bombing Squadron 86 performed feats of endurance, heroism and devotion to duty unparalleled in the annals of Naval aviation.”

In 1939, Sheldon Prentice had married Sheila Potter, and they had three children, Clare, Sheldon and Sheila.