Harold S. Fawcett

U.S. Navy, Photographer's Mate Chief Petty Officer
1917 - 1999

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Prior to World War II it was rare for civilians on the home front to see war's destruction in vivid detail. By the 1940s, however, advancements in photography and print technology made it possible for global audiences to experience tragedies such as the Spanish Civil War in such large-format publications as *Life* or *Time* magazines. The photograph's potential for both reconnaissance and propaganda profoundly changed the lives of men like Harold Suddrath "Jabo" Fawcett, who had a camera in his hands at Pearl Harbor December 7, 1941.

Harold was born January 13, 1917, the second child of Robert and Helen Fawcett in Pruntytown, West Virginia. His family moved to Parkview, a community in nearby Grafton, to help establish the Nazarene church. Throughout Harold's teenage years his family stayed afloat during the Great Depression as his father, Robert, managed to keep a job at the local Carr China pottery plant. And, the family owned their home. Harold graduated from Grafton High School in 1935 and enlisted in the U.S. Navy in 1936.

Fawcett's Navy service began ordinarily enough. His first assignment was the USS *Utah* (AG-16), originally a large battleship (BB-31) when it joined the fleet in 1911, but which was recommissioned in the lowly role of a target ship in 1931. Harold was already a budding photographer during his early Navy years, and some of his *Utah* photographs are preserved at the Naval History and Heritage Command archives.

Harold S. Fawcett later in his Navy career.
*Taylor County Historical Society*

Sailors pause their work on USS Utah (AG-16) in this photo taken by Fawcett between 1936 and 1938.
Naval History & Heritage Command

Fawcett's career met the cutting edge of aviation and photography during his early years of service. Harold had just begun a new assignment with a general-purpose aerial unit, VJ-1 (Utility Squadron One), before securing entrance to the Naval School of Photography at Pensacola, Florida, in 1939. Soon after, he refined his skills at the Aerial Camera School on Long Island, New York.

Now significantly more experienced in aerial image making, Harold rejoined VJ-1 in San Diego, California. In May 1940 the squadron moved to the U.S. Naval Base at Pearl Harbor on the island of Oahu, Hawaii, where it remained for the next year. "Our Squadron, the workhorse of the Fleet, delivered mail and towed targets, while the photo section photographed torpedo practice, dive-bombing, construction and repair, and did some public relations work," Harold recalled later. He found the work "exciting and challenging duty," but it was still relatively routine. All that was about to change.
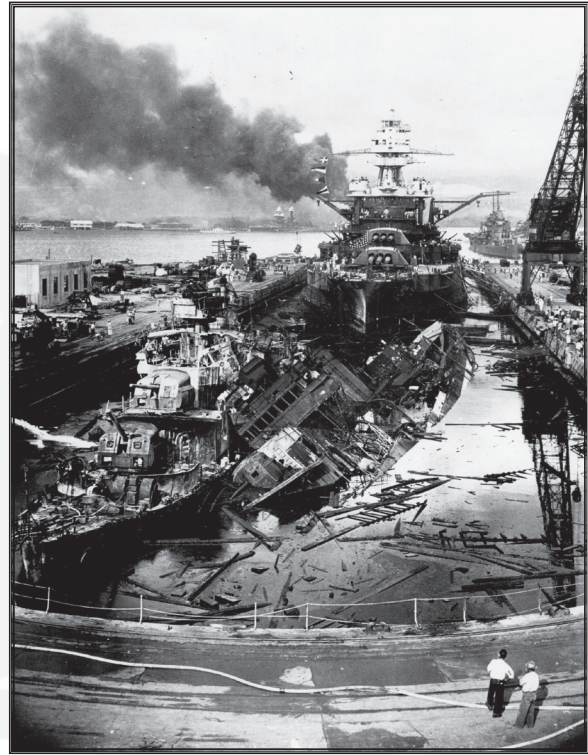
Fawcett's most famous photograph, showing the crippled destroyers USS *Cassin* (DD-372) and USS *Downes* (DD-375) and battleship USS *Pennsylvania* (BB-38). *US Navy photo, NARA 80-G-19943*

On the morning of December 7, 1941, Fawcett was in line for breakfast, daydreaming about surfing at Waikiki, when the infamous Japanese surprise attack struck the base. "I was stationed right in the bull's eye on Ford Island where the aviation units were located," he recalled. Ford Island was a priority target for wave after wave of Japanese planes that hoped to destroy American squadrons on the ground, leaving the anchored ships defenseless. Harold was caught in the chaos:

> **The first half hour was a mixed bag of surprise, shock, anger, confusion and a matter of survival, combined with disorganization, the screaming of commands, exploding bombs, the drone of airplanes, sounds of flying bullets, ships blowing up, the screams of wounded sailors and the cries for help.**

Fawcett grabbed his camera and ran outside to photograph the attack. A Japanese dive-bomber attacked a nearby row of parked seaplanes, dropping his ordnance a few hundred feet away and leaving a huge crater "28 feet wide and eight feet deep." Harold kept a fragment of the 955lb. bomb for the rest of his life.

Fawcett and a handful of other photographers dodged through the carnage of the shipyards and docks, often narrowly avoiding armed officers or Marines suspicious of anyone with a camera. His intent was to document the destruction for future analysis—but he couldn't bring himself to photograph suffering sailors.

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In Walter Lord's book, "Day of Infamy," there are two pictures I took. The first one was the [USS *Cassin*, DD-372] lying on its side, the U.S. flag still flying but hanging in the oily waters of the No. 1 dry dock. I can still see the scene in my mind as I look at our flag. I see the crew out on the dock— sailors in various parts of uniforms coated with oil, others with blood. A first-class petty officer was trying to hold muster to see who was missing, wounded or dead. I could not take a picture of my shipmates in distress.

Fawcett survived the devastating attack, but there would be no return to pre-war routine. "We were called upon to take hundreds of pictures in the months to follow," he said. "One, I remember, was to photograph details and ID an unexploded torpedo in the bowels of a battleship. It was like crawling in a cave." One of the many sad sights he witnessed was the shattered remains of his first ship, the *Utah*, which had served its role of "target ship" too well.

A more optimistic view of Pearl Harbor captured by Fawcett several months after the December 1941 attack. Three sailors watch as a repaired USS *Nevada* (BB-36) steams past. *US Navy photo, NARA 80-G-64768*

Though he had planned to leave the Navy when his six-year enlistment expired in 1942, Fawcett knew now that he couldn't leave in the nation's hour of need. Many of his Pearl Harbor photographs could not be published until well after the attack, since the military did not wish the full extent of the fleet's destruction to be known—either to the American public or the Japanese.

The 25-year-old photographer briefly returned to California in December 1942, just as the Navy allowed several of his photographs to be published on the first anniversary of the attack. "Many of the pictures I took I never did see again [,] nor did I remember for sure if I had shot them," Harold admitted. "In those days, the photographer did not get credit or a byline."

His respite stateside was short, as his skills were needed in Photographic Squadron One (VD-1). The unit was the Navy's first aerial reconnaissance unit, created to take photographs of enemy troops and positions from the air. Their expertise was needed now more than ever as Allied forces were waging costly battles on the South Pacific islands of Guadalcanal and New Guinea in a desperate fight to keep the Japanese from threatening Australia. From May to December 1943 Fawcett and VD-1 would be in the thick of this fight.

VD-1 flew specially modified PB4Y-1 Liberator bombers, which were in turn modifications of the B-24 Liberators flown by the U.S. Army Air Forces during World War II. The plane proved versatile in Navy hands for long range bombing and anti-submarine patrols—and aerial photography. As

used by VD-1, the Liberator usually had bomb racks and several machine gun turrets removed to mount special camera rigs for photographic reconnaissance. VD-1 planes were sent along on scouting missions, photographing enemy bases for analysis and planning future attacks. Fawcett and his crews often accompanied bombing raids by other Navy and Marine squadrons to capture battle damage on film. As one author stated, VD-1 and other recon squadrons turned aerial photography "into an invaluable tool for scouting future landing sites and enemy defenses. The allies would no longer have to rely on decades old maps or *National Geographic* for vital information."

VD-1 built a camp on the island of Espiritu Santo (near Guadalcanal) in tents and Quonset huts, complete with a photo developing lab. A staff of "interpreters" stitched together long strips of "aerial mapping" views and identified enemy fortifications and targets. The ingenuity of VD-1 in designing new camera rigs and modifying their planes earned them several wartime articles in *Naval Aviation News.* While Fawcett spoke little about his months in VD-1, other squadron mates recalled countless dangerous missions, including futile attempts to photograph heavily guarded Japanese bases at night by the light of flares and antiaircraft gun fire.

In a personal account written in the 1980s Fawcett recalled that his transport plane leaving New Guinea in December 1943 suffered mechanical problems and crash-landed in the ocean. Those aboard the aircraft waited six days for rescue. It was a final, harrowing conclusion to his service in the combat theater, but at least Harold made it home.

Once back on American soil Fawcett earned his pilot's wings in 1944, training at the
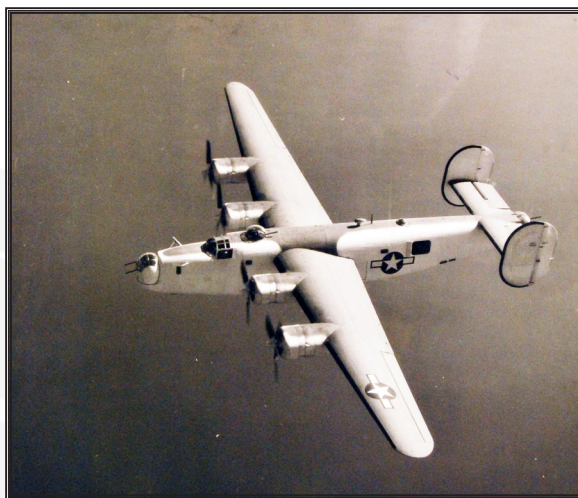
PB4Y-1 Liberator patrol bomber similar to those used by Fawcett's squadron VD-1. *US Navy photo*

A VD-1 photographer prepares an aerial mapping camera rig in the bomb bay of one of the squadron's PB4Y-1 Liberators. *US Navy photo*

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University of Texas, Austin, and Schreiner Institute in Kerrville, Texas. He later deployed as a pilot photographing classified missions, including two hydrogen bomb tests. He married his first wife, Rue Evelyn Ardinger, June 30, 1945. By the time World War II ended a few months later, Harold decided he may as well remain in the Navy for another decade.

Until 1955, he and Rue were stationed at a number of postings in California, including Naval Air Station (NAS) Miramar in San Diego, the aircraft carrier USS *Hancock* (CV-19), and Antisubmarine Squadron 20 at NAS Brown Field. Fawcett retired from the U.S. Navy August 30, 1955. Fawcett's many service awards include the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Fawcett eventually returned to West Virginia, living in the Meadland community outside of his hometown of Grafton. He worked for Sears and Roebuck until 1974. Harold and Rue divorced in 1970. He maintained a good relationship with his two daughters, Helen Hughes Bevis and Ann Margaret Harrington. In 1980 he married Norma Jean Webb Goodwin and welcomed a new son, Gregory Goodwin. Harold Fawcett died June 5, 1999, and received a burial with full military honors in the West Virginia National Cemetery in Pruntytown. His many photographs remain with us, a testament to his bravery and the nation he served.

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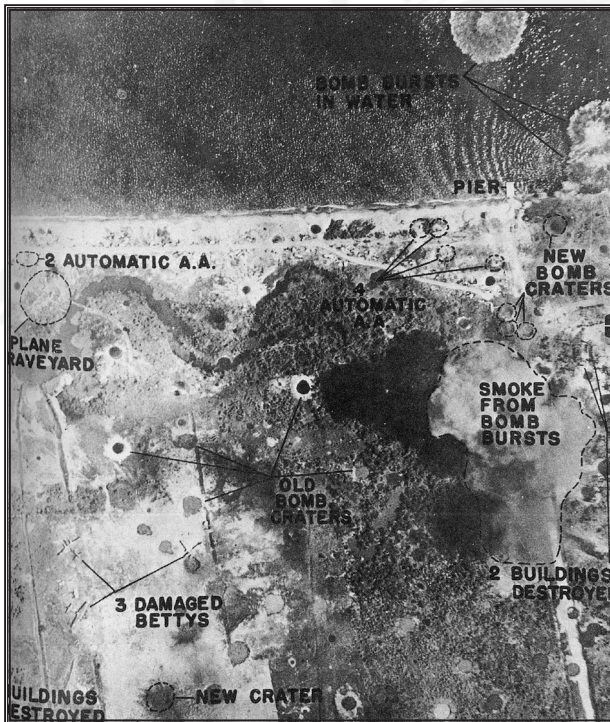
ABOVE: VD-1 photographers demonstrate an "oblique" camera rig with a 40-inch lens shooting through the side machine-gun port of a PB4Y-1. *US Navy photo*

LEFT: Interpretive annotations mark Japanese positions in a VD-1 reconnaissance photo taken sometime in 1943. Photo recon was as dangerous as any other wartime aviation—note the bomb splashes at upper right. *US Navy photo*

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Resting Place

West Virginia National Cemetery
42 Veterans Memorial Lane, Grafton, WV 26354
(304) 265-2044

Section 2
Site 693

Interment Date: June 9, 1999

About the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project

The West Virginia National Cemeteries Project is a program of the West Virginia Humanities Council, funded in part by the Veterans Legacy Program of the Department of Veteran Affairs and initiated in 2021. All biographies produced as part of this program are composed by West Virginia high school students, who conduct original research on veterans interred at the Grafton National Cemetery or the West Virginia National Cemetery, both of which are located in or near Grafton, Taylor County, West Virginia.

As home to one of the nation's earliest National Cemeteries, the community of Grafton has longstanding traditions of honoring America's veterans, including the longest continuously celebrated Memorial Day parade in the United States. The Grafton National Cemetery, located in the heart of the city and founded in 1867, is typically the endpoint of each year's parade. When the Grafton National Cemetery began to run short of space during the 1960s, the West Virginia National Cemetery was dedicated in 1987, just a few miles outside of Grafton in the community of Pruntytown. The same National Cemetery Administration staff cares for both facilities.

The West Virginia Humanities Council is proud to thank the following organizations for their participation in the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project: West Virginia Archives and History, the West Virginia University history department, Taylor County Historical and Genealogical Society, Taylor County Public Library, and Grafton High School.

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