

TEACHER RESOURCE

by Elaine G. Rosa

for the Indiana Historical Society Press publication

Fighter Pilot *The World War II Career of Alex Vraciu*

by Ray E. Boomhower



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Overview/Description

Written by award-winning author Ray E. Boomhower, senior editor with the Indiana Historical Society Press, *Fighter Pilot: The World War II Career of Alex Vraciu* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 2010) examines the daring exploits of a young Hoosier flier from his youth in East Chicago, Indiana, to his college days at DePauw University and his years as an accomplished World War II fighter pilot. This is the sixth volume in the IHS Press's youth biography series.

The activities in these lessons are based on Vraciu's World War II experiences in the Pacific theater. The activities may be used in conjunction with reading the book and to supplement other classroom studies related to the war. The lessons feature individual and group reading and writing assignments, self-directed student research, interpretation of historical materials, and project-based learning opportunities. Internet access is required to complete some of these activities.

Grade Level

High School

Academic Standards for the Social Studies

- Indiana Standards:
 - High School, U.S. History, Standard 5, The United States and World War II: 1939 to 1945 (USH 5.3 and USH 5.6), Standard 6, Postwar United States: 1945 to 1960 (USH 6.1 and USH 6.4), and Standard 9, Historical Thinking (USH 9.1, USH 9.2, USH 9.3, USH 9.4, USH 9.5, and USH 9.6)
 - High School, World Geography, Standard 2, Places and Regions
 - High School, World History and Civilization, Standard 8, An Era of Global Conflicts, Challenges, Controversies and Changes: 1900 to the Present (WH 8.4 and WH 8.7)
- National Standards (National Council for the Social Studies): II Time, Continuity, and Change; III People, Places, and Environments;

IV Individual Development and Identity;
V Individuals, Groups, and Institutions;
VI Power, Authority, and Governance;
IX Global Connections

Social Studies/Historical Concepts

World War II, Pacific theater of operations, courage, leadership, and U.S. naval and aircraft technology

Learning/Instructional Objective

Depending on the activities selected, students will:

- Read and discuss key actions and events during World War II.
- Contribute to a list of World War II-era terms and use them to complete a glossary to share with the class.
- Investigate maps to locate places in the United States and the Pacific Ocean based on Vraciu's military service.
- Create a time line of key World War II events.
- Conduct research and personal interviews to identify the training required to become a fighter pilot in today's U.S. military.
- Conduct Internet research to complete a newscast related to World War II in the Pacific.
- Create compelling stories based on oral histories and memories of World War II.

Time Required

Multiple class periods. Refer to the specific activities for details.

Materials Required

- For all activities:
 - Student copies of *Fighter Pilot: The World War II Career of Alex Vraciu* by Ray E. Boomhower
- Refer to a specific activity for a list of required materials.

Background/Historical Context

On the afternoon of December 7, 1941, those in the United States that were listening to their radios were stunned to hear of an attack by the Japanese Empire on the American naval base at Pearl Harbor in the Hawaiian Islands. At 2:26 p.m., Len Sterling, staff announcer for WOR Radio in New York, interrupted a broadcast of a professional football game between the Brooklyn Dodgers and New York Giants at the Polo Grounds to read the following bulletin from the United Press news agency: “The Japanese have attacked Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, by air, President [Franklin] Roosevelt has just announced.”

Soon, other radio stations broadcast the momentous news to a stunned and disbelieving nation. Some even thought that broadcasters were trying to pull a hoax similar to the one Orson Welles had done with his famous October 30, 1938, War of the Worlds broadcast on Halloween that tricked some Americans into thinking the nation was being invaded by Martians. Others, however, were determined to avenge the defeat and began lining up at recruiting centers for the army, navy, and marines.

In December 1941 twenty-three-year-old Alex Vraciu (rhymes with cashew), born in the Indiana Harbor section of East Chicago, Indiana, the second child and only son of a longtime police officer in that community, was stationed at the U.S. Naval Air Station in Glenview, Illinois, where he received training to become a fully qualified navy pilot. Vraciu had recently graduated from DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana, where he was respected for his athletic ability, but he was best known for having a wicked sense of humor and for playing an elaborate prank with his fraternity brothers on a psychology professor that received nationwide attention.

During a summer break from his college studies between his junior and senior year at DePauw, Vraciu had earned a private pilot's license through the federal government's Civilian Pilot Training Program. Relaxing at the home of his uncle in the Chicago suburbs that Sunday in December, Vraciu remembered being as shocked as millions of other

Americans were when they heard the radio broadcast about the disaster at Pearl Harbor. “I had a big mad on . . . after Pearl Harbor,” recalled Vraciu, whose anger also grew as he later saw his friends fall to Japanese gunfire. He vowed to gain a measure of revenge on the enemy, and his uncle promised to pay him \$100 for each Japanese aircraft he destroyed.

Vraciu earned his navy wings in August 1942 and eventually became one of the more than three hundred navy pilots flying from U.S. carriers in the Pacific theater to earn the title of an ace (downing five confirmed enemy aircraft in aerial combat). He did so while flying the famous F6F Hellcat fighter plane built by the Grumman Aircraft Company of Bethpage, New York. “The Hellcat gave us not only the speed, range, and climb to compete successfully against the Zero,” Vraciu noted, “but it could dictate the rules of combat.” One Hellcat pilot spoke for many when he exclaimed: “I love this airplane so much that if it could cook I'd marry it.”

While stationed in Hawaii early on during his service, Vraciu became the wingman of legendary pilot Lieutenant Commander Edward “Butch” O'Hare, who had been awarded his country's highest honor, the Congressional Medal of Honor, for shooting down five Japanese bombers. “We were training with a legend. I learned my trade from one of the best!” Vraciu said of O'Hare, for whom O'Hare International Airport in Chicago is named. “He taught you lessons you didn't realize until you are fighting in combat yourself that may have saved your life.”

Vraciu learned well with O'Hare's Fighting Squadron 6. Finally making it into combat at the end of August 1943 as part of a strafing raid on a Japanese base on Marcus Island, Vraciu earned his first aerial victory by shooting down a Zero in October during a mission against Wake Island. Vraciu's feud with his opponents in the air became personal when he learned that his mentor, O'Hare, had been killed in combat on November 26, 1943, apparently by a Japanese Betty bomber during a confused night battle. Vraciu vowed to shoot down ten of the same aircraft to avenge O'Hare's death.

The Hoosier pilot began to make good on his promise and achieved ace status on January 29, 1944, when he downed three Betty bombers near Kwajalein. “Between the vow on Butch and Pearl Harbor, I think that probably was the biggest single motivator—driving force—in my life as to why I preferred to be out there rather than back home,” Vraciu later explained. “I’d rather be in combat. That’s really what it did to me. That’s the honest truth.”

Possessed with keen eyesight, quick reflexes, excellent shooting instincts, and a knack for finding his opponent’s weak spot, Vraciu became skilled in the deadly game of combat with the enemy in the skies over the Pacific Ocean. “That was our job,” he noted. “That is what we were trained to do. You can’t be squeamish about the thing or you don’t belong in a cockpit of that kind of an airplane [a fighter]. Nobody told you it was going to be an easy job.”

For a period of four months in 1944, Vraciu stood as the leading ace in the U.S. Navy. He shot down nineteen enemy airplanes in the air, destroyed an additional twenty-one on the ground, and sank a large Japanese merchant ship with a well-placed bomb hit. He also earned a distinction as “Grumman’s best customer,” as he twice had to ditch his Hellcat in the ocean due to battle damage or mechanical failure, and two of the carriers he served on were torpedoed (but not sank) by the Japanese.

Perhaps Vraciu’s most notable achievement in the war came on the morning of June 19, 1944, while part of a carrier task force protecting American forces landing on Saipan in the Mariana Islands. Facing an attack from a large Japanese fleet, Vraciu and other American pilots rushed to their planes to protect the American ships in a lopsided air battle that became known as the Great Marianas Turkey Shoot.

Calling the mission a “once-in-a-lifetime fighter pilot’s dream” when he spotted a large mass of enemy planes bearing down on the U.S. fleet, Vraciu, launched from the USS *Lexington*, pounced

on the Japanese and shot down six dive-bombers in just eight minutes. “I looked ahead,” Vraciu told a *Chicago Tribune* reporter. “There was nothing but Hellcats in the sky. I looked back. Up above were curving vapor trails. And down on the sea, in a pattern 35 miles long, was a series of flaming dots where oil slicks were burning.”

The Hoosier pilot accomplished this stunning feat despite a number of mechanical difficulties. Engine trouble caused Vraciu’s windshield to be smeared with oil, which meant he had to fly his Hellcat close to the enemy so he could see what he was aiming at. Later he also learned that he flew his mission with his plane’s wings not securely locked into place (aircraft serving on carriers usually had folding wings in order to be stored in the tight confines of the ship). Returning to the *Lexington*, Vraciu found that he had used just 360 rounds of ammunition from his Hellcat’s six .50-calibre machine guns—an impressive display of shooting.

Vraciu’s luck, however, finally ran out on December 14, 1944, during a strafing run against a Japanese airfield before the American invasion to retake the Philippines. Heavy antiaircraft fire hit his Hellcat, puncturing his oil tank. “I knew I had it,” he remembered. “Oil was gushing out and going all over my canopy, and my oil pressure was rapidly dropping. There was no way I’d be able to get back to my carrier.”

After safely bailing out of his stricken plane, Vraciu parachuted to the ground close to enemy-held territory near Mount Pinatubo, an active volcano. Luckily he was almost immediately rushed to safety by a small group of U.S. Army of the Far East guerrillas, who had been battling the Japanese in the area for the past few years. The small force was under the command of an American who had escaped from Japanese capture after the surrender of U.S. troops in 1942.

The navy flyer spent the next five weeks with the guerrillas, receiving the honorary rank of brevet major while with them. “For the final week of this episode,” Vraciu recalled, “I found myself in

command of 180 men, dodging Japanese to meet General [Douglas] MacArthur's advancing Americans." He finally marched into an American camp carrying with him a captured Japanese pistol and sword. Unfortunately, because of his time behind enemy lines, Vraciu was prevented by navy officials from participating in the last missions against the Japanese home islands. When the war finally ended with Japan's surrender on August 14, 1945, Vraciu, the navy's fourth-ranking ace, was in the United States flying as a test pilot at the Naval Test Center in Patuxent River, Maryland.

After the war, Vraciu remained in the navy, working in the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. During the 1950s he reached the "ultimate desire of all fighter pilots" when he took command of his own squadron, becoming the leader of Fighter Squadron 51, flying North American FJ-3 Fury jet fighters. Retiring from the navy in 1964 with the rank of commander, Vraciu began a career in banking for Wells Fargo in California. Today, he lives in Danville, California, in the home where he and his late wife raised five children (three daughters and two sons).

Teacher's Instructional Plan

Introduction

Teachers may select one or more of the activities described on the following pages. Activities one, two, and three may be completed while students are reading *Fighter Pilot*. Activities four through seven may be assigned while students read the book and completed afterward.

Introduce the lessons with a general discussion of key events during World War II and emphasis on the Pacific theater. Discuss Vraciu's life in context of the times. Guided reading and discussion questions are provided in activity one.

ACTIVITY 1

Guided Reading and Discussion Questions

Using the study guide created for *Fighter Pilot*, students will read and discuss key actions and events in Vraciu's life.

Time Required

Multiple class periods; may require work outside of class to complete the reading assignments

Materials Required

- *Fighter Pilot: The World War II Career of Alex Vraciu* by Ray E. Boomhower
- Copies of the *Fighter Pilot* Study Guide, one for each student or group of students if this is a small-group activity. The Study Guide is provided on pages fourteen through twenty of this lesson.
- Pencil or pen

Procedure

This activity is intended to assist students as they read *Fighter Pilot* and prepare for class discussions of the book. The study guide serves two purposes—as a classroom discussion guide that emphasizes key events in the book and as a guide for student assessment after the reading is completed. This activity may be completed individually or as a small group.

- Distribute a copy of *Fighter Pilot* to each student.
 - Individual Reading Activity:
Ask students to respond to the questions in the study guide. Students will use the completed handouts to participate in class discussions.
 - Group Reading Activity:
Have students work in small reading groups during class to read the book and respond to the questions posed in the study guide. Students will use their responses to the questions during class discussion.
- Conduct class discussions of the book.
See pages twenty through twenty-five of this lesson for suggested responses to the study guide questions.

ACTIVITY 2

World War II Glossary of Terms

As the class reads *Fighter Pilot*, students will contribute to a growing list of World War II-era terms and then create a glossary for the class.

Time Required

Multiple class periods; may require work outside of class to complete the reading assignment

Materials Required

- *Fighter Pilot: The World War II Career of Alex Vraciu* by Ray E. Boomhower
- Notepaper
- Pencil or pen
- Whiteboard or large notepad
- Sticky notes
- Optional: Access to Google Docs or similar software

Procedure

- Step One—To be completed in conjunction with the reading assignments:
 - Have each student identify unfamiliar terms they encounter while reading the book.
 - Ask each student to write down unfamiliar terms. Include the chapter and page numbers where they appear in the book and the sentences that use the words.
- Step Two—To be completed prior to beginning a book discussion:
 - Ask students to contribute words from their reading notes to create a class list.
 - Have students write a term on a sticky note and place it on the classroom whiteboard or a large notepad.
 - The instructor will remove duplicates and organize the words into small groups before assigning them to students to define the terms for the class.
- Step Three—Have student teams post their terms and associated definitions on a whiteboard or large notepad.

- As an alternate suggestion: Use Google Docs or similar software that accommodates multiple users and have each team add their terms and associated meanings online to create a shared glossary of terms.
- Make this list available to all students.

ACTIVITY 3

Where in the World is Alex Vraciu?

Students will investigate historical and contemporary maps to identify geographic locations in the United States and the Pacific Ocean that are related to key events in World War II and Vraciu's life.

Time Required

One class period following completion of the reading assignments.

Materials Required

- *Fighter Pilot: The World War II Career of Alex Vraciu* by Ray E. Boomhower
- Notepaper
- Pencil or pen
- Student copies of a world atlas and a U.S. atlas, one for each group.
 - As an alternate suggestion: Use student computers with Internet access to Google Earth or similar software.
 - Make sure the world atlas includes these Pacific Ocean locations: Hawaii, Marcus Island, Wake Island, Marianas Islands, New Guinea, New Britain, Gilbert Islands, Marshall Islands, Midway Island, the Philippines, and Guadalcanal.
- Historical map from the Indiana Historical Society's Digital Image Collections
 - "AAF Cloth Map. Southwest Pacific Area" (Item ID: R2110)

- On this map of the southwest Pacific, one side shows New Guinea, the south Pacific Ocean, and the Coral Sea, while the reverse side shows New Britain, New Ireland, New Hanover, part of New Guinea, and the Admiralty Islands. Two insets show other smaller island groups.
- To view the map online and zoom in on details, go to the IHS Digital Image Collections, Military History Section, World War II materials accessed on November 10, 2010, at <http://images.indianahistory.org/cdm4/browse.php?CISOROOT=/ww2> and search for “AAF Cloth Map. Southwest Pacific Area.”
- Historical map from the University of Texas at Austin, Perry-Castañeda Library’s Map Collection, “Engineers of the Southwest Pacific, 1941–1945, Vol. 1”
 - Find the “Southwest Pacific Theater of Operations, 26 July 1942” map, accessed November 10, 2010, at http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/engineers_v1_1947/sw_pacific_theater_1942.jpg.

Procedure

- Step One—To be completed with the reading assignments:
 - As students read *Fighter Pilot*, have each student make a list of the geographic locations identified in the book.
 - Record the name of each location along with the chapter and page number where it appears in the book.
 - As a class, make a master list of places that were significant in Vraciu’s life.
- Step Two—To be completed in small groups following the reading assignments:
 - Divide the students into small groups.

- Distribute copies of a U.S. atlas, world atlas, and historical maps to each group.
 - As an alternate suggestion: Instead of using bound atlases, have students use the Internet and Google Earth.
- In small groups, have students use the maps and atlases or Google Earth to find the latitude/longitude coordinates for each location on the master list.
- Step Three: At the conclusion of the group activity, meet as a class to discuss these locations and map coordinates.

ACTIVITY 4

World War II Time Line

In this activity students will create a time line of events during World War II and compare it to the events in Vraciu’s life.

Time Required

One or two class periods following completion of the reading assignments. Work outside of class may be needed to complete the assignment.

Materials Required

- Student copies of *Fighter Pilot: The World War II Career of Alex Vraciu* by Ray E. Boomhower
- Student textbooks, other print resources, and Internet resources related to World War II.
 - Refer to pages twelve through fourteen of this lesson for a list of suggested resources.

Procedure

- Step One—To be completed with the reading assignments:
 - As students read *Fighter Pilot*, have each student make a list of key dates and events that took place in Vraciu’s life from his birth in 1918 to the end of World War II in 1945.

- Step Two—To be completed in small groups following the reading assignments:
 - During class, divide the students into small groups.
 - Have students compare their individual lists and select their top-ten key dates and related events.
 - As a group, use print and Internet resources to identify an additional fifteen to twenty key dates and events that took place during World War II. Refer to pages twelve and thirteen of this lesson for a list of suggested resources.
 - Make sure at least half of these events took place in the Pacific theater.
- Step Three—After the small groups have completed their research, meet as a class to discuss the major events in Vraciu’s life and the significant events of World War II.
 - Discussion questions should consider the significance of these events and the impact they may have had on the United States and its allies as well as the Axis powers (Germany, Japan, and Italy).

ACTIVITY 5

Do You Want to Be a Fighter Pilot?

In this activity students will conduct research and personal interviews to identify the training required to become a fighter pilot in the U.S. military. Students will use their research to compare and contrast similarities and differences in today’s requirements to the training that fighter pilots such as Vraciu received during World War II.

Time Required

One or two class periods following completion of the reading assignments. Work outside of class may be needed to complete the reading assignments.

Materials Required

- Student copies of *Fighter Pilot: The World War II Career of Alex Vraciu* by Ray E. Boomhower

- Pencil or pen
- Paper
- Whiteboard
- *Optional:*
 - Digital video and audio equipment
 - Computer access to e-mail or Voice over Internet Protocol such as Skype™
 - Student access to Google Docs or similar software.

Procedure

- Preactivity Preparation: The instructor should contact a local branch of a U.S. military recruitment center, ROTC, or National Guard unit to identify someone who would be willing to be interviewed by students in person, via e-mail, teleconference, or Voice over Internet Protocol such as Skype™.
 - Be sure to explain that this interview is a classroom project and how it will be used.
 - Let the person know if this interview will be recorded, transcribed, or otherwise made available for later use by students or members of the public.
 - If the interview will be recorded, be sure the individual has given written permission to do so.
 - Discuss your plans with school administrators to determine if any additional requirements must be met before setting a date for the interview. Refer to the oral history resources resources on page thirteen of this lesson for tips on conducting an interview.
- Step One—To be completed with the reading assignments:
 - Ask students to read pages thirty-nine through forty-three of *Fighter Pilot* and have students create an outline describing the training that Vraciu received to become a fighter pilot.

- Have each student make a list of five questions they might want to ask a fighter pilot about the training and qualifications to become a pilot.
- Record the outline and the questions to be asked on sheets of paper or add these to Google Docs or other similar software and share them with the class.
- Step Two—To be completed following the reading assignment:
 - As a class, discuss the key elements of Vraciu’s training during World War II.
- Step Three—To be completed following the reading assignment:
 - Explain that you have identified someone in the military community who may be able to answer their questions about fighter pilot training and that you have arranged for the students to interview this person.
 - To identify the key questions to be asked, divide the class into smaller groups and have them prepare a list of three to five interview questions that they might want to ask someone about becoming a fighter pilot in today’s U.S. military.
 - Have groups compare their lists of interview questions and select the key questions they’d like to ask during the interview.
 - Select a spokesperson from each group to ask the questions during the interview.
- Step Four—On the appointed date and time, set up the audio visual equipment, if the interview will be recorded, and have students conduct the interview.
- Step Five—At the conclusion of the interview, conduct a class discussion to consider the responses obtained during the interview. Compare and contrast the training required of today’s fighter pilots with those who flew during World War II.

ACTIVITY 6

Create a World War II Newscast

In this activity, students will conduct Internet research to uncover details about combat in the Pacific theater during World War II and prepare a newscast presentation for the class.

Time Required

Multiple class periods. Work outside of class may be needed to complete the project prior to the in-class presentations.

Materials Required

Student computers with Internet access and presentation or digital video software to create the newscast.

Procedure

- Step One—Tell students that their assignment is to select a major World War II battle in the Pacific and create a three- to five-minute newscast to present to the class. The project may be completed individually or in small groups.
- Step Two—Have students complete their research and prepare their newscast. The instructor may want to show examples of contemporary and World War II-era newscasts followed by a discussion of the newscast format and content.
- Step Three—After students have completed their projects, conduct a discussion of their experiences and have them make their presentations to the class.

ACTIVITY 7

Telling a Memorable Story

Oral histories pose unique challenges for biographers as well as some interesting details. Missing or incomplete information, individual bias, and a time lapse between the historical events and the time they were recorded require a biographer to do additional research to verify the information and flesh out missing or incomplete details.

In this classroom activity, students will read an essay provided by *Fighter Pilot* author Ray E. Boomhower and use the suggestions he provides to create a compelling story based on World War II-era oral histories.

Time Required

Two class periods. Additional time outside of class may be needed to complete the writing assignment.

Materials Required

- Student copies of “Telling a Hero’s Tale” by Ray E. Boomhower, found on page twenty-six of this lesson.
- Sample oral histories
 - Indiana Historical Society
 - Select excerpts of oral history interviews with World War II veterans from the “IN History: Indiana in World War II” section of the IHS Web site, available in January 2011 at <http://www.indianahistory.org/teachers-students/teachers/teacher-resources/in-history>.
 - Veterans History Project from the Library of Congress, American Folklife Center
 - Search for oral history interviews with World War II veterans, accessed November 30, 2010, at <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/html/search/search.html/>. If possible select interviews that include transcripts and other digital resources.
 - Example: In an interview with Edward W. Settles of Schelburne, Indiana, made on September 8, 2002, he describes his U.S. Navy service in the Pacific from 1940 to 1946. A digital recording and transcript of the interview, accessed November 30, 2010, are available at <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.02917/>.

- Pencil or pen
- Paper

Procedure

- Distribute copies of “Telling a Hero’s Tale” by Boomhower to each student.
- Select several World War II-era oral histories and provide student access to them, either on-line or by providing copies of the transcripts.
- Ask students to write a two-page, nonfiction essay based on these oral histories.
- After the assignment has been completed, ask students to describe the challenges they had in completing the writing assignment. How did the personal stories helped make their essay a memorable one?

Enrichment Activities

Exploring World War II Biographies

Alex Vraciu’s biography is one of many that depict life during World War II. Have students read one additional biography and compare and contrast Vraciu’s experiences to those described in the other biography. Ask the students to consider: What are the similarities and differences in these two biographies? What was the impact of each person’s contributions to the war effort? How did Americans view their efforts after the war? How did their efforts affect the world today?

Digital Time Lines

For activity four, World War II Time Line, use a time line generator from the Internet to create a digital time line for the class activity. Refer to page thirteen of this lesson for a list of suggested Web sites.

Veterans’ Oral History Interviews

Have students prepare and conduct an interview with someone who was living during World War II (1939–1945). Contact a local veterans organization, retirement home, or senior community center to identify individuals who would be willing to be interviewed by students about their life during the war.

Adapt the procedures described in activity five. Following the interview, ask students to identify similarities and differences to today's experiences and draw conclusions about American life during World War II.

Assessment

Prelesson Assessment

Have students complete an assessment to determine their prior knowledge of key World War II events with an emphasis on the war in the Pacific.

Midpoint Progress Assessment

Have students complete an assessment to gauge their learning. Compare these results with the prelesson assessment.

Depending on the activities selected, meet with students individually or in small groups to assess their progress in completing these assignments.

Final Assessment and Portfolio Reviews

Repeat the prelesson assessment, but vary the terms so that it is not identical to the original. The study guide responses on pages twenty-one through twenty-five of this lesson may be used to develop the assessment.

Depending on the activities selected, students will have a variety of materials to include in an individual and group portfolio for final assessment.

Resources

Suggested Reading List

- Ambrose, Hugh. *The Pacific*. New York: New American Library, 2010.
- Boomhower, Ray E. *Fighter Pilot: The World War II Career of Alex Vraciu*. Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 2010.
- Burgin, R. V. *Islands of the Damned: A Marine at War in the Pacific*. New York: NAL Caliber, 2010.
- Hillenbrand, Laura. *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption*. New York: Random House, 2010.

Leckie, Robert. *Helmet for my Pillow: From Parris Island to the Pacific*. 1957. Reprint, New York: Bantam, 2010.

Marston, Daniel, ed. *The Pacific War: From Pearl Harbor to Hiroshima*. Oxford: Osprey, 2010.

Petty, Bruce M. *At War in the Pacific: Personal Accounts of World War II Navy and Marine Corps Officers*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2006.

Sanders, Thomas. *The Last Good War: The Faces and Voices of World War II*. New York: Welcome Books, 2010.

Sledge, E. B. *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa*. New York: Presidio Press, 2007.

Spector, Ronald H. *Eagle against the Sun: The American War with Japan*. New York: Free Press, 1985.

Internet Resources

General

- Google. "Google Docs" orientation tour. Accessed November 30, 2010. <http://www.google.com/google-d-s/tour1.html/>.
- Google. "Google Earth" user guide. Accessed November 30, 2010. http://earth.google.com/support/bin/static.py?page=guide_toc.cs/.

Time Line Generators

- Famento. "xTimeline." Accessed November 30, 2010. <http://www.xtimeline.com/index.aspx/>.
- Underlying. "Dipity." Accessed November 30, 2010. <http://www.dipity.com/>.

Oral History Interview Resources

- Indiana University, Bloomington. "Welcome to the Center for the Study of History and Memory." Accessed November 30, 2010. <http://www.indiana.edu/~cshm/>.
- Oral History Association. "Resources." Accessed November 30, 2010. <http://www.oralhistory.org/resources/>.

Library of Congress, American Folklife Center, Veterans History Project. "How to Participate: Especially for Educators and Students." Accessed November 30, 2010. <http://www.loc.gov/vets/youth-resources.html/>.

World War II Resources

Acepilots.com. "U.S. Navy Fighter Pilot Aces of World War Two." Accessed November 30, 2010. http://www.acepilots.com/usn_aces.html/.

Department of the Navy, Naval Historical Center. "A Collection of Articles Published in the *Naval Aviation News* magazine to Commemorate the 50th Anniversary of World War II." Accessed November 30, 2010. <http://www.history.navy.mil/branches/article-2.html/>.

Federal Resources for Educational Excellence. "U.S. History Topics: Wars: World War II." Accessed November 30, 2010. http://free.ed.gov/subjects.cfm?subject_id=145&res_feature_request=1/.

HBO. "The Pacific education guide." Accessed November 30, 2010. <http://www.hbo.com/the-pacific/index.html#/the-pacific/inside/extras/extras/education-guide.html/>.

Library of Congress. "A Guide to World War II Materials." Accessed November 30, 2010. <http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/WW2/WW2bib.html/>.

National Archives, ARC Gallery. "World War II." Accessed November 30, 2010. <http://www.archives.gov/research/arc/topics/ww2/>.

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FIGHTER PILOT STUDY GUIDE

Chapter 1—“Air Raid! No Drill!”

- 1) After Pearl Harbor, how did the U.S. military go on the attack in the Pacific?
- 2) Who was Alex Vraicu’s mentor and why was this man considered a navy legend?
- 3) When did Vraicu achieve “ace” status? How did he earn it?
- 4) What were Vraicu’s strengths as a pilot? What skills did he possess?
- 5) How did Vraicu earn distinction as the U.S. Navy’s leading ace in 1944?
- 6) What happened during the “Great Marianas Turkey Shoot” air battle on June 19, 1944?
- 7) What happened to Vraicu on December 14, 1944?
- 8) What happened to Vraicu after World War II ended?

Think About It:

You’ve been asked to consider awarding Vraicu the Navy Cross, the second highest honor for extraordinary courage against the enemy. Write a nomination that explains why you think Vraicu is worthy of this award.

FIGHTER PILOT STUDY GUIDE

Chapter 2—The Region

- 1) Alex Vraciu's father and mother immigrated to the United States from this eastern European country:

- 2) Where did his parents settle in the United States? What did they do there?

- 3) What were Vraciu's high school activities and awards?

- 4) How did Vraciu learn to fly a plane?

- 5) What was Vraciu's inspiration to become a pilot?

Think About It:

Vraciu was known around college for a prank he played on a professor when he jumped from a second-story window. His friends caught him safely outside, below the window where he had jumped. What does this incident suggest about Vraciu's personality and his future in the military?

FIGHTER PILOT STUDY GUIDE

Chapter 3—Off The Ground

- 1) When did Alex Vraciu join the navy and where did he first report for duty?

- 2) What event that took place on November 14, 1910, that changed the role of navy ships and airplanes in combat?

- 3) What major event reinforced the growing importance of World War II aircraft carriers in the Pacific theater?

- 4) What was Vraciu's goal when he joined the navy?

- 5) What did pilots have to do to qualify and become navy pilots?

- 6) What was a "routine" day for O'Hare's squadron?

- 7) What does a wingman do?

- 8) What flying "lessons" did O'Hare teach Vraciu?

Think About It:

You've been assigned to review the strengths and capabilities of the U.S. Navy's new F6F Hellcat airplane. Why do you think this Grumman plane will be a favorite among the U.S. Navy pilots?

FIGHTER PILOT STUDY GUIDE

Chapter 4—The Fast Carriers

- 1) Who was the most important person on the ship when the fighter planes were trying to land safely. What did he do?

- 2) Explain what happened to Alex Vraciu during his first air-to-air combat mission.

- 3) How were the results of combat missions reported to the carrier's crew? Why?

- 4) Tarawa in the Gilbert Islands was the site of a major battle in the Pacific. What was unusual about Vraciu's first flight mission on Tarawa on November 18, 1943? What were the U.S. Marine casualties in the land battle there?

- 5) What happened to Vraciu's ship, the USS *Independence*, during the battle at Tarawa?

- 6) What happened to Vraciu's mentor O'Hare on November 26? How was he honored?

- 7) Why was the battle at Roi significant for Vraciu?

- 8) What was the significance of Operation Hailstorm and Truk Atoll?

Think About It:

You're a navy pilot aboard the USS *Independence* and have a few minutes to write your parents a brief letter. Describe what the guys wear in a combat mission, eat before their departure on a mission, and do when they're not flying.

FIGHTER PILOT STUDY GUIDE

Chapter 5—The Turkey Shoot

- 1) What reward did destroyer crews get for returning airmen safely to their carriers?

- 2) How did Alex Vraciu earn the reputation as “Grumman’s Best Customer”?

- 3) How many planes did Vraciu down in the “Great Marianas Turkey Shoot”?

- 4) What losses did the Japanese suffer during the “Great Marianas Turkey Shoot”?

- 5) What unusual command did Admiral Marc Mitscher order to help the pilots land at night after a particularly risky mission on June 20, 1944? Why?

- 6) Vraciu had trouble landing on his ship, the USS *Lexington*, in the “Mission Beyond Darkness,” so what did he do?

- 7) How many American planes were lost in the “Mission Beyond Darkness” and how many pilots and crewmen were lost?

- 8) After the Battle of the Philippine Sea, the men of Fighting Squadron 16 were taken out of combat. What did they do next?

Think About It:

Your squadron just returned to the ship after completing a mission in the Marianas, a prelude to a major engagement in the Pacific—the Battle of the Philippine Sea. You’re heading to the ready room to debrief the ship’s commanding officer. Explain what you will tell him about Japan’s strengths and weaknesses, and what you encountered during your mission.

FIGHTER PILOT STUDY GUIDE

Chapter 6—The Reluctant Hero

- 1) On August 6, 1944, what did city officials do at Indiana Harbor and East Chicago when Alex Vraciu came home for a visit?

- 2) Why was Vraciu hailed as a hero at this time?

- 3) What dessert did Alex request while he was home on leave in 1944?

- 4) Describe what happened to Vraciu at Block Stadium during his August 1944 homecoming? What happened to Vraciu about two-and-a-half weeks later?

- 5) After Vraciu returned to active duty in the Pacific, what happened to him as he flew a mission over Luzon in the northern Philippines on December 14, 1944?

- 6) What did the Filipinos do to rescue Vraciu?

- 7) Where did Vraciu stay in the Philippines?

- 8) Where was Vraciu stationed during the last few months of World War II? What did he do?

Think About It:

You are a war correspondent on the USS *Wasatch* working for an American news service. You had time for a quick interview with Vraciu when he returned to the ship after being rescued in Luzon. Vraciu had spent several weeks hiding out in Luzon with U.S. forces and guerrilla fighters on the island. What three questions would you ask?

FIGHTER PILOT STUDY GUIDE

Chapter 7—Peace

- 1) What activity ended the war with Japan?

- 2) What kind of plane dropped the atomic bomb over Hiroshima? What was the plane's nickname?

- 3) When did Emperor Hirohito announce Japan's surrender over the radio?

- 4) When did the formal surrender take place? Where?

- 5) What did Alex Vraciu do after the war ended?

- 6) When did Vraciu retire from military service? What did he do after retirement?

Think About It:

You've been asked by a member of a volunteer group to write a letter to an Indiana congressman concerning the nomination of Vraciu for a Congressional Medal of Honor, the country's highest military honor, for his service to the United States during World War II. What would be your response to the request? What are your reasons for taking this position?

FIGHTER PILOT STUDY GUIDE

SUGGESTED RESPONSES

Chapter 1—“Air Raid! No Drill!”

- 1) After Pearl Harbor, how did the U.S. military go on the attack in the Pacific? (p. 6) *U.S. carriers made air attacks on Japanese bases. The U.S. Marines and U.S. Army stormed the Pacific Islands by launching aircraft that dropped bombs and torpedoes and strafing enemy ships.*
- 2) Who was Alex Vraciu’s mentor and why was this man considered a navy legend? (p. 8) *Lieutenant Commander Edward “Butch” O’Hare was awarded a Congressional Medal of Honor for shooting down five Japanese bombers.*
- 3) When did Vraciu achieve “ace” status? How did he earn it? (pp. 8–9) *January 29, 1944. He downed three Betty bombers near Kwajalein in the Marshall Islands.*
- 4) What were Vraciu’s strengths as a pilot? What skills did he possess? (p. 9) *Vraciu had keen eyesight, quick reflexes, excellent shooting instincts, and knack for finding his opponent’s weak spot.*
- 5) How did Vraciu earn distinction as the U.S. Navy’s leading ace in 1944? (p. 9) *He shot down nineteen enemy planes in the air, destroyed twenty-one enemy planes on the ground, and sank a Japanese merchant ship with a bomb.*
- 6) What happened during the “Great Marianas Turkey Shoot” air battle on June 19, 1944? (p. 9) *American pilots won a lopsided air battle against the Japanese to protect American forces landing on Saipan in the Mariana Islands. Vraciu shot down six Japanese dive-bombers in eight minutes with his “world class” marksmanship.*
- 7) What happened to Vraciu on December 14, 1944? (pp. 13–14) *Vraciu was shot down, bailed out of his plane, parachuted near enemy-held territory near Mount Pinatubo (Philippines), and was rescued by a small group of U.S. Army in the Far East guerrillas. He spent five weeks with them fighting the enemy on the ground before his was returned to a navy ship.*

8) What happened to Vraciu after World War II ended? (p. 14) *Vraciu remained in the navy, worked at the Pentagon, and commanded his own squadron. After retirement, he became a banker for Wells Fargo in California, married, and had five children. He is now a grandfather and great-grandfather.*

Think About It:

You’ve been asked to consider awarding Alex Vraciu the Navy Cross, the second highest honor for extraordinary courage against the enemy. Write a nomination that explains why you think Vraciu is worthy of this award. *Responses will vary, but should support ideas such as Vraciu’s courage in battle, his combat leadership, and his many successful missions as a navy pilot.*

Chapter 2—The Region

- 1) Alex Vraciu’s father and mother immigrated to the United States from this eastern European country: (p. 20) *Romania.*
- 2) Where did his parents settle in the United States? What did they do there? (p. 20) *The Vraciu’s settled in Indiana Harbor, in northwest Indiana. His father owned properties in the area, including a hotel. Later, his father had a job in the East Chicago police force.*
- 3) What were Vraciu’s high school activities and awards? (pp. 22–29) *He was a good student and athlete. He was a National Honor student, yearbook editor, ran track (low hurdles) and the mile relay, and was on the tennis team. He received a scholarship to attend DePauw University, in Greencastle, Indiana, where he was in the Delta Chi fraternity and was on the track, football, and baseball teams.*
- 4) How did Vraciu learn to fly a plane? (p. 31) *Vraciu participated in the U.S. Civilian Pilot Training Program at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana. The program trained civilians for potential service in the army air corps, navy, and marines prior to the United States involvement in World War II.*
- 5) What was Vraciu’s inspiration to become a pilot? (p. 30) *He heard the radio news of the heroic pilots during the Battle of Britain.*

Think About It:

Vraciu was known around college for a prank he played on a professor when he jumped from a second-story window. His friends caught him safely outside, below the window where he had jumped. What does this incident suggest about Vraciu's personality and his future in the military? *Responses will vary, but they should suggest his willingness to take risks, ability to follow through with a dangerous task, a sense of humor, and showmanship.*

Chapter 3—Off The Ground

1) When did Alex Vraciu join the navy and where did he first report for duty? (p. 35) *Vraciu enlisted in the navy in the fall of 1940; he was not drafted. He first reported for duty at the Glenview Naval Air Station near Chicago, Illinois.*

2) What event took place on November 14, 1910, that changed the role of navy ships and airplanes in combat? (p. 35) *Eugene B. Ely made the first successful flight from a warship, which changed navy ships into became floating airfields (now called aircraft carriers) for warplanes.*

3) What major event reinforced the growing importance of World War II aircraft carriers in the Pacific theater? (p. 37) *The Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in the Hawaiian Islands*

4) What was Vraciu's goal when he joined the navy? (p. 53) *He wanted to become a fighter pilot.*

5) What did pilots have to do to qualify and become navy pilots? (p. 53) *Make eight successful landings and takeoffs from a converted carrier.*

6) What was a "routine" day for O'Hare's squadron? (pp. 54–55) *Four to five hours of flying, playing checkers, and an occasional hand of poker*

7) What does a wingman do? (p. 55) *He is the squadron leader's lookout during battle and watches his "back."*

8) What flying "lessons" did O'Hare teach Vraciu? (p. 56) *O'Hare taught Vraciu how to conserve ammunition, fly close to the enemy before opening fire, aim at a plane's vulnerable spots, and look over his shoulder for enemy planes before starting a dive in a strafing run.*

Think About It:

You've been assigned to review the strengths and capabilities of the U.S. Navy's new F6F Hellcat airplane. Why do you think this Grumman plane will be a favorite among the U.S. Navy pilots? (pp. 56–58) *It was designed to challenge/defeat the Japanese Zero plane, was easy to repair, extremely rugged in combat, had a 2,000 hp Pratt and Whitney engine, an armor-plated cockpit and engine, a bullet-resistant windscreen, and a rubber-coated, self-sealing fuel tank.*

Chapter 4—The Fast Carriers

1) Who was the most important person on the ship when the fighter planes were trying to land safely? What did he do? (p. 68) *The LSO—landing signal officer—used color-coded paddles to signal the pilot if he was on course for a safe landing, and to wave off the pilot if he was in danger of crashing.*

2) Explain what happened to Alex Vraciu during his first air-to-air combat mission. (p. 73) *Vraciu downed his first Japanese Zero with his machine gun, strafed a Zero on the ground, causing it to catch fire, and destroyed a bomber on the runway.*

3) How were the results of combat missions reported to the carrier's crew? Why? (p. 75) *Results were written in chalk on the superstructure of the ships to boost morale and have the carrier crew share in the pilot's success.*

4) Tarawa in the Gilbert Islands was the site of a major battle in the Pacific. What was unusual about Vraciu's first flight mission on Tarawa on November 18, 1943. What were the U.S. Marine casualties in the land battle there? (pp. 78–80) *It was a nighttime flight; more than 1,000 dead and 2,300 wounded.*

5) What happened to Vraciu's ship, the USS *Independence*, during the battle at Tarawa? (p. 80) *It was attacked by the Japanese on November 20 and hit by a torpedo from a Japanese bomber.*

6) What happened to Vraciu's mentor O'Hare on November 26? How was he honored? (p. 83) *O'Hare was shot in a crossfire and killed in action. Chicago renamed Orchard Depot Airport to O'Hare International Airport in his honor.*

7) Why was the battle at Roi significant for Vraciu? (pp. 84–86) *Vraciu shot down three Japanese Betty bombers and got five kills, qualifying him as an “ace.”*

8) What was the significance of Operation Hailstorm and Truk Atoll? (pp. 86–87) *Truk was a Japanese military stronghold, the “Gibraltar of the Pacific.” The U.S. Navy’s Operation Hailstorm was supposed to keep the Japanese at Truk from supporting their troops at Eniwetok in the Marshall Islands, where the United States was planning to invade. The problem for the U.S. Navy was that gunfire from outside the reef surrounding the atoll couldn’t reach the island or the Japanese fleet anchored in the lagoon. Japan lost thirty planes in the air, another forty on the ground; the United States only lost four planes, but the USS Intrepid was hit by a torpedo on the starboard quarter, below the waterline, and it had to return to Pearl Harbor for repairs.*

Think About It:

You’re a navy pilot aboard the USS *Independence* and have a few minutes to write your parents a brief letter. Describe what the guys wear in a combat mission, eat before their departure on a mission, and do when they’re not flying. *Responses may vary but should include a description of a khaki flight suit, cotton helmet with leather earphone covers, goggles, Mae West flight vest, parachute, survival knife, and shoulder holster with a .38-caliber revolver or .45-caliber pistol, as described on page 64. Breakfast consisted of steak and eggs. Pilots were always “on call” between missions but tried to relax by playing card games and sleeping.*

Chapter 5—The Turkey Shoot

1) What reward did destroyer crews get for returning airmen safely to their carriers? (p. 95) *Ice cream (a scarce item on a small destroyer)*

2) How did Alex Vraciu earn the reputation as “Grumman’s Best Customer?” (p. 97) *He ditched two planes in a five-week period.*

3) How many planes did Vraciu down in the “Great Marianas Turkey Shoot?” (p. 109) *Six.*

4) What losses did the Japanese suffer during the “Great Marianas Turkey Shoot?” (p. 110) *Lost about 273 carrier planes and fifty land-based aircraft. Two aircraft carriers (Taiho and Shokaku) sank, 2,913 men lost at sea. For the Americans? (p. 110) twenty-nine carrier planes lost. Two ships (USS South Dakota and the USS Bunker Hill) were damaged.*

5) What unusual command did Admiral Marc Mitscher order to help the pilots land at night after a particularly risky mission on June 20, 1944? Why? (p. 115) *He ordered the ships to turn on their deck lights so the pilots could safely make a night landing.*

6) Vraciu had trouble landing on his ship, the USS *Lexington* in the “Mission Beyond Darkness,” so what did he do? (pp. 116–117) *He landed on another carrier, the USS Enterprise and flew back to his carrier the next morning.*

7) How many American planes were lost in the “Mission Beyond Darkness” and how many pilots and crewmen were lost? (p. 118) *Sixteen pilots and thirty-three crewmen died.*

8) After the Battle of the Philippine Sea, the men of Fighting Squadron 16 were taken out of combat. What did they do next? (p. 119) *Returned to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, then on to San Diego, California, for a thirty-day leave.*

Think About It:

Your squadron just returned to the ship after completing a mission in the Marianas, a prelude to a major engagement in the Pacific—the Battle of the Philippine Sea. You’re heading to the ready room to debrief the ship’s commanding officer. Explain what you will tell him about Japan’s strengths and weaknesses, and what you encountered during your mission. (p. 100) *Responses will vary, but should include details that the Americans caught the Japanese by surprise during the attack in the Marianas. The Japanese fleet was pretty substantial: five large carriers, four light flattops, five battleships, a number of cruisers and destroyers, with oilers for refueling. They were looking for a decisive win against the Americans. Japanese planes were lighter and could fly greater distances than American planes, so they wanted*

to attack first and catch them by surprise. The Japanese had about 500 land-based aircraft to assist. Americans forces had superior carrier strength, so the Japanese were outnumbered on that score. The Japanese pilots looked pretty shaky in the air and didn't know how to maneuver to attack ships at sea. They weren't as experienced in air combat as the American pilots were. It was easy to catch the Mitsusishi Betty bombers because they caught fire pretty easily when they were hit in combat.

Chapter 6—The Reluctant Hero

- 1) On August 6, 1944, what did city officials do at Indiana Harbor and East Chicago when Alex Vraciu came home for a visit? (p. 121) *Held a parade in Vraciu's honor.*
- 2) Why was Vraciu hailed as a hero at this time? (p. 121) *He was the leading navy ace in the Pacific.*
- 3) What dessert did Alex request while he was home on leave in 1944? (p. 122) *Strawberry shortcake.*
- 4) Describe what happened to Vraciu at Block Stadium during his August 1944 homecoming. What happened to Vraciu about two and a half weeks later? (pp. 124–125) *He was greeted by an honor guard from the American Legion, Indiana governor Henry Schricker praised Vraciu in a speech, the East Chicago community gave him \$1,500 in war bonds, and his uncle gave him \$2,500 for shooting down nineteen Japanese aircraft. On August 24 he married Kathryn Horn.*
- 5) After Vraciu returned to active duty in the Pacific, what happened to him as he flew a mission over Luzon in the northern Philippines on December 14, 1944? (pp. 128–129) *His plane was hit by anti-aircraft fire, his oil tank was damaged, and he had to bail out over enemy territory.*
- 6) What did the Filipinos do to rescue Vraciu? (p. 129) *Helped him change into different clothes (exchanged his flight suit and parachute for a straw hat, shirt, and pants), then set up bamboo traps to discourage the Japanese from following them as they helped Vraciu escape.*
- 7) Where did Vraciu stay in the Philippines? (p. 130) *He stayed in a guerilla camp in Luzon with other rescued pilots until he could safely return to his ship.*

- 8) Where was Vraciu stationed during the last few months of World War II? What did he do? (p. 140) *He was a test pilot at the Naval Air Test Center, Patuxent River, Maryland. He flew the new Grumman Bearcat fighter.*

Think About It:

You are a war correspondent on the USS *Wasatch* working for an American news service. You had time for a quick interview with Vraciu when he returned to the ship after being rescued in Luzon. Vraciu had spent several weeks hiding out in Luzon with U.S. forces and guerrilla fighters on the island. What three questions would you ask? *Responses may vary, depending on the information the reader might find interesting about Vraciu's stay with the U.S. Forces in the Far East guerrilla groups as described on pages 129 through 138 of Fighter Pilot.*

Chapter 7—Peace

- 1) What activity ended the war with Japan? (p. 143 and 146) *Dropping the atomic bomb over Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Russian invasion of Manchuria.*
- 2) What kind of plane dropped the atomic bomb over Hiroshima? What was the plane's nickname? (p. 143) *A B-29 Superfortress bomber called the Enola Gay.*
- 3) When did Emperor Hirohito announce Japan's surrender over the radio? (p. 146) *August 15, 1945.*
- 4) When did the formal surrender take place? Where? (p. 146) *September, 2, 1945, on the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay.*
- 5) What did Vraciu do after the war ended? (pp. 150–152) *Vraciu worked in the naval and marine air reserve program as a lieutenant commander. He worked at the U.S. Navy Department and Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and later as a jet training officer in California, a communication officer aboard the USS Hornet, and a commander of his own fighter squadron.*
- 6) When did Vraciu retire from military service? What did he do after retirement? (p. 155) *He retired on December 31, 1963, and remained in California with his wife and five children. He worked as a trust officer for Wells Fargo Bank in California and is now retired.*

Think About It:

You've been asked by a member of a volunteer group to write a letter to an Indiana congressman concerning the nomination of Alex Vraciu for a Medal of Honor, the country's highest military honor, for his service to the United States during World War II. What would be your response to the request? What are your reasons for taking this position? *Responses will vary. Look for examples that support or refute the idea that Vraciu "distinguished himself conspicuously by gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty while engaged in an action against an enemy of the United States" as described in "Section 576.4, Medal of Honor," of the Code of Federal Regulations, Title 32, Volume 2, revised as of July 1, 2002, from the U.S. Government Printing Office at http://edocket.access.gpo.gov/cfr_2002/julqtr/32cfr578.4.htm (accessed November 15, 2010).*

“TELLING A HERO’S TALE”

From the Indiana Historical Society’s Blog, March 9, 2010, by Ray Boomhower

<http://www.indianahistory.org/blog/telling-a-heros-tale-1/> (accessed November 15, 2010)

As a nonfiction writer who engages in the field of biography, I often give talks to groups around the state. During the question-and-answer portion, one of the queries I always get is how to come up with a subject to write about. I usually advise the questioner to pick a subject he or she will enjoy spending time with, as the writing of a biography can take years. I point to a lesson I learned from David McCullough, who had begun to research a biography of the famed Spanish painter Pablo Picasso. Early in his research, McCullough discovered that he disliked the man and did not want to write about him. He was able to convince his publisher to switch to a new subject—Harry S. Truman—a decision that resulted in a bestseller and a Pulitzer Prize.

I have followed McCullough’s example and try to select subjects that I respect and whose career I have some interest or knowledge about. That was the case in my newest book, the IHS Press youth biography *Fighter Pilot: The World War II Career of Alex Vraciu*. Back in the spring of 2008, I was trying to think of a new book project to work on. I was flipping through some back issues of *Traces* magazine when I came across the special issue we did to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II. On the cover of that issue was a photograph of an American pilot leaving his airplane after successfully shooting down a host of Japanese aircraft in the Pacific.

The pilot was Alex Vraciu of East Chicago, Indiana. During the war, Vraciu had shot down nineteen enemy aircraft, including six dive-bombers in just eight minutes during the Battle of the Philippine Sea. Here was a story that combined a number of my interests—aircraft, World War II and, especially, the Pacific theater. I had always been fascinated by the American effort against the Japanese, especially the long distances involved and the savageness of the fighting.

Vraciu had retired to Danville, California, and, with the assistance of a former colleague from the IHS Press, Doug Clanin, I wrote the former ace and asked him if he would be willing to cooperate with me in writing his biography. At first reluctant, Vraciu finally gave his consent when he learned that the book was part of the IHS Press’s youth biography series—books aimed at the middle school/high school audience. Vraciu had given numerous talks before young audiences about his wartime experience, and saw this as another opportunity to tell the story of his service to a new generation.

I traveled to Vraciu’s home and spent a couple of days with him talking about his life. He provided great details about growing up in northwest Indiana, attending DePauw University, training as a navy pilot and flying with his mentor in the air, Butch O’Hare. Vraciu also shared his large collection of photographs with me, many of which are reproduced in the book. It has been an honor to tell his story.