

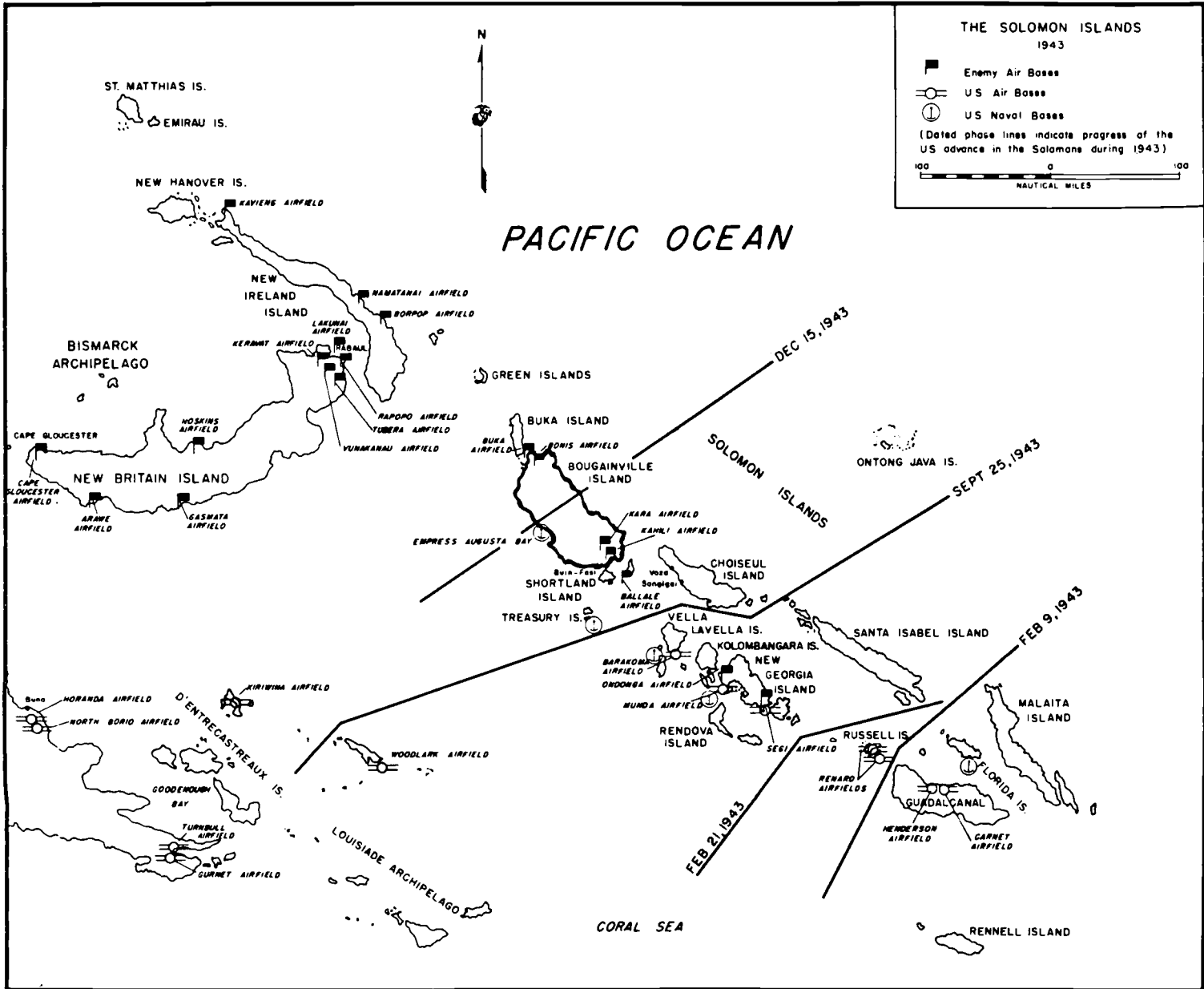
TIME OF THE ACES:

MARINE PILOTS IN THE SOLOMONS, 1942-1944

MARINES IN
WORLD WAR II
COMMEMORATIVE SERIES

BY COMMANDER PETER B. MERSKY
U.S. NAVAL RESERVE





Time of the Aces: Marine Pilots in the Solomons

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The morale of the men of the 1st Marine Division on Guadalcanal soared dramatically in the late afternoon of 20 August 1942. That was when 19 Grumman F4F Wildcats of Captain John L. Smith's Marine Fighter Squadron (VMF) 223 and 12 Douglas Dauntless SBDs of Major Richard C. Mangrum's Marine Scout-Bomber Squadron (VMSB) 232 landed on yet-uncompleted Henderson Field. Ever since the assault landing on Guadalcanal on 7 August, and subject to unchallenged Japanese air raids from that time, the ground troops wondered, "Where are our planes?" Like so many other soldiers in so many other campaigns, they had little knowledge of the progress of the war elsewhere in the Pacific.

From the very beginning of World War II, with the Japanese attack on Wake Island, Marine aircraft, pilots, and crews became immediately and personally involved in the fighting. On Wake, Marine Wildcat pilots of VMF-211 gave a good account of themselves, even after the number of the squadron's flyable planes was reduced to four, and when those planes were damaged beyond repair, all aviation personnel became riflemen. And in the Battle of Midway, Marine pilots for the first time at first hand apprehended the nature of the war in the

air as they flew against combat-experienced Japanese aircrews. But by the time of the landings on Guadalcanal and when the war was nearly a year old, only a relatively small number of Marine pilots had seen combat. A few had shot down several Japanese aircraft, although none had scored a fifth kill which would entitle him to be designated an ace. The leading Marine scorer at Midway was Captain Marion Carl, who had downed two Mitsubishi Type "O" Carrier Fighters. The Americans would later call them "Zeros" or "Zekes" and would shoot them down regularly despite the early reputation they received for being a highly maneuverable and deadly adversary in the air. Before he left the Pacific, Captain Carl would add considerably to his score, as would some of the other fighter pilots who landed on Guadalcanal with him on the 20th.

Guadalcanal: The Beginning of the Long Road Back

Marine Aircraft Group (MAG) 23, the initial air unit participating

in the Guadalcanal operation, was assigned the mission of supporting the ground operations of the 1st Marine Division as well the air defense of the island once the landing had been made. MAG-23 included VMF-223 and -224, and VMSB-231 and -232. The fighter squadrons flew the F4F-4, the Grumman Wildcat with folding wings and six wing-mounted .50-caliber machine guns. The two VMSBs flew the Douglas SBD-3 Dauntless dive-bomber. Another fighter squadron, VMF-212, under Major Harold W. Bauer, was on the island of Efate in the New Hebrides, while MAG-23 headquarters had yet to sail from Hawaii by the time Marines hit the beaches on 7 August 1942. The first contingent of MAG-23—VMF-223 and VMSB-232—left Hawaii on board the escort carrier USS *Long Island* (CVE 1). On 20 August, 200 miles from Guadalcanal, the two squadrons launched toward their new home. VMF-224 (Captain Robert E. Galer) and VMSB-231 (Major Leo R. Smith) followed in the aircraft transports USS *Kitty*

The Douglas SBD Dauntless divebomber fought in nearly every theater, flying with the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps, as well as the U.S. Army (as the A-24 Banshee). The SBD made its reputation in the Pacific, especially at Midway and Guadalcanal.

Author's Collection



On the cover: Using hit-and-run tactics, Capt Joe Foss flames a Japanese Zero over Henderson Field in October 1942. Painting by Ted Wilbur, courtesy of the artist. **At left:** "Fogerty's Fate—22 Oct 1942." TSgt John Fogerty, an enlisted Marine pilot, was killed this date. Watercolor by Col Albert M. Leahy, USMCR (Ret), in the Marine Corps Art Collection.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 26044
Capt Henry T. Elrod, a Wildcat pilot with VMF-211, earned what is chronologically the first Marine Corps—but not the first actually awarded—Medal of Honor for World War II. His exploits during the defense of Wake Island were not known until after the war. After his squadron's aircraft were all destroyed, Capt Elrod fought on the ground and was finally killed by a Japanese rifleman.

Hawk (APV 1) and *USS Hammondsport* (APV 2), and flew on to the island on 30 August. While en route toward the launch point for Guadalcanal, Captain Smith wisely decided to trade eight of his less experienced junior pilots for eight pilots of VMF-212 who had more flight time and training in the F4F than had Smith's fledglings.

The newly arrived squadrons barely had time to get settled before they were in heavy action. Early on the 21st, the Japanese sent a 900-man force to attack Henderson Field, named after Major Lofton R. Henderson, a dive-bomber pilot killed at Midway. Around mid-day, Captain Smith was leading a four-plane patrol north of Savo Island heading toward the Russell Islands with Second Lieutenants Noyes McLennan and Charles H. Kendrick, and Technical Sergeant John Lindley. The two lieutenants had 16 days of operational flight training in F4Fs, and Lindley had been through ACTG,

the Aircraft Carrier Training Group, which, as part of its training syllabus, gave tyro pilots indoctrination into fighter tactics.

Beyond Savo, six Zeros came straight at them from the north, with an altitude advantage of 500 feet. Smith recognized the Zeros immediately, although neither he nor any of the other three pilots had ever seen one before. He turned his flight toward them and the Zeros headed toward the F4Fs.

It was hard to say just what happened next except that the Zero Captain Smith was shooting at pulled up and he shot fairly well into the belly of the enemy plane as it went by, only to find that now he had two Zeros on his tail. Captain Smith dove toward Henderson Field and the Japs broke away.

Minutes later, the Zero Captain Smith shot became VMF-223's first kill when it crashed into the water just off Savo Island. Smith's plane had some bullet holes but was flying alright. Two F4Fs joined on him. They looked back and it appeared that the Zeros were in a dogfight near Savo. The Marines thought they were ganging up on Sergeant Lindley so they went back to help him, but found that there was no F4F, just five Zeros acting like they were fighting.

The three Marines then got into another dogfight and the Zeros shot them up some more. Lindley and Kendrick got back to Henderson and made dead-stick landings. Lindley was burned and blinded by hot oil when his oil tank was shattered and landed wheels up. Kendrick's oil line was shot away and he crash-landed. His airplane never flew again. It took eight days before Smith's plane was patched up enough to fly once again. Repairs on the fourth plane required 10 days. Only 15 of the 19 F4Fs were flyable after their first day of action from Henderson Field.

Members of VMF-224 pose by one of their fighters on Guadalcanal in mid-September 1942. Rear row, left to right: 2dLt George L. Hollowell, SSgt Clifford D. Garrabrant, 2dLt Robert A. Jefferies, Jr., 2dLt Allan M. Johnson, 2dLt Matthew H. Kennedy, 2dLt Charles H. Kunz, 2dLt Dean S. Hartley, Jr., MG William R. Fuller. Front row: 2dLt Robert M. D'Arcy, Capt Stanley S. Nicolay, Maj John F. Dobbin, Maj Robert E. Galer, Maj Kirk Armistead, Capt Dale D. Irwin, 2dLt Howard L. Walter, 2dLt Gordon E. Thompson. All in this picture are pilots except MG Fuller, who was the Engineering Officer. Lt Thompson was reported missing in action on 31 August 1942.

Photo courtesy of BGen Robert E. Galer



'CUB One' at Guadalcanal

On 8 August 1942, U.S. Marines captured a nearly completed enemy airstrip on Guadalcanal, which would prove critical to the success of the island campaign. It was essential that the airstrip become operational as quickly as possible, not only to contest enemy aircraft in the skies over Guadalcanal, but also to ensure that badly needed supplies could be flown in and wounded Marines flown out. As it turned out, Henderson Field also proved to be a safe haven for Navy planes whose carriers had been sunk or badly damaged.

A Marine fighter squadron (VMF-223) and a Marine dive bomber squadron (VMSB-232) were expected to arrive on Guadalcanal around 16 August. Unfortunately, Marine aviation ground crews scheduled to accompany the two squadrons to Guadalcanal were still in Hawaii, and would not arrive on the island for nearly two weeks. Aircraft ground crews were urgently needed to service the two Marine squadrons upon their arrival.

The nearest aircraft ground crews to Guadalcanal were not Marines, but 450 Navy personnel of a unit known as CUB One, an advanced base unit consisting of the personnel and material necessary for the establishment of a medium-sized advanced fuel and supply base. CUB One had only recently arrived at Espiritu Santo in the New Hebrides.

On 13 August, Admiral John S. McCain ordered Marine Major Charles H. "Fog" Hayes, executive officer of Marine Observation Squadron 251, to proceed to Guadalcanal with 120 men of CUB One to assist Marine engineers in completing the airfield (recently named Henderson Field in honor of a Marine pilot killed in the Battle of Midway), and to serve as ground crews for the Marine fighters and dive bombers scheduled to arrive within a few days. Navy Ensign George W. Polk was in command of the 120-man unit, and was briefed by Major Hayes concerning the unit's critical mission. (After the war, Polk became a noted newsman for the Columbia Broadcasting System, and was murdered by terrorists during the Greek Civil War. A prestigious journalism award was established and named in his honor).

Utilizing four destroyer transports of World War I vintage, the 120-man contingent from CUB One departed Espiritu Santo on the evening of 13 August. The total supply carried northward by the four transports included 400 drums of aviation gasoline, 32 drums of lubricant, 282 bombs (100 to 500 pounders), belted ammunition, a variety of tools, and critically needed spare parts.

The echelon arrived at Guadalcanal on the evening of 15 August, unloaded its passengers and supplies, and began assisting Marine engineers the following morning on increasing the length of Henderson Field. In spite of daily raids by Japanese aircraft, the arduous work continued, and on 19 August, the airstrip was completed. CUB One personnel also installed and manned an air-raid warning system in the famous "Pagoda," the Japanese-built control tower.

On 20 August, 19 planes of VMF-223 and 12 dive bombers of VMSB-232 were launched from the escort carrier *Long Island* and arrived safely at Henderson Field. The Marine pilots

were quickly put into action over the skies of Guadalcanal in combat operations against enemy aircraft.

The men of CUB One performed heroics in servicing the newly arrived Marine fighters and bombers. Few tools existed or had yet arrived to perform many of the aircraft servicing jobs to which CUB One was assigned. It was necessary to fuel the Marine aircraft from 55-gallon drums of gasoline. As there were no fuel pumps on the island, the drums had to be man-handled and tipped into the wing tanks of the SBDs and the fuselage tanks of the F4F fighters. To do this, CUB One personnel stood precariously on the slippery wings of the aircraft and sloshed the gasoline from the heavy drums into the aircraft's gas tanks. The men used a make-shift funnel made from palm-log lumber.

Bomb carts or hoists were also at a premium during the early days of the Guadalcanal campaign, so aircraft bombs had to be raised by hand to the SBD drop brackets, as the exhausted, straining men wallowed in the mud beneath the airplanes.

No automatic belting machines were available at this time as well, so that the .50-caliber ammunition for the four guns on each fighter had to be hand-belted one round at a time by the men of CUB One. The gunners on the dive bombers loaded their ammunition by the same laborious method.

The dedicated personnel of CUB One performed these feats for 12 days before Marine squadron ground crews arrived with the proper equipment to service the aircraft. The crucial support provided by CUB One was instrumental to the success of the "Cactus Air Force" on Guadalcanal.

Like their Marine counterparts, the personnel of CUB One suffered from malaria, dengue fever, sleepless nights, and the ever-present shortage of food, clothing, and supplies. They would remain on Guadalcanal, performing their duties in an exemplary manner, until relieved on 5 February 1943. CUB One richly earned the Presidential Unit Citation awarded to the unit for its gallant participation in the Guadalcanal campaign.

—Arvil L. Jones with Robert V. Aquilina

Allied air operations in the Solomons were controlled from the "Pagoda," built by the Japanese and rehabilitated by the men of CUB One.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 51812

