

replied, "shoot the SOB if you can!" Then all was silence.

Smith's aircraft was mortally wounded, and he tried to regain the field. He finally had to make a dead-stick landing six miles from the strip and walk back, watching all the time for roving Japanese patrols.

Second Lieutenant Charles H. Kendrick was not as fortunate as his skipper. The Zeros had gotten him on their first pass, and he tried to guide his stricken fighter to a crash landing. He apparently landed close to Henderson, but his fighter flipped over on its back, killing the young pilot.

Major Smith led a party to the crash site. They found Kendrick still in his cockpit. They released and buried him beside his plane. Stan Nicolay recalled, "I don't know how many we lost that day. We really took a beating." Actually, six Wildcats had been shot down or returned with strike damage. Several others required major repair.

VMF-224's skipper was also shot down. Bob Galer bailed out over the water—his third shootdown in less than three weeks—and was rescued. He had accounted for two Zeros, however. He recalled:

I was up with six fighters, cruising about at 20,000 or 25,000 feet. Suddenly, 18 Zeros came at us out of the sun, and we took 'em on. The day was cloudy and after a few minutes, the only other Marine I could find was Second Lieutenant Dean Hartley. In the melee of first contact, I heard several Jap bullets splatter against—and through—my ship, but none stopped me. At about the same moment, Hartley and I started to climb into a group of seven Zeros hovering above us. In about four minutes, I shot down two Zeros and Hartley got a possible. The other four were just

too many and we were both shot down. Hartley got to a field, but I couldn't make it. The Jap that got me really had me boresighted. He raked my ship from wingtip to wingtip. He blasted the rudder bar right from under my foot. My cockpit was so perforated it's a miracle that I escaped. The blast drove the rivets from the pedal into my leg. I pancaked into the water near Florida Island. It took me an hour-and-a-half to swim ashore....I worried not only about the Japs but about the tide turning against me, and sharks.

Major Galer struggled ashore where he encountered four men armed with machetes and spears. Fortunately, the natives were friendly and took the bedraggled pilot to their village. After enjoying what hospitality his hosts could

offer, Major Galer rode in a native canoe to a Marine camp on a beach five miles away. He made his way back to Henderson from there.

Marine Aircraft Group 23 and the rest of its squadrons also left the following day, having earned a rest from the intense combat of the last two-and-a-half months. Between 20 August and 16 October, the squadrons of MAG-23 and attached Army and Navy squadrons had shot down 244 Japanese aircraft, including 111.5 by VMF-223 and 60.5 by VMF-224. The score had not come free, though. Twenty-two pilots of the group, as well as 33 aviators from other Navy, Marine, and Army squadrons assigned to the Cactus Air Force, had been lost.

John Smith had seen his last engagement. He received the Medal of Honor for his leadership during the Guadalcanal campaign and finished the war as the sixth highest on the

Maj John L. Smith, LtCol Richard C. Mangrum, and Capt Marion E. Carl pose for photos after returning to the States. LtCol Mangrum commanded an SBD squadron at the height of the Cactus campaign and was universally admired. He eventually attained the rank of lieutenant general, while Marion Carl retired as a major general after fighting in three wars—World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War.

Department of Defense photo (USMC) A707812



A New Crew at Cactus



Painting by William S. Phillips, courtesy of The Greenwich Workshop

Marion Carl, now a major and commanding his old squadron, VMF-223, made his 17th kill in December 1943, when he shot down a Japanese Tony over Rabaul. Carl was escorting Marine PBJ (B-25) bombers in his F4U-1 Corsair when the enemy fighter jumped the raiders. The victory was Carl's next-to-last score.

list of Marine Corps aces, closely followed by his friend and rival, Marion Carl. Much to his initial chagrin, Smith found himself on the War Bond circuit, and then training new pilots. It was not until two years later, in 1944, that Lieutenant Colonel Smith got a combat assignment again. As commanding officer of MAG-32 in Hawaii, he took the group to Bougainville and the Philippines.

Marion Carl assumed command of his old squadron, VMF-223, in the United States in January 1943 and took the newly renamed Bulldogs to the South Pacific late in the fall. He gained two more kills—a Ki.61 Tony (a Japanese Army fighter) and a Zero, on 23 December and 27 December 1943, respectively—this time in a Vought F4U Corsair. His final score at the end of the war was 18.5 Japanese aircraft destroyed.

The night of 13-14 October saw the Japanese pound beleaguered Henderson Field with every gun they could fire from their assembled flotilla offshore, as well as the entrenched artillery positions hidden in the dense jungle surrounding the field. The night-long barrage might very well have been the end for the Cactus Marines.

The new day revealed that of 39 Dauntlesses, only seven could be considered operational, only a few Army fighters could stagger into the air, and all the TBF Avenger torpedo bombers were destroyed or down. The only saving factor was that the fighter strip was relatively untouched. By the afternoon, a few Wildcats were sent up to mount a patrol over Henderson while it pulled itself together. For the next few days, the Cactus Air Force—Marine, Navy, and Army—flew as though its collective life was on the line, which it was.

Although VMF-223 had left, Guadalcanal still had several top scoring aces left, among them Captain Joe Foss of VMF-121 and Lieutenant Colonel Harold Bauer of VMF-212. Throughout October 1942, Foss and Bauer were kept busy by constant Japanese raids, desperately trying to dislodge the determined Marines from the island.

Lieutenant Colonel Bauer had led his VMF-212 up from Espiritu Santo on the afternoon of 16 October, when he finally had his own squadron at Henderson. With empty gas tanks, the 18 Wildcats were running on fumes as they entered the landing pattern in time to see a U.S. transport under attack from Japanese dive-bombers. Without hesitating, Bauer broke from the pattern and charged into the Vals, shooting down four of them. It was an incredible way to advertise the arrival of his squadron.

Joe Foss took off on the afternoon of 23 October to intercept an incoming force of Betty bombers, escorted by Zeros. Five of the escorting fighters dove toward Foss and his flight, followed by 20 more Zeros. Diving to gain speed, the VMF-121 executive officer saw a Wildcat pursued by a Zero. He fired at the Japanese fighter, shredding it with his six .50-caliber machine guns.

Without losing speed, Foss racked his aircraft into a loop behind another Zero. He destroyed this second Mitsubishi while both fighters hung inverted over Guadalcanal. As he came out of the loop, Foss hit a third Zero. A fourth kill finished off a highly productive mission.

On 25 October, Foss took off again against a Japanese raid, and this time, he shot down two enemy aircraft. Later the same day, Foss gunned down three more Zeros for a total of five in one day, and an overall score of 16 kills.

Marine Corps Aviators Who Received the Medal of Honor in World War II

Of the 81 Medals of Honor awarded to Marines for service during World War II, 11 Marine Corps aviators received America's highest military award. Except for two posthumous awards, the medals all went to aces who served in the Solomons and Bougainville campaigns. The Medal of Honor was awarded to Captain Henry T. Elrod of VMF-211 and Captain Richard E. Fleming of VMSB-241. Captain Elrod was killed on Wake in December 1941. Although his award is chronologically the first Medal of Honor to be awarded to a

Marine during the war, his performance did not become known until survivors of Wake had been repatriated after the war.

Captain Fleming was a dive-bomber pilot at Midway in 1942. VMSB-241 flew both the obsolete Vought SB2U Vindicator and the SBD Dauntless during this pivotal battle. On 5 June 1942, Captain Fleming was last seen diving on a Japanese ship amidst a wall of flak. His Vindicator struck the cruiser's aft turret.

Two of the remaining nine awards were for specific actions; the

other seven were for periods of continued service or more than one mission. Seven of these awards were for service in the Solomons-Guadalcanal Campaign. The awards for specific actions went to First Lieutenant Jefferson DeBlanc (31 January 1943) and First Lieutenant James E. Swett (7 April 1943).

Five of these awards were originally posthumous. However, Major Gregory Boyington made a surprise return from captivity as a prisoner of war to receive his award in person from President Harry S. Truman.

The Pilots and Their Aircraft

*Lieutenant Colonel Harold W. Bauer, VMF-212. For service from May to November 1942. Grumman F4F-4 Wildcat.

Major Gregory Boyington, VMF-214. For service from September 1943 to January 1944 in the Central Solomons. Vought F4U-1/F4U-1A Corsair.

First Lieutenant Jefferson J. DeBlanc, VMF-112. For action on 31 January 1943. Grumman F4F-4 Wildcat.

*Captain Henry T. Elrod, VMF-211. For action on Wake Island 8-23 December 1941. Grumman F4F-3 Wildcat.

*Captain Richard E. Fleming, VMSB-241. For action at the Battle of Midway, 4-5 June 1942. Vought SB2U-3 Vindicator.

Captain Joseph J. Foss, VMF-121. For service in the Guadalcanal Campaign, October 1942-January 1943. Grumman F4F-4 Wildcat.

Major Robert E. Galer, VMF-224. For service in the Guadalcanal Campaign, August-September 1942. Grumman F4F-4 Wildcat.

*First Lieutenant Robert M. Hanson, VMF-215. For action in the Central Solomons, November 1943 and January 1944. Vought F4U-1 Corsair.

Major Robert L. Smith, VMF-223. For service in the Guadalcanal Campaign, August-September 1942. Grumman F4F-4 Wildcat.

First Lieutenant James E. Swett, VMF-221. For action on 7 April 1943 over Guadalcanal. Grumman F4F-4 Wildcat.

First Lieutenant Kenneth A. Walsh, VMF-124. For action on 15 and 30 August 1943. Vought F4U-1 Corsair.

* indicates a posthumous award

Lieutenant Colonel Bauer was adding to his score, too. A veteran aviator, Colonel Bauer was a respected flight leader. He frequently gave pep talks to his younger pilots, earning the affectionate nickname of "Coach." Bauer had taken over as commander of fighters on Guadalcanal on 23 October.

Before the big mission on 23 October, the Coach had told his pilots, "When you see Zeros, dogfight 'em!" His instructions went against the warnings that most of American fighter pilots had been given about the lithe little Japanese fighter. Joe Foss' success on this day seemed to vindicate Bauer, however. Twenty Zeros and two Bettys, including the four Zeros claimed by Foss, went down in front of Marine Wildcats.

Up to this time the Zero was considered the best fighter in the Pacific. This belief stemmed from the fact that the Zero had spectacular characteristics of performance in both maneuverability, rate of climb, and radius of action, all first noted at the Battles of the Coral Sea and Midway. And it was because of its performances in these actions that it achieved the seeming invincibility that it did. At the same time, the Zero was highly flammable because it lacked armor plate in any form in its design and also because it had no self-sealing fuel tanks, such as existed in U.S. aircraft. Initially in the war, in the hands of a good pilot, the Zero could usually take care of itself against its heavier and tougher American opponents, but early in the air battles over Guadalcanal, its days of supremacy became numbered. By the end of the war in the Pacific, the kill ratio of U.S. planes over Japanese aircraft went from approximately 2.5:1 to better than 10:1.

What made the difference as far as Lieutenant Colonel Bauer was concerned was his feeling that, in the 10 months of intense combat

after Pearl Harbor, including their disastrous and failed adventure at Midway, the Japanese had lost many of their most experienced pilots, and their replacements were neither so good nor experienced. Many of the major aces of the Zero squadrons—the ones who had accumulated many combat hours over China—had, indeed, been lost or been rotated out of the combat zone. Whatever the situation, most of the Marine pilots in this early part of the war in the South Pacific would still admit that the Japanese remained a force to be reckoned with.

The Japanese endeavored to reassert their dominance on 25 October. In a last-ditch effort to remove American carriers from the South Pacific, a fleet including three aircraft carriers sortied to find the U.S. carriers *Enterprise* and *Hornet*, all that remained at the moment of the meager U.S. carrier strength in the Pacific.

The Japanese fleet was discovered during an intensive search by PBV flying boats, and the battle was joined early in the morning of 26

October. What became known as the Battle of Santa Cruz occurred some 300 miles southeast of Guadalcanal. Indeed, most of the Marine and Navy flight crews attempting to blunt remaining enemy air raids still plaguing the positions of the embattled ground forces on Guadalcanal had no idea that another desperate fight was being waged that would have a distinct impact on their situation back at Henderson.

Many American Navy flight crews received their baptism of fire during Santa Cruz. *Hornet* was hit by Japanese dive-bombers and eventually abandoned—one of the few times that a still-floating American ship had been left to the enemy, even though she was burning from stem to stern. (The carrier was only a year old.) *Enterprise* was hit by Val dive-bombers, and the aircraft of her Air Group 10 were ultimately forced to land on Guadalcanal. The displaced Navy crews remained at Henderson until 10 November, while their ship underwent repairs at Noumea, New Caledonia.

While the Marines on Guadalcanal fought for their lives, their Navy compatriots far offshore also challenged the Japanese. At the Battle of Santa Cruz, October 1942, Japanese bombers hit the American ships, damaging the vital carrier Enterprise as well as attacking squadrons of inexperienced Navy aircrews. This A6M2 Model 21 Zero launches from the carrier Sholalu during Santa Cruz while deck crewmen cheer on the pilot, Lt Hideki Shingo.

Author's Collection



While blame and recriminations went the rounds of the Navy's Pacific commands—for it seemed that Santa Cruz was a debacle, a strategic and tactical defeat for the hard-pressed carrier force—the effects of the battle would become clear soon.

Sixty-nine Japanese aircraft had been shot down by Navy F4Fs and anti-aircraft fire. An additional 23 were forced to ditch because of crippling battle damage.

Like Midway, Santa Cruz deprived the Japanese of many of

their vital aircraft *and* their experienced flight crews and flight commanders. Thus, as the frantic month of October gave way to November, and although they did not know it at the time, the Cactus Air Force crews had been given a respite, and

Brigadier General Roy S. Geiger, USMC

General Geiger, commander of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, arrived on Guadalcanal on 3 September 1942 to assume command of air operations emanating from Henderson Field. He was 57 years old, and he had been a Marine for 35 of those years, commanded a squadron in France in World War I, served a number of tours fighting the bandits in Central America, and had served in the Philippines and China. He was designated a naval aviator in June 1917, thus becoming the fifth flyer in the Marine Corps and the 49th in the naval service. In the course of his career, he had a number of assignments to staff and command billets as well as tours at senior military courses such as the ones at the Army Command and Staff School at Fort Leavenworth, the Army War College at Carlisle, and the Navy War College at Newport. He also was both a student and instructor at various times at the Marine Corps Schools, Quantico, Virginia. Among other reasons, it was because of his sound training in strategy and tactics at these schools and his long experience as a Marine that he was so well equipped to assume command of I Marine Amphibious Corps (later III Amphibious

Corps) for the Bougainville, Guam, Peleliu, and Okinawa operations.

When Lieutenant General Simon Bolivar Buckner, Jr., USA, commander of the Tenth Army on Okinawa was killed, and based on General Buckner's stated decision before the operation, General Geiger took over command and became the first Marine ever to accede to command of as large a unit as an army. He was then 60, an age when many men in civilian life looked forward to retirement.

But it was at Guadalcanal, where his knowledge of Marine planes and pilots was so important in defeating the myth of Japanese invincibility in the air, that he first made his mark in the Pacific War. A short, husky, tanned, and white-haired Marine, whose deep blue eyes were piercing and whose reputation had preceded him, compelled instant attention, recognition, and dedication on the part of his junior pilots, many of whom had but a few hours of experience in the planes they were flying. As told in this pamphlet, out of meager beginnings grew the reputation and success in combat of the aces in the Solomons.

—Benis M. Frank



ultimately, the key to victory over the island.

Meanwhile, under the command of Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, the Japanese decided to make one more try to land troops and material on Guadalcanal and to regain the island and its airstrips. The Americans were also bringing new squadrons and men in to fortify Cactus Base and Henderson Field. MAG-11 arrived on 1 November, bringing the SBDs of VMSB-132 and the F4Fs of VMF-112. Newly promoted Brigadier General Louis Woods arrived on 7 November to relieve Brigadier General Roy S. Geiger as commander of the Cactus Air Force. Both men were pioneer Marine aviators, and Geiger had led his squadrons through some of the most intense combat to be seen during the war. But, almost inevitably, the strain was beginning to show on the tough, 57-year-old Geiger. He had once taken off in an SBD in full view of his troops and dropped a 1,000-pound bomb on a Japanese position, showing his troops that a former squadron commander in France in World War I could still do it.

As new planes and crews arrived at Henderson and the frustrated Japanese planned their final attacks, the Cactus Marines fought on. On 7 November, a sighting of a force of Japanese ships near Florida Island scrambled a strike group of SBDs and their F4F escorts. Captain Joe Foss led eight VMF-121 Wildcats, each with 250-pound bombs beneath its wings. The VMSB-132 Dauntlesses carried 500-pounders in their centerline-mounted bomb racks.

The heavily laden aircraft took some 30 minutes to climb to 12,000 feet as their crews searched for the enemy flotilla. As he looked ahead and below, Foss spotted six Japanese floatplane Zeros—a modification of the A6M2 model of the land-



Painting by Ted Wilbur, courtesy of the artist
Using hit-and-run tactics, Capt Joe Foss flames a Japanese Zero over Henderson Field in October 1942.

and carrier-based Zero—crossing from right to left, descending. Alerting his squadron mates, he dropped his light bombs and headed toward the unsuspecting enemy fighters.

In one slashing pass, Foss' Wildcats shot down five of the six Zeros, Foss' target literally disintegrating under the weight of his heavy machine gun fire. One of the other Wildcats shot down the surviving Zero. All six enemy pilots bailed out of their fighters and seemed to be out of danger as they floated toward the water. As the incredulous Marine pilots watched, however, the six Japanese aviators unlatched their parachute harnesses and fell to their deaths.

Foss called for his fighters to regroup in preparation for a strafing run on the enemy warships below. He spotted a slow float biplane—probably a Mitsubishi type used for reconnaissance—and lined up for what he thought would be an easy kill. However, the two-seater was surprisingly maneuverable, and its pilot chopped the throttle, letting his rear gunner get a good shot at the surprised American fighter.

The gunner's aim was good and Foss' Wildcat suffered heavy damage before he finally dispatched the audacious little floatplane. Soon, the VMF-121 executive officer found a third victim, another floatplane, and shot it down. Regrouping with a portion of his group, he flew back to Henderson Field with another badly damaged Wildcat. However, the two cripples were spotted en route by enemy fighters. The two American fighters tried to get to the protection of clouds. Foss succeeded, but his wingman was apparently shot down by the enemy flight.

Foss was not out of danger, however, as his engine finally quit, forcing him to glide toward the sea, 3,500 feet below. He dropped through heavy rain, trying to gauge the best way to put his aircraft down in the water. He spotted a small village on the coast of a nearby island and wondered if the natives would turn him over to the Japanese.

He hit the water with enough force to slam his canopy shut, momentarily trapping him in the cockpit as the Wildcat began to sink. In a few seconds which seemed like an



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 97555
Two aces walk with another famous aviator. Charles Lindbergh, right, visited the Pacific combat areas several times to help Army, Navy, and Marine Corps squadrons get the most from the respective mounts. Here, the pioneer transatlantic flier visits with now-Maj Joe Foss, left, and now-Maj Marion Carl, center, in May 1944.

eternity, he struggled to free himself from his seat and the straps of his parachute, and force the canopy open again. His aircraft was well below the surface and only after an adrenalin-charged push, was he able to ram the canopy back and shoot from his plane. He remembered to inflate his Mae West life preserver, which helped him get to the surface where he lay gasping for air.

After floating for a long time as darkness fell, Foss was finally rescued by natives and a missionary priest from the village he had seen as he dropped toward the water. The rescue came none too soon as sharks, which frequented the waters near the island, had begun to appear around the Marine pilot.

A PBY flew up from Henderson the next day to collect him and he was back in action the day after he returned. On 12 November, he scored three kills, making him the top American ace of the war, and the first to reach 20 kills.

The Battle for Guadalcanal

On the night of 12-13 November, American and Japanese naval forces fought a classic naval battle which has been called the First Battle of Guadalcanal. It was a tactical defeat for the Americans who lost two rear admirals killed in action on the bridges of their respective flagships.

The next day, 14 November, the Second Battle of Guadalcanal pitted aircraft from the carrier *Enterprise* and Henderson Field against a large enemy force trying to run the Slot, the body of water running down the Solomons chain between Guadalcanal and New Georgia. By midnight, another naval engagement was underway. This battle turned out differently for the Japanese, who lost several ships, including 10 transports carrying more than 4,000 troops and their equipment.

The Navy and Marines from *Enterprise* and Henderson hammered the enemy ships, while the Americans on the island, in turn, were harassed day and night by well-entrenched enemy artillery positions still on Guadalcanal and the huge guns of the Japanese battleships and cruisers offshore.

During these furious engagements, Lieutenant Colonel Bauer had dutifully stayed on the ground, organizing Cactus air strikes and ordering other people into the air. Finally, on the afternoon of 14 November, Colonel Bauer scheduled himself to lead seven F4Fs from VMF-121 as escorts for a strike by SBDs and TBFs against the Japanese transport ships.

Together with Captain Foss and Second Lieutenant Thomas W. "Coot" Furlow, Bauer strafed one of the transports before turning back for Henderson. Two Zeros sneaked up on the Marine fighters, but Bauer turned to meet the

threat, shooting down one of the Japanese attackers. The second Zero dragged Foss and Furlow over a Japanese destroyer which did its best to take out the Wildcats. By the time they had shaken the Zero and returned to the point where they last saw the Coach, they found a large oil slick with Colonel Bauer in the middle, wearing his yellow Mae West, waving furiously at his squadron mates.

Foss quickly flew back to Henderson and jumped into a Grumman Duck, a large amphibian used as a hack transport and rescue vehicle. Precious time was lost as the Duck had to hold for a squadron of Army B-26 bombers landing after a flight from New Caledonia; they were nearly out of gas. Finally, Foss and the Duck's pilot, Lieutenant Joseph N. Renner, roared off in the last light of the day. By the time they arrived over Bauer's last position, it was dark and the Coach was nowhere to be seen.

The next morning a desperate search found nothing of Lieutenant Colonel Bauer. He was never found and was presumed to have drowned or have been attacked by the sharks which were a constant threat to all aviators forced to parachute into the waters around Guadalcanal during the campaign.

Bauer's official score of 11 Japanese aircraft destroyed (revised lists credit him with 10) did not begin to tell the impact the loss the tough veteran had on the young Marine and Navy crews at Henderson. He was decorated with a Medal of Honor posthumously for his flight on 16 October, when he shot down four Japanese Val dive-bombers, but the high award could also be considered as having been given in recognition of his leadership of his own squadron, VMF-212, and later, as the commander of the fighters of the Cactus Air Force.



Painting by William S. Phillips, courtesy of The Greenwich Workshop

Capt Foss saves a fellow pilot by shooting down an attacking Zero during an engagement on 23 October 1942.

The loss of the Coach was a hard blow. Another loss, albeit temporary, was that of Joe Foss who became severely ill with malaria. (Many of the Cactus Air Force aviators, like the ground troops, battled one tropical malady or another during their combat tours.) Foss flew out to New Caledonia on 19 November with a temperature of 104 degrees. He spent the next month on sick leave, also losing 37 pounds. While in Australia, he met some of the Australian pilots who had flown against Nazi pilots in the Desert War in North Africa. In one of his conversations with them, he told the Aussies, "We have a saying up at Guadalcanal, if you're alone and you meet a Zero, run like hell because you're outnumbered." In

the coming months, they would find out he knew what he was talking about.

Foss returned to Guadalcanal on 31 December 1942, and remained on combat status until 17 February 1943, when he was ordered back to the U.S. By this time, besides enduring several return bouts with malaria, he had shot down another six Japanese aircraft for a final total of 26 aircraft and no balloons, thus becoming the first American pilot to equal the score of Captain Edward Rickenbacker, the top U.S. ace in World War I. In that war, tethered balloons shot down counted as aircraft splashed. Of the 26 planes Rickenbacker was given credit for, four were balloons.

Joe Foss was one of the Cactus

Marines who was awarded the Medal of Honor for his cumulative work during their intense campaign. Summoned to the White House on 18 May 1943, he was decorated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. After his action-packed tour at Guadalcanal, Captain Foss went on the requisite War Bond tour. Promoted to major, he took command of a new fighter squadron, VMF-115, equipped with F4U-1 Corsairs.

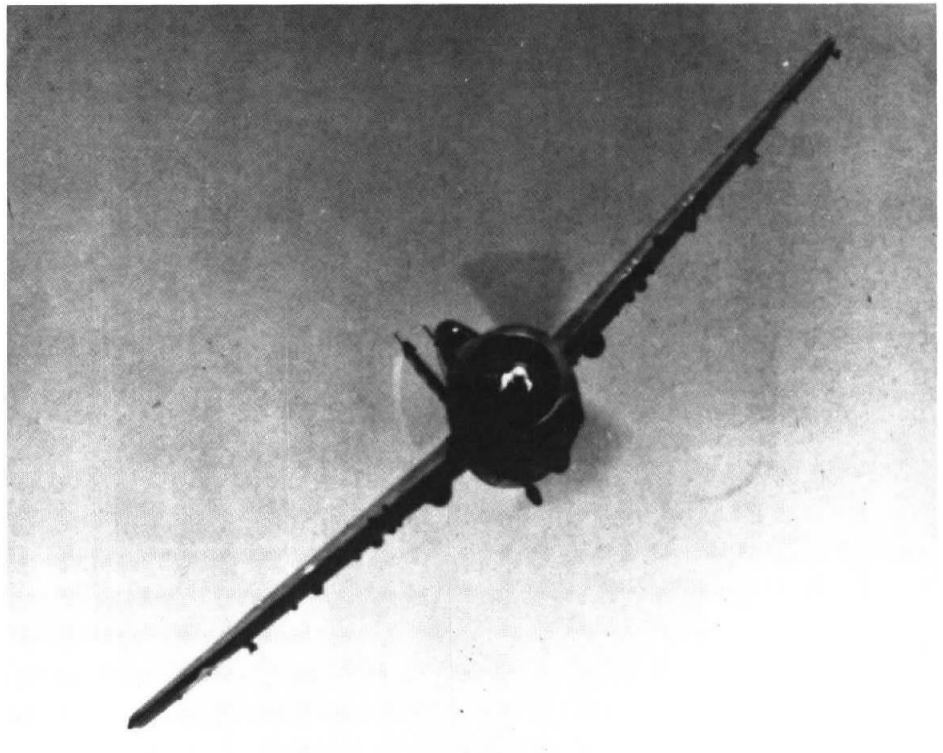
Originally nicknamed "Joe's Jokers," in deference to their famous skipper, VMF-115 flew a short combat tour from Bougainville during May when there was little or no enemy air activity from and above Rabaul. Major Foss did not add to his score.

Cactus Victory

By Christmas 1942, the Japanese position was clearly untenable. Their troops who remained on Guadalcanal were sick and short of food, medicine, and ammunition. There was still plenty of action on the ground and in the air, but not like the intense engagements of the previous fall. On 31 January 1943, First Lieutenant Jefferson J. DeBlanc of VMF-112 led six Wildcats as escorts for a strike by Dauntlesses and Avengers. He encountered a strong force of Zeros near Kolombangara Island and took his fighters down to meet the threat before the Japanese could reach the Marine bombers.

In a wild melee, DeBlanc, who already had three Zeros to his credit, shot down three more before hearing a call for help from the bombers now under attack by floatplane Zeros. DeBlanc and his flight climbed back to the formation and dispersed the float Zeros.

Soon after the SBDs and TBFs made their attacks on Japanese ships, DeBlanc discovered two



Author's Collection

This front view of an F4F-4 shows an unusual aspect of Grumman's tubby little fighter.

more Zeros closing from behind. He engaged and destroyed these two attackers with his badly damaged Wildcat. DeBlanc and a member of his flight, Staff Sergeant James A.

Felton, had to abandon their F4Fs over Kolombangara. A coast-watcher cared for the two Marine aviators until a plane could come from Henderson to retrieve them.

A good closeup of a Wildcat's cockpit and the aircraft's captain on Guadalcanal. Although this F4F displays 19 Japanese flags, it is doubtful that it flew with these since such a large scoreboard would have attracted unwanted attention from the Japanese. Note the reflector gunsight inside the windscreen.

National Archives Photo 80-G-37929



On 31 January 1943, 1stLt Jefferson DeBlanc of VMF-112 earned the Medal of Honor while escorting Marine dive bombers and torpedo-bombers to Vella Gulf. His flight encountered a larger enemy force and during the melee, DeBlanc shot down three float planes and two Zeros before being forced to abandon his own plane at a very low altitude over Japanese-held Kolombangara.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 57750





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 310555

1stLt James E. Swett of VMF-221 was in a flight which rose from Guadalcanal to challenge a large group of enemy planes bent on destroying shipping off the island on 7 April 1943. In a 15-minute period, Swett shot down seven Japanese bombers, a performance which earned him the Medal of Honor.

DeBlanc received the Medal of Honor for his day's work.

The Japanese evacuated Guadalcanal on the night of 7-8 February 1943. The campaign had been costly for both sides, but in the longer term, the Japanese were the big losers. Their myth of invincibility on

A Marine Wildcat dogfights a Zero over Henderson as other F4Fs finish off another enemy fighter at low level.

the ground in the jungle was shattered, as was the myth surrounding the Zero and the pilots who flew it. The lack of reliable records by both sides leaves historians with only wide-ranging estimates of losses. Estimates placed 263 Japanese aircraft lost, while American losses were put at 118. Ninety-four American pilots were also killed in action during the campaign.

Post-Guadalcanal Operations, February-December 1943

Even though the main body of their troops had been evacuated, the Japanese continued to oppose Allied advances by attacking ships and positions. The enemy mounted these attacks through June 1943 from their huge bases in southern Bougainville and from Rabaul on New Britain.

On 7 April 1943, the enemy sent a huge strike against Allied shipping around Guadalcanal. The Japanese force consisted of more than 100 Zero escorts and perhaps 70 bombers, dive bombers, and torpedo bombers. It was an incredibly large raid, the likes of which had

not been seen in the Solomons for several months. But it was also, at best, a last desperate gamble by the Japanese in the area.

Henderson scrambled over 100 fighters—Wildcats, Corsairs, P-38s, P-39s, and P-40s. Among this gaggle were the F4Fs of VMF-221. First Lieutenant James E. Swett, leading one of the squadron's divisions, waded into a formation of Val dive bombers. Swett had arrived on Guadalcanal in February and had participated in a few patrols, but had yet to fire his guns in combat.

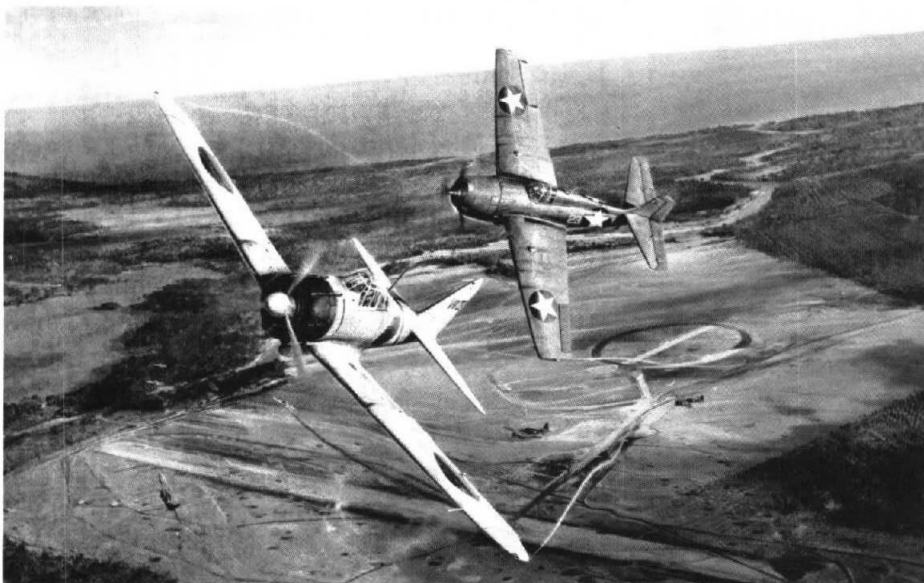
As he led his four Wildcats toward the Japanese formation, Swett ignored the flak from the American ships below. He targeted two Vals and brought them down. He got a third dive-bomber as a flak shell put a hole in his Wildcat's port wing.

Disengaging, Swett tested his wounded fighter, and satisfied that he could still fly and fight with it, he reentered the fight. Spotting five Vals hightailing it home, he caught up with the little formation and methodically disposed of four of the fixed-gear Vals. The gunner of the fifth bomber, however, hit Swett's Wildcat with a well-aimed burst from his light machine gun, putting .30-caliber ammunition into the Marine fighter's engine and cockpit canopy.

Wounded from the shattering glass, and with his vision obscured from spouting engine oil, Swett pumped more fire into the Val, killing the gunner. The Japanese aircraft disappeared into a cloud, leaving a smoke trail behind. American soldiers later found the Val, with its dead crew. The troops presented Swett with the radio code from the Val's cockpit. However, the aircraft was apparently never credited to Swett's account, leaving his official total for the day at seven.

Swett struggled toward Henderson but over Tulagi harbor, his aircraft's engine quit, leaving him to

Painting by Robert Taylor, courtesy of The Military Gallery



ditch. The Wildcat hit hard, throwing its pilot against the prominent gunsight, stunning him and breaking his nose. Like Joe Foss six months before him, Swett was momentarily trapped as his aircraft sunk, dragging him below the surface. He finally broke free and struggled to the surface where he was rescued by a small picket boat from Gavutu Island. Only one of the four fighters of Swett's division had made it back to Henderson. After intelligence confirmed Swett's incredible one-mission tally, he became the sixth Marine Wildcat pilot to receive the Medal of Honor for action over Guadalcanal.

Swett's engagement was part of the last great aerial battle in the Solomons. The Japanese were forced to turn their attention elsewhere as the American strategy of island-hopping began to gather momentum. All the Marine Corps

Wildcat squadrons at Henderson soon transitioned to the next generation of Marine fighter aircraft, the world-beating Vought F4U Corsair which would also provide its own generation of Leatherneck aces in the coming months.

James Swett transitioned to the Corsair and served with VMF-221 when the squadron embarked in the aircraft carrier USS *Bunker Hill* (CV17). By 11 May 1945, when he shot down his last victim, a Japanese kamikaze, he had a total of 15.5 kills in Wildcats and Corsairs.

The Marine Corsair Aces of Bougainville and the Central Pacific, 1943-44

The campaign and victory on Guadalcanal signaled the containment of the seemingly unstoppable Japanese, and the beginning of the long, but ultimately successful, Al-

lied drive through the Pacific to Japan. The first step of the long journey began with the island with the strange name.

Once secured, however, by 7 February 1943, Guadalcanal quickly became the major support base for the remainder of the Solomons campaign. While Marine ground forces slugged their way up the Solomons chain in the middle of 1943, Allied air power provided much-needed support, primarily from newly secured Guadalcanal. Marine and Navy squadrons were accompanied by Army and New Zealand squadrons as they made low-level sweeps along the islands, or escorted bombers against the harbor and airfields around Rabaul. The U.S. Army Air Force sent strikes by B-24 Liberators against Kahili, escorted by Corsairs, P-38s, P-39s, and P-40s. For Marine aviators, it was the time of the Corsair aces.

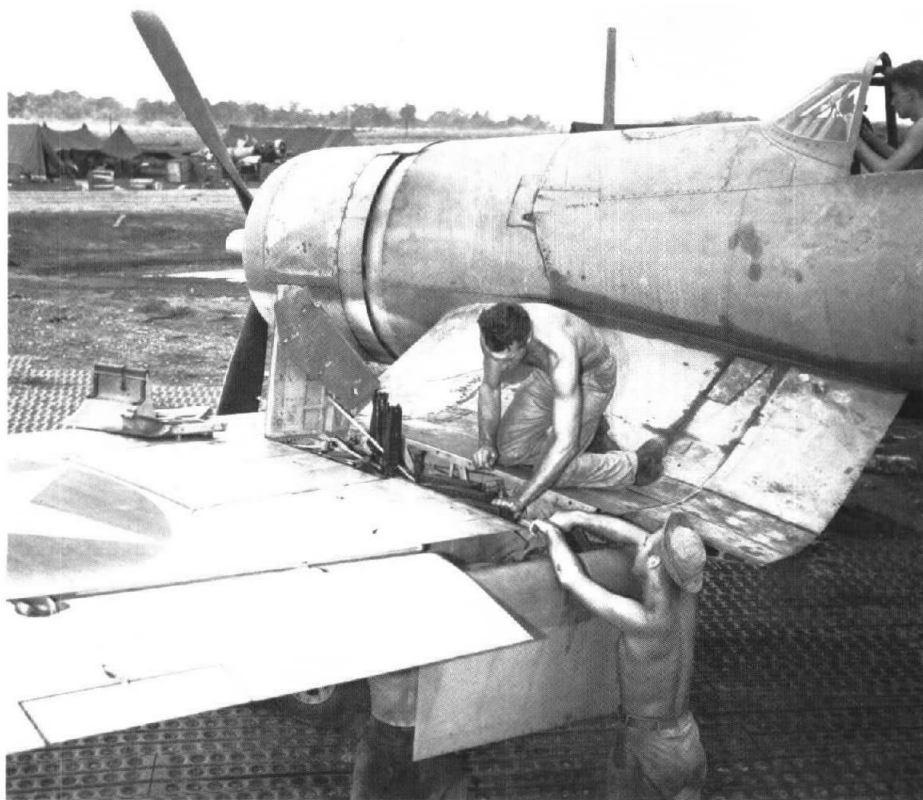
The First Corsair Ace

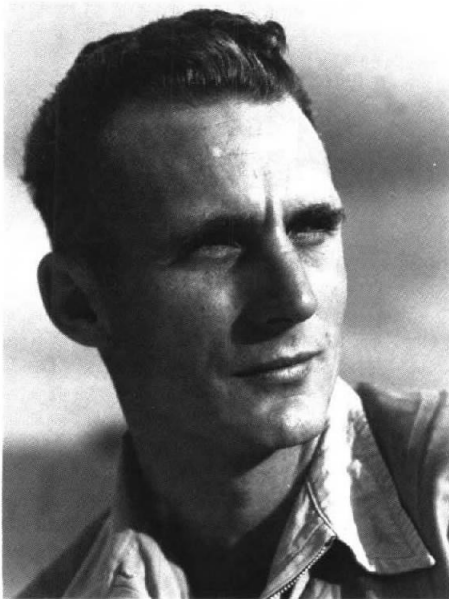
Because the Navy decided that the F6F Wildcat was a better carrier fighter than the F4U Vought Corsair, the Marines got a chance to field the first operational squadron to fly the plane. Thus, Major William Gise led the 24 F4U-1s of VMF-124 onto Henderson Field on 12 February 1943.

As the Allied offensive across the Pacific gathered momentum, the fighting above the Solomons and the surrounding islands continued as the Japanese constantly harassed the advancing Allied troops. The Corsair's first engagements were tentative. The pilots of the first squadron, VMF-124, had only an average of 25 hours each in the plane when they landed at Guadalcanal. The very next day, they were off to Bougainville as escorts for Army B-17s and Navy PB4Y Liberators. It was a lot to ask, but they did it, taking some losses of both

Marine mechanics service an early F4U Corsair, perhaps of VMF-124, on Guadalcanal in early 1943. "Bubbles" is already showing the effects of its harsh tropical environment as well as the constant scuffing of its keepers' boots. Note the Corsair's large gull wings and long nose, which prohibited a clear view forward, especially during taxi and landings.

National Archives 127-N-55431





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 60940
Enlisting in the Marine Corps in 1933, 1stLt Kenneth A. Walsh eventually went through flight training as a private, gaining his wings in 1937. By 1943, Walsh was in aerial combat over the Solomons and became the first Corsair-mounted ace.



National Archives photo 80-G-54291
1stLt Ken Walsh of VMF-124 connects his radio lead to his flight helmet before a mission in 1943. He was the first F4U pilot to be decorated with the Medal of Honor, for a mission on 30 August 1943, during which he shot down four Japanese Zeros before ditching his borrowed Corsair.

bombers and escorts. While it was a rough start, the Marines soon settled down and began to exploit the great performance of this new machine, soon to become known to the Japanese as “Whistling Death,” and to the Corsair pilots as the “Bent Wing Widow Maker.”

After the first few missions, the new experience with the Corsair’s capabilities began to really take hold. First Lieutenant Kenneth A. Walsh, a former enlisted pilot (he received his wings of gold as a *private*), shot down three enemy aircraft on 1 April. Six weeks later, after several patrols, Walsh dropped three more Zeros on 13 May 1943, becoming the first Corsair ace. By 15 August, Walsh had 10 victories to his credit.

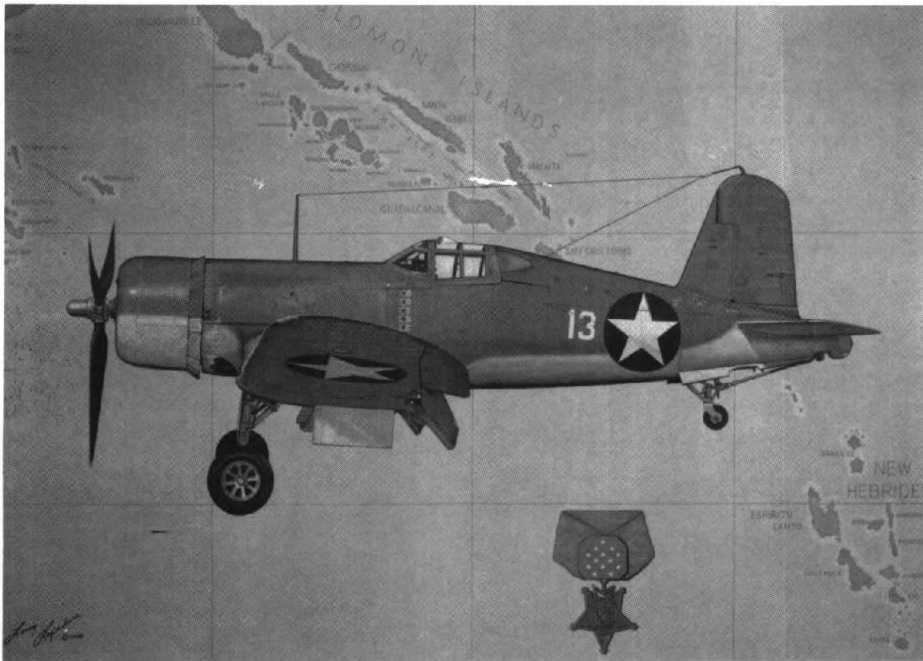
On 30 August, he was scheduled to fly escort for Army B-24s on a strike against the Japanese airfield at Kahili, Bougainville. Walsh’s four-plane section launched before noontime to make the flight to a forward base on Banika in the Russell Islands. After refueling and

grabbing some lunch, the four Marine pilots took off again to rendezvous with the bombers. As the escorts—more F4Us and Army P-38s—joined up with the bombers, Walsh’s engine acted up, forcing him to make an emergency landing at Munda.

A friend, Major James L. Neefus, was in charge of the Munda airfield, and he let Walsh choose another fighter from Corsairs that were parked on Munda’s airstrip. Walsh took off in his borrowed fighter and headed toward Kahili to try to find and rejoin with his division. As he finally approached the enemy base, he saw the B-24s in their bomb runs, beset by swarms of angry Zeros. Alone, at least for the moment, Walsh piled into the enemy interceptors which had already begun to work on the Army bombers.

As Walsh fought off several attacks by some 50 Zeros, thereby disrupting to a degree their attack on the bombers, he wondered where all the other American fighters might be. Finally, several other Corsairs appeared to relieve the hard-pressed ace. As other aircraft took the burden from Walsh, he eased his damaged fighter east to take stock of his situation. He was able to shoot down two Zeros, but the enemy interceptors were nearly overwhelming. The B-24s were struggling to turn for home as more Zeros took off from Kahili.

Lieutenant Walsh managed to down two more Zeros before he had to disengage his badly damaged Corsair. Pursued by the Japanese, who pumped cannon and machine gun fire into his plane, Walsh knew he would not return this Corsair to



Profile by Larry Lapadura, courtesy of the artist

This VMF-124 F4U-1, No.13, was flown by 1stLt Ken Walsh during his first combat tour in which he became the first Corsair-mounted ace.

Major Neefus at Munda. Several Corsairs and a lone P-40 arrived to scatter the Zeros which were using Walsh for target practice.

He ditched his battered fighter off Vella Lavella and was picked up

by the Seabees who borrowed a boat after watching the Marine Corsair splash into the sea. For his spirited single-handed defense of the B-24s over Bougainville, Lieutenant Walsh became the first Cor-

Maj Gregory "Pappy" Boyington became the best known Marine ace. A member of the Flying Tigers in China before World War II, he later commanded VMF-122 before taking over VMF-214. By early January 1944, he was the Corps' leading scorer. Here, the colorful Boyington, center, relaxes with some of his pilots.

Author's Collection



sair pilot to receive the Medal of Honor. The four Zeros he shot down during this incredible mission ran his score to 20.

Ken Walsh shot down one more aircraft, another Zero, off Okinawa on 22 June 1945, the day the island was secured. At the time, Walsh was the operations officer for VMF-222, shorebased on the newly secured island.

A series of assaults during the spring and summer of 1943 netted the Allies several important islands up the Solomons chain. An amphibious assault of Bougainville at Empress Augusta Bay on 1 November 1943, caught the Japanese defenders off guard. In spite of Japanese reaction and reinforcement, a secure perimeter was quickly established, and within 40 days, the first of three airfields was in operation with two more to follow by the new year. Aircraft from these strips flew fighter sweeps first, later to be followed by daily escorted SBD and TBF strikes. With the establishment of this air strength at Bougainville, the rest of the island was effectively bypassed, and the fate of Rabaul sealed.

Marine aircraft began flying from their base at Torokina Point at Empress Augusta Bay, the site for the initial landing on Bougainville's midwestern coast. Navy Seabees then quickly hacked out two more airstrips from the jungle—Piva North and Piva South. Piva Village was a settlement on the Piva River, east of the airfield complex.

The official Marine Corps history noted that "whenever there was no combat air patrol over the beachhead, the Japanese were quite apt to drop shells into the airfield area. The Seabees and Marine engineers moved to the end of the field which was not being hit and continued to work."