Author's Collection

Petty Officer Hiroyoshi Nishizawa at Lae, New Guinea, in 1942. Usually considered the top Japanese ace, Navy or Army. A definitive total will probably never be determined. Nishizawa died while flying as a passenger in a transport headed for the Philippines in October 1944. The transport was caught by American Navy Hellcats, and Lt(j.g.) Harold Newell shot it down.

Photo courtesy of Henry Sakaida

Petty Officer Sadamu Komachi flew throughout the Pacific War, from Pearl Harbor to the Solomons, from Bougainville to the defense of the Home Islands. His final score was 18.

Nishizawa kept himself usually aloof, enjoying a detached but respected status as he rolled up an impressive victory tally through the Solomons campaign. He was eventually promoted to warrant officer in November 1943. Like a few other high-scoring aces, Nishizawa met death in an unexpected manner in the Philippines. He was shot down while riding as a passenger in a bomber used to transport him to another base to ferry a Zero in late October 1944. In keeping with the established tradition, Nishizawa was posthumously promoted two ranks to lieutenant junior grade. His score has been variously given as 102, 103, and as high as 150. However, the currently accepted total for him is 87.

Henry Sakaida, a well-known authority on Japanese pilots in World War II, wrote:

> No Japanese pilot ever scored more than 100 victories! In fact, Nishizawa entered combat in 1942 and his period of active duty was around 18 months. On the other hand, Lieutenant junior grade Tetsuo Iwamoto fought from 1938 until the end of the war. If there is a top Navy ace, it's him.
>
> Iwamoto claimed 202 victories, many of which were against U.S. Marine Corps aircraft, including 142 at Rabaul. I don't believe his claims are accurate, but I don't believe Nishizawa's total of 87, either. (I might believe 30.) Among Iwamoto's claims were 48 Corsairs and 48 SBDs! His actual score might be around 80.

Several of Sho-ichi Sugita's kills—which are informally reckoned to total 70—were Marine aircraft. He was barely 19 when he first saw combat in the Solomons. (He had flown at Midway but saw little of the fighting.) Flying from Buin on the southern tip of Bougainville, he first scored on 1 December 1942, against a USAAF B-17. Sugita was one of the six Zero escort pilots that watched as P-38s shot down Admiral Yamamoto's Betty on 18 April 1943. There was little they could do to alert the bombers carrying the admiral and his staff since their Zeros' primitive radios had been taken out to save weight.

The problem of keeping accurate records probably came from the directive issued in June 1943 by Tokyo forbidding the recording of individual records, the better to foster teamwork in the seemingly once-invincible Zero squadrons. Prior to the directive, Japanese Zero pilots were the epitome of the hunter-pilots personified by the World War I German ace, Baron Manfred von Richthofen. The Japanese Navy pilots roamed where they wished and attacked when they wanted, assured in the superiority of their fighters.

Occasionally, discipline would disappear as flight leaders dove into Allied bomber formations, their wingmen hugging their tails as they attacked with their maneuverable Zeros, seemingly simulating their Samurai role models whose expertise with swords is legendary.

Most of the Japanese aces, and most of the rank-and-file pilots, were enlisted petty officers. In fact, no other combatant nation had so many enlisted fighter pilots. The U.S. Navy and Marine Corps had a relatively few enlisted pilots who flew in combat in World War II and for a short time in Korea. Britain and Germany had a considerable number of enlisted aviators without whose services they could not have maintained the momentum of their respective campaigns.

However, the Japanese officer corps was relatively small, and the number of those commissioned pilots serving as combat flight commanders was even smaller. Thus, the main task of fighting the growing Allied air threat in the Pacific fell to dedicated enlisted pilots, many of them barely out of their teens.

During a recent interview, Saburo Sakai shed light on the role of Japanese officer-pilots. He said:

> They did fight, but generally, they were not very good because they were inexperienced. In my group, it would be the enlisted pilots that would first spot the enemy. The first one to see the enemy would lead and signal the others to follow. And the officer pilot would be back there, wondering where everyone went! In this sense, it was the enlisted pilots who led, not the officers.

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 47912

Maj Edward Overend, shown here in a Wildcat in San Diego in 1945, flew with the Flying Tigers, shooting down five Japanese aircraft, thus becoming one of the first American aces of the Pacific war, albeit under another country's colors. Maj Overend scored 3.5 kills while leading VMF-321, for a combined total of 8.5 victories in P-40Bs and F4U-1As.

Other Marine Aces

Although the colorful time of the Solomons Campaign, and the equally colorful men like Boyington and Hanson, were gone, other Leatherneck aviators achieved sizeable scores, and a measure of fame, if only within their operating areas and squadrons.

VMF-214's five-month tour of combat created eight aces, including Pappy Boyington. The Black Sheep accounted for 97 Japanese aircraft downed. VMF-215's tour lasted four-and-a-half months, and Bob Hanson and his squadron mates—the squadron's roster included 10 aces—destroyed 137 enemy aircraft, 106 in the last six weeks.

Besides Boyington, the Black Sheep alumnus who had one of the most interesting careers was John Bolt. Then-First Lieutenant Bolt shot down six aircraft in the Pacific. Ten years later, now-Major Bolt flew F-86s as an exchange pilot with the U.S. Air Force in Korea. During a three-month period, May-July 1953, he shot down six Russian-built MiG-15s, becoming the Marine Corps' first and only jet ace, and one of a very select number of pilots who became aces in two wars.

While Lieutenant Robert Hanson was the star of VMF-215 for a few short weeks, there were two captains who were just as busy. Donald N. Aldrich eventually scored 20 kills, while Harold L. Spears accounted for 15 Japanese planes. The two aces were among the senior flight leaders of VMF-215.

Don Aldrich had been turned down by recruiters before Pearl Harbor because he was married. Like many other eager young men of his generation, he went across the Canadian border and enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force in February 1941. He got his wings that November. But the RCAF put the new aviator to work as an instructor. When the U.S. entered the war, Aldrich had no trouble rejoining his countrymen, and eventually got his wings of gold as a Marine aviator, following which, he headed for the Solomons. From August 1943 to February 1944, in three combat

tours, Captain Aldrich gained an impressive number of kills, 20. Although he survived the war, he died in an operational accident in 1947.

Harold Spears was commissioned a Marine second lieutenant and got his Marine commission and his wings in August 1942. He joined VMF-215 as the squadron wandered around the various forward bases near Bougainville. Spears wanted to make the service his career, and shortly after finishing his combat tour, during which he shot down 15 Japanese planes, he was assigned to El Toro, and eventually to a new fighter squadron, VMF-462.

One of the most successful but least known Marine Corsair aces was First Lieutenant Wilbur J. Thomas, whom Barrett Tillman called "one of the deadliest fighter pilots the Corps ever produced." He scored 18.5 kills while flying with VMF-213. Thomas' combat career is remarkable because he scored most of his kills in a one-month period during the hotly contested landings on Rendova and Vangunu islands in mid-1944.

After staying in the rear area of the New Hebrides, Thomas was finally transferred to the combat zone. He flew his first missions in June and July 1943. His mission on 30 June was a CAP mission over amphibious landings at Wickham Anchorage on the southern tip of New Georgia.

Zero fighter-bombers prepare to launch for a raid from their Bougainville base in late 1943. Originally an air superiority weapon, the Zero toted light bombs as required, and ended the war as one of the primary aircraft used by the Kamikaze suicide pilots.

Author's Collection

Fifteen Zeros pounced Thomas's fighters. After he had become separated from his group, seven Zeros had attacked the lone F4U, but, undeterred by the odds, Thomas turned into the Japanese, eventually shooting down four of them. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for this mission. Three weeks later, on 17 July, Thomas and his wingman attacked a group of Japanese bombers and their Zero escort, and shot down one of the bombers.

Thomas was on the receiving end of enemy fire on 23 September. After shooting down three Zeros, and splitting a fourth with his wingman, the young ace found he had taken hits in the oil lines. His engine seized and he glided toward the water, eventually bailing out at 3,000 feet. He scrambled into his rubber raft and waited for rescue. He paddled for five hours to keep from drifting to enemy positions. After 10 hours, a Consolidated Catalina flying boat (PBY) set down beside him and brought him home.

By the time VMF-213 left for the States in December, Wilbur Thomas had scored 16.5 kills in five dogfights. He returned for another combat tour, this time on board the carrier *Essex* (CV 9) headed for the South China Sea and Japanese bases in Southeast Asia. He added two more kills to his previous score when he took out two Zeros near Tokyo during *Essex's* first strike against the Japanese Home Islands on the afternoon of 16 February 1945.

Again, as did several of the young aces who managed to survive the war, now-Captain Thomas died in a postwar flying mishap in 1947.

By mid-1944, the war had moved on, past the Solomons and Bougainville, closer to Japan and into the final battles in the Philippines and on to Iwo Jima and Okinawa. There were still occasional encounters in these now-rear areas until the end of the war, and other Marine aviators became aces, but the end of the Solomons Campaign also saw the end of the heyday of the aces.

Fighter pilots and their missions sometimes fall into a nondescript category. By themselves, they rarely decide the outcome of major battles or campaigns, although exceptions might well be Guadalcanal and the Battle of Britain.

The Cactus fighters defended their base daily against enemy raids, and the Marine Corps aces were colorful. They established a tradition of dedication, courage, and skill for their successors in future generations of military aviators. It is 50 years since John Smith, Bob Galer, Marion Carl, Joe Foss, and Greg Boyington led their squadrons into the swirling dogfights over the Solomons. But the legacy these early Marine aces left to their modern successors lives on in a new era of advanced weapons and technology.

Maj Robert Galer with his ubiquitous baseball cap leans against his Wildcat. "Barbara Jane" was a high school sweetheart. (He didn't marry her.) The square panel directly beneath the aircraft's wing was an observational window.

Photo courtesy of BGen Robert Galer, USMC (Ret)

Researching the Aces' Scores

Meticulous investigation by Dr. Frank Olynyk has refined and changed the established list of aces. In most respects, he has reduced by one or two kills an individual's score, but in some instances, he has generated enough doubt about the vital fifth kill that at least two aviators have lost their status as aces during World War II. One man, Technical Sergeant John W. Andre of night-fighter squadron VMF(N)-541, shot down four Japanese planes in the Pacific, and scored a fifth kill in Korea. Thus, he is a bonafide ace, but not solely by his service in World War II.

In an article published in the Summer 1981 issue of *Fortitudine*, the bulletin of the Marine Corps History and Museums Division, Dr. Olynyk discussed the problems associated with compiling records of aerial kills, especially for the Marine Corps. Whether an enemy aircraft which was last seen descending with a trail of smoke should be considered destroyed cannot always be decided. Thus, several "smokers" were claimed as definite kills.

He also commented, "...most of the pilots whose scores are subject to some uncertainty are all from the 1942-early 1943 period when air combat was the heaviest. War diaries from this period are often incomplete, or even non-existent..."

Retired Brigadier General Robert Galer put the question of aces and their kills in perspective. In a recent letter to the author he wrote, "Aces' scores are not an exact number. There were too many people shooting at the same targets. The enemy might sustain some battle damage, such as in the engine, but they could run for another five minutes. It was tough to be accurate."

Then-Captain Stanley S. Nicolay, who shot down three Bettys during his tour with VMF-224, also commented on the problems of simply engaging the enemy.

"There were a lot of people out there who didn't get any (kills), but they worked their tails off. Shooting down an airplane is 90 percent luck; you're lucky if you find one. Most of the time, you can't. That sky gets bigger and bigger the higher you go.

"We had no radar. Even our radios weren't very good. We depended on our sight. Look, look, look, with our heads on a swivel."

USMC Aces During the Period August 1942-April 1944

* Awarded the Medal of Honor.

VMF-112:

Lieutenant Colonel Paul J. Fontana. 5 victories. Retired as a major general.
Major Archie G. Donahue. 14 victories.
Major Robert B. Fraser. 6 victories.
Captain Jefferson J. DeBlanc*. 9 victories (1 in F4Us).
Captain James G. Percy. 6 victories (1 in F4Us).
First Lieutenant John B. Maas, Jr. 5.5 victories.

VMF-121:

Lieutenant Colonel Donald K. Yost. 8 victories (2 in F4Us).
Lieutenant Colonel Leonard K. Davis. 5 victories.
Major Joseph H. Reinburg. 7 victories.
Major Francis E. Pierce, Jr. 6 victories.
Major Perry L. Shuman. 6 victories in F4Us.
Captain Joseph J. Foss*. 26 victories.
Retired as a brigadier general in Air National Guard
Captain Thomas H. Mann, Jr. 9 victories.
Also flew with VMF-224.
Captain Ernest A. Powell. 5 victories.
Captain Robert M. Baker. 5 victories.
Captain Donald C. Owen. 5 victories.
Captain Kenneth M. Ford, 5 victories in F4Us.
First Lieutenant William P. Marontate. 13 victories.
First Lieutenant William B. Freeman. 6 victories.
First Lieutenant Roger A. Haberman. 6.5 victories.
Captain Gregory K. Loesch. 8.5 victories.
Second Lieutenant Cecil J. Doyle. 5 victories.
Second Lieutenant Joseph L. Narr. 7 victories.

VMF-124:

Captain Kenneth A. Walsh*. 21 victories in F4Us.

VMF-212:

Lieutenant Colonel Harold W. Bauer*. 10 victories
Major Frank C. Drury. 6 victories (1 in F4Us).
Also flew with VMF-223.
Major Robert F. Stout. 6 victories. Flew with VMF-224.
Captain Jack E. Conger. 10 victories.
Captain Phillip C. DeLong. 11-1/6 victories in World War II, two victories in Korea (all in F4Us).
Major Hugh M. Elwood. 5.1 victories.
Retired as a lieutenant general.
Captain Loren D. Everton. 10 victories.
Also flew with VMF-223.
Warrant Officer Henry B. Hamilton. 7 victories.
Also flew with VMF-223.
Major Frederick R. Payne, Jr. 5.5 victories.
Also flew with VMF-223.

VMF-213 (all kills in F4Us):

Lieutenant Colonel Gregory J. Weissenberger. 5 victories.
Major James N. Cupp. 12 victories
Captain Sheldon O. Hall. 6 victories.
Captain John L Morgan, Jr. 8.5 victories.
Captain Edward O. Shaw. 14.5 victories.
Captain Wilbur J. Thomas. 18.5 victories.

VMF-214 (all kills in F4Us):

Major Gregory Boyington*. 28 official victories.
Captain William N. Case. 8 victories.
Captain Arthur R. Conant. 6 victories.
Captain Donald H. Fisher. 6 victories.
Captain John F. Bolt, Jr. 6 victories in World War II, six victories in Korea.
Captain Christopher L. Magee. 9 victories.
Captain Robert W. McClurg. 7 victories.
Captain Paul A. Mullen. 6.5 victories.
Captain Edwin L. Olander. 5 victories.
First Lieutenant Alvin J. Jensen. 7 victories.

VMF-215 (all kills in F4Us):

Captain Donald N. Aldrich. 20 victories.
Captain Harold L. Spears. 15 victories.
First Lieutenant Robert M. Hanson*. 25 victories.

VMF-221:

Lieutenant Colonel Nathan T. Post, Jr. 8 victories.
Captain Harold E. Segal. 12 victories.
Captain William N. Snider. 11.5 victories.
Captain James E. Swett*. 15.5 victories (7 in F4Fs)
Captain Albert E. Hacking., Jr. 5 victories (in F4Fs).

VMF-222 (all in F4Us):

Major Donald H. Sapp (later changed to Stapp). 10 victories.

VMF-223:

Major John L. Smith*. 19 victories.
Major Hyde Phillips. 5 victories.
Captain Marion E. Carl. 18.5 victories (2 in F4Us).
Retired as a major general.
Captain Kenneth D. Frazier. 13.5 victories (1 in F4Us).
Captain Fred E. Gutt. 8 victories.
Captain Orvin H. Ramlo. 5 victories.
First Lieutenant Charles Kendrick. 5 victories.
First Lieutenant Eugene A. Trowbridge. 6 victories.
Second Lieutenant Zenneth A. Pond. 6 victories.

VMF-224:

Lieutenant Colonel John F. Dobbin. 7.5 victories
Major Robert E. Galer*. 14 victories.
Retired as a brigadier general.
Major Charles M. Kunz. 8 victories.
Captain George L. Hollowell. 8 victories.
First Lieutenant Jack Pittman, Jr. 5 victories.

VMF-321 (all in F4Us):

Major Edmund F. Overend. 8.5 victories, including 5 with the Flying Tigers (3.5 in F4Us).
Captain Robert B. See. 5 victories.

Henderson Field—Night.

Watercolor by Sgt Hugh Laidman in the Marine Corps Art Collection

Sources

Sources for this booklet fall into two basic categories: general historical publications for the overall situation in the Pacific, and references that describe specific subjects, such as aircraft, personalities, and campaigns. I found several general official and commercial publications invaluable, including LtCol Frank R. Hough, Maj Verle J. Ludwig, and Henry I. Shaw, Jr., *Pearl Harbor to Guadalcanal* and Henry I. Shaw, Jr. and Maj Douglas T. Kane, *Reduction of Rabaul*, volumes 1 and 2, *History of U.S. Marine Corps Operations in World War II*, (Washington: Historical Branch, G-3 Division, Headquarters, USMC, 1958 and 1963, respectively), and Robert Sherrod, *History of Marine Corps Aviation in World War II* (Novato, California: Presidio Press, 1980). Other general histories included, Peter B. Mersky, *U.S. Marine Corps Aviation, 1912-Present* (Baltimore: Nautical & Aviation Publishing Company of America, 1983, 1986), Masatake Okimuya and Jiro Horikoshi, *Zero!* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1956), and John Lundstrom, *The First Team: Pacific Naval Air Combat from Pearl Harbor to Midway* (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute, 1984).

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He is the assistant editor of *Approach*, the Navy's aviation safety magazine, published by the Naval Safety Center in Norfolk, Virginia. Commander Mersky has written or coauthored several books on Navy and Marine Corps aviation, including *The Naval Air War in Vietnam* (with Norman Polmar), *U.S. Marine Corps Aviation, 1912–Present*, *Vought F-8 Crusader*, and *A History of Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 321*. He has written many magazine articles for American and British publications, and he also writes a regular book review column for *Naval Aviation News*.

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