

force arrived off the southern tip of the island and prepared to land. Shore batteries, in a 45-minute action, scored many hits and sank one destroyer (the first Japanese surface warship to be sunk by U.S. naval forces in WW II). The Japanese force abandoned the landing attempt and withdrew. Airborne during the action were Maj. Putnam and Capt. Elrod, Freuler and Tharin. As the force retreated, they went to work with 100-pound bombs and repeated strafing runs, scoring bomb hits on two light cruisers and a medium transport. The strafing caused one destroyer to blow up about 20 miles offshore. The ship's AA fire cut Elrod's main fuel line and his plane was wrecked as he made a beach landing just short of the air strip. Freuler's engine was badly shot up as well.

However, less than four hours after the landing attempt was thwarted, 30 bombers were again over the island. Lieutenants Kinney and Davidson hit them, with Davidson getting two, Kinney damaging another, and AA knocking down one and damaging three more. On the 12th, an early raid by flying boats was met by Capt. Tharin, who shot down one of the two four-engined aircraft. There was no further raid until the 14th, when the early seaplane raid was repeated, followed by the return of the 30 bombers from Roi at 1100. The raid killed two Marines and wounded a third, and also made a direct bomb hit on one of the two remaining fighters.

The make-shift engineering section continued its heroic efforts, trading from plane to plane and salvaging from wrecks so that, by December 17, there were still two serviceable F4Fs available. On the 20th, a Navy PBY landed in the lagoon and brought word from Pearl Harbor of a relief force on the way. It took off on the return flight at 0700 with unit reports, mail and urgent administrative matters. It was the last contact with Wake from the outside.

Just one hour and 50 minutes after the PBY took off, 29 bombers and 18 fighters arrived over the island, and this time there was a more ominous aspect about them. They were carrier types, indicating that new weight had been introduced to soften up the island defenses. Three hours later, 33 bombers from Roi arrived and reduced the AA defenses of the island to a total of only four three-inch guns left of the original 12. The two F4Fs were still serviceable. On December 22nd, Freuler and Davidson had the morning patrol, when 33 bombers and six fighters arrived from the carriers. Capt. Freuler managed to get one of the fighters but, in so doing, debris and flames from his target disabled his plane. As he headed back, wounded in the shoulder, to attempt a forced landing on

the strip, he caught a last glimpse of Davidson with enemy fighters on his tail. Freuler crash-landed his burning aircraft on the field, but Davidson was not seen again. Now the island was without aircraft and the remaining personnel of VMF-211 joined the defense battalion as infantrymen.

On the 21st and 22nd, the relief task force was about 600 miles from Wake. Because the ship losses and damage sustained at Pearl Harbor put a very high premium on what was left, the decision was made, reluctantly, on the 23rd, to turn back to Pearl Harbor.

In the early morning of December 23, the first Japanese troops landed on Wilkes Island, part of the Wake Island complex. At 0700, Commander Cunningham, the island's commander, ordered its surrender.

Marine Aviation did not participate again in early defensive operations until the Battle of Midway. Along the route to Australia, there were other islands to be defended. Airfields were built on most of these and, as soon as they were ready, Army, Navy or Marine aircraft units were assigned. Although the Japanese took Guam and the Philippines in the early days following Pearl Harbor, none of these island bases on the route to the southwest Pacific suffered the fate of Wake Island.

With the fall of Wake Island, the immediate concern of the 2nd MAW and MAG-21 was the reinforcement of Midway and the closest of the outer islands, from which a Japanese force could interdict the routes to and from Hawaii and the southwest. Of almost equal concern was the earliest possible provision of air defense for those Allies-held islands farther out on the route to Australia and the southwest.

All of the lifeline "route islands" were in American or British hands, but the only one that had any air defense was Fiji, where 22 British planes were based. Colonel Larkin of MAG-21 began strengthening Midway almost immediately after Pearl Harbor by dispatching Marine Scout Bomber Squadron (VMSB) 231 when it returned from deployment aboard *Lexington*. The long overwater flight was made one week later on the 17th. It was a major accomplishment to get the squadron ready to deploy again in one week's time. In addition, the arrival of VMF-221 was like a Christmas present on the 25th when it flew in from *Saratoga* with 14 F2As, on its way back to Pearl Harbor from the aborted relief task force for Wake. Aviation deployments came from elements of both the 1st and 2nd wings.

An important step toward organized expansion was taken on March 1, 1942. Squadrons were broken into as even a



In 1940, the 1st MAW HQ aircraft was this Curtiss SBC-4.

distribution of talent as possible, to form additional Marine air groups and fighter or bomber squadrons. For the most part, the reorganization was ahead of the equipment curve and the new units struggled along with minimum aircraft, sending whatever was available in planes and pilots to the MAG at Midway.

Personnel shifts continued in a constant effort to spread what experience and talent were available, as widely as possible. Regrettably, inexperienced and partially trained pilots generally had to be moved westward to Midway and Samoa, with some veterans going back to Ewa and the West Coast to take over new squadrons. The net effect was to turn Ewa, Midway and Samoa into training bases with minimum aircraft assigned. This was the case on the eve of the battle of Midway at the end of April. A typical squadron on the West Coast in the spring of 1942 would have as many as 60 lieutenants just out of flight training and only six obsolete F2As to fly.

## Battle of Midway

After the Battle of the Coral Sea, intelligence increasingly indicated a brewing assault by the Japanese, with Midway Island the target for invasion. Its occupation would give the Japanese the ability to control and interdict any operations from Hawaii.

On May 2, Admiral Chester W. Nimitz made a visit to Midway and, afterwards preparations for an attack intensified. By the end of May, the airfield was literally choked with any aircraft that could be spared from Hawaii. Included were four B-26s and 17 B-17s of the Army, and six Navy torpedo planes of the latest type. The Navy patrol planes, which had been based on the island from the beginning, now totaled 16. MAG-22 had 19 SBD-2s, 17 SB2U-3s, 21 F2A-3s and seven F4F-3s. The SBDs and the F4Fs were to carry Marine Aviation well into the start of its

swing to superiority, but at this point they were brand-new to these squadrons which, in turn, were largely manned by inexperienced pilots. As for the SB2U-3s and the F2As, both were obsolescent but they were all that was available.

The Japanese task force was formidable. It was composed of four carriers, including *Akagi* and *Kaga*; two battleships; three cruisers; adequate supporting destroyers; and the transport group carrying a landing force of 5,000 troops. The plan called for three days of softening up Midway by aircraft and naval bombardment, following which the 5,000 troops would land in the assault. In the approach to the Midway area, the transport group took a more southerly route with the main force coming into the area from the northwesterly quadrant.

The first sighting came from a patrol PBV which uncovered the transport force 700 miles to the west of the island at 0900 on June 3. The B-17s were sent out, and they found and struck the transport group but without any identified success.

The first sighting of the main enemy force came at 0525 on the morning of June 4. The four Army B-26s and the six Navy TBFs were launched for a torpedo attack against the carrier, reported to be 180 miles to the northwest of the island. At 0555, Navy radar picked up "many

planes" bearing 310 degrees at 89 miles and inbound for Midway. Within 10 minutes, all planes of both Marine squadrons were airborne. The fighters were divided into two units of 12 and 13 aircraft: seven F2As and five F4Fs under Major Parks were vectored directly on course for the inbound enemy planes; and 12 F2As and one F4F under Captain Armistead were vectored out to 10 miles to await an anticipated attack flight on a slightly different inbound heading. The dive-bombers were divided into two groups also, with 16 SBDs under Major Henderson and 11 SB2Us under Major Norris, both proceeding in company to attack the carriers "180 miles out, bearing 320 degrees, enemy course 135 degrees, speed 20 knots."

At 14,000 feet and 30 miles out, Maj. Parks and his 12 fighters ran into what looked like the whole Japanese air force: 108 planes, divided into several waves of attack, dive-bomber and fighter aircraft. Joined in just a few moments by Armistead and his 13, the 25 fighters gave all they had and scored well. They reduced the attack flight to almost half of the 36 horizontal bombers they started with, and the dive-bombers from 36 to 18 by the time they were over the target.

The courageous and resolute attack by the Marine fighters with their inferior planes resulted in the heaviest losses

they would sustain in all of WW II. Fifteen of the 25 pilots, including Maj. Parks, were lost in the brief action. In Maj. Parks' flight of 12, only Captains Carl and Carey and Lieutenant Canfield returned, while the Armistead flight lost six out of its 13. Although 13 F2As and two F4Fs were lost, the damage inflicted by the Marine fighters on the overwhelmingly superior striking force left the Japanese with considerably less weight to throw against the American carriers as the battle developed. It was a costly contribution to the successful outcome of the battle.

Because the fighters went after the inbound attack flight, the bombers headed toward the Japanese carriers were very much alone. In the first launch with the B-26s and the TBFs, no fighters were even airborne. The attack on the main Japanese force at 0710, almost 150 miles from Midway, was like the slaughter of the fighters closer in. Five of the six TBFs and two of the four B-26s fell to either enemy fighters or AA fire, without scoring a single hit on a Japanese ship.

Maj. Henderson's SBDs reached the enemy force ahead of the slower SB2U-3s at 0800. They went into a wide circle at 8,500 feet preparatory to launching a glide-bombing attack from 4,000 feet above the carriers. This was because the



Grumman F4F Wildcat fighters were the mainstay of the "Cactus Air Force" at Guadalcanal prior to the introduction of the F4U.

pilots were not experienced in the SBD which was new to the squadron. They had no time to learn and develop their dive-bombing tactics, a far less vulnerable approach than glide-bombing. Defending fighters hit them at 8,000 feet and Maj. Henderson was one of the first to be shot down.

Postwar analysis of Japanese records showed that, at 0810, hits were scored on two of the carriers, *Akagi* and *Soryu*, but that damage was quickly brought under control. Eight of the 16 SBDs were shot down in the attack and, tragically, no significant damage was done to the enemy carrier force. Major Norris and his 11 SB2Us arrived at the target about 15 minutes after the SBDs and was immediately attacked by defending fighters. The flight was out of position for a run on the carriers and was forced to choose a battleship as target, inflicting minor damage on either *Kirishima* or *Haruna*. Three planes were shot down and one pilot was recovered by a PT boat. At 1900, six SBDs and five SB2Us were launched to search for and attack a "burning carrier," 200 miles northwest of the island. The flight could not locate the enemy carrier and, on the return leg 40 miles from the field, Maj. Norris went into a steep turn while letting down and was not seen again.

June 4, 1942, was indeed a rough day for both fighters and dive-bombers of Marine Aviation — high on courage and resolve, low on time and equipment. At 0630, June 5, Captain Marshall Tyler, the third skipper of VM5B-241 in the fateful 24 hours of June 4-5, took off with what dive-bombers were left — six SBDs and six SB2Us. They had no trouble finding the target, as an oil slick 50 miles long led them right in. Capt. Tyler led the SBDs in a steep dive-bombing run from 10,000

feet against *Mogami* and achieved six near misses but no direct hits. The SB2Us were led by Captain Richard Fleming in another glide-bombing run from 4,000 feet at *Mikuma*, a light cruiser. Fleming was hit in the attack and, as he pulled out, his plane burst into flames and crashed into the after turret, starting many fires and causing extensive damage. He was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for his courageous and determined attack against the cruiser and his participation in all three missions of his squadron. This was the last Marine Aviation mission in the battle.

Any summary of the Battle of Midway gives top honors to the Navy carrier pilots. While no one surpassed the pilots of the Marine fighter aircraft and dive-bombers in sheer guts and determination, the carrier air groups showed what could be done with a minimum level of training in the up-to-date SBDs and F4Fs assigned.

In Adm. Nimitz' post-action message to the Marine Aviation units at Midway, he summed up their part in the Battle of Midway as follows: "Please accept my sympathy for the losses sustained by your gallant aviation personnel based at Midway. Their sacrifice was not in vain. When the great emergency came, they were ready. They met, unflinchingly, the attack of vastly superior numbers and made the attack ineffective. They struck the first blow at the enemy carriers. They were the spearhead of our great victory. They have written a new and shining page in the annals of the Marine Corps."

### The Road Back

Japan's early strategy carried it southward over and around the Philippines, westward to the Netherlands

and East Indies, and eastward toward New Guinea and the Bismarck Archipelago. By January 23, 1942, the Japanese had taken Rabaul, and almost immediately began to build it into their major base of operations in the eastern area of the Southwest Pacific. They viewed Rabaul as the focal point from which they could dominate New Guinea and Australia on the right, and the Solomons, New Caledonia, Fiji, and perhaps even New Zealand on the left. Little time was wasted by the Japanese and, within two months, they had pushed down this chain to Bougainville and beyond, and by early May to Tulagi in the southern Solomons.

One outcome of the Battle of the Coral Sea was that the Japanese abandoned, for the time being, their attempt to occupy Port Moresby in New Guinea and simultaneously seize Tulagi. The Battle of Midway took care of step two of their planning, which was the occupation of Midway and the seizure of the western Aleutians. These two outcomes made it feasible to reassess what could be done realistically with the policy of "doing the most with the least" in the South Pacific. Admiral Ernest J. King wasted no time in Washington looking into the matter, as he had been concerned almost from the beginning of the year with what he saw as the Japanese' step three: the conquest of New Caledonia, Fiji and Samoa. To offset such a move, it seemed logical to go "up" the same stepping stones the enemy was already starting "down."

The planning began as early as February 18, when Adm. King successfully sold the idea of making a base out of the island of Efate in the New Hebrides. By the end of March, a force had arrived at Vila, the capital of Efate, with the mission of building an airfield. The force was composed of the 4th Defense Battalion (Reinforced), a forward echelon of MAG-24, and 500 troops of the Army's Americal Division. VMF-212, under Lieutenant Colonel Harold W. Bauer, one of the great younger leaders of Marine Aviation, was on its way from Ewa to Efate by any transportation and with any incremental detachments that could be arranged. The squadron was in place and operating by June 9 and Col. Bauer became the anchor of all the preparations to open Espiritu Santo and mount the Naval and Marine Aviation effort for the Solomons campaign.

The campaign began with the Tulagi and Guadalcanal landings August 7. It was a turning point in the war against Japan, characterized by bold planning, high risk, short deadlines, almost nonexistent intelligence, inadequate shipping, dogged determination, magnificent combat performance, and exceptional stamina.

Marine Aviation played a major role in



The Brewster F2A Buffalo suffered greatly in combat against the Japanese Zero at Midway.



all phases of the operation and, because it was an all-Marine-type landing from the initial stages, assumed the overall aviation command as the force was augmented by Army Air Corps and allied squadrons from Australia and New Zealand. From time to time, Navy fighter, dive-bomber and torpedo squadrons also operated temporarily ashore from their carriers, and rendered key assistance in beating off steady Japanese attempts to retake the island.

On August 7, there were two Marine squadrons in the South Pacific: VMF-212 at Efate, and VMO-251 newly-arrived at Espiritu Santo. VMO-251 was equipped with F4F-3Ps long-range photo planes. They had arrived from Noumea in the latter part of July, and had barely had time to put their planes in commission before the landing. They did not receive their long-range fuel tanks until two weeks after the landing and so were not of much use in the operation. The land-based fighters and dive-bombers to support the First Marine Division (1st MarDiv) were those of the four MAG-23 squadrons and, as far as training and

aircraft were concerned, it was again almost the same situation of "new pilots and old machines" tragically seen at Midway.

However, just prior to sailing from Hawaii, things began looking up for the first two squadrons to leave for Guadalcanal. VMF-223, commanded by Captain John L. Smith, received brand-new F4F-4s; and VMSB-232, under Major Richard C. Mangrum, turned in its old SBD-2s for new SBD-3s, complete with self-sealing fuel tanks and armor plate. Both squadrons embarked on the escort carrier *Long Island* and launched for Guadalcanal about three weeks later on August 20, from a point about 200 miles southeast of the island. The other two squadrons of the group, VMF-224, commanded by Captain Robert E. Galer, and VMSB-231, led by Major Leo R. Smith, were in about the same shape as the first two squadrons. They left Hawaii on August 15 aboard the aircraft transports *Kitty Hawk* and *HammondSPORT*, and arrived at Guadalcanal on August 30.

From the very beginning of the

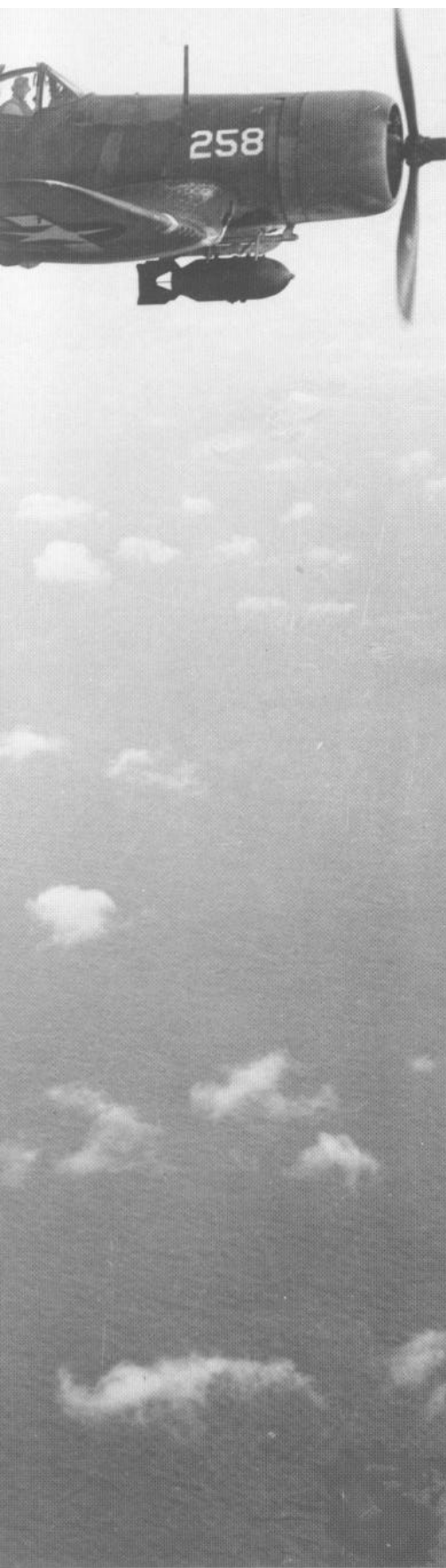
**The Douglas SBD-1 gave the Marine Corps its first modern dive-bomber prior to WW II.**

operation, the Japanese made it clear that they intended to run an "at any cost" operation to push the Marines back into the sea. There were two large air attacks on the first day. The next day, the pattern of daily operations was established as a raid of 45 bombers sank another destroyer and a transport.

On September 8, operations became complicated when General A. A. Vandegrift was informed that the carriers and the transports, which still held most of the Marine supplies, could not stay for the third of the three promised days and would have to leave the area. To make matters worse, on the night of the 8th, Japanese naval forces almost annihilated the screening force for the transports, sinking four cruisers and heavily damaging a fifth. Until the 20th, when the first planes arrived, this daily routine of heavy bomber raids did not let up. However, in between raids, every effort was made to bring in aviation fuel

Designed as a fighter, the F4U Corsair proved to be an excellent bomber and provided air superiority over the Zero.





and other supplies, and to do what engineering work could be rigged without equipment to improve the condition of the airfield.

On August 12, the field had 3,800 usable feet, 400 drums of aviation gasoline, and a captured Japanese radio which was used to transmit a message that the field was "ready to receive fighters and dive-bombers." At this point, it was found that the transports bringing VMF-223 and VMSB-232 were being held up at Suva because of the action on the 8th. There was also some word from the task group commander that the squadrons needed more carrier time before he could bring them forward and launch them, and that he "was writing a letter about the subject." Admiral J. S. McCain replied by dispatch that he needed fighters and dive-bombers "now" at Guadalcanal, and the ships were underway. Some pilots from 223, who were fresh out of flight school, were traded for an equal number from Col. Bauer's 212 at Efate, who had been out a little longer and were more experienced. This was done on the way to the launch point and, on the 20th, a mighty cheer went up on "the canal" when the 19 F4Fs and 12 SBDs began to land in the waning hours of the afternoon.

### The Solomons Campaign

Guadalcanal was undoubtedly a case of living from crisis to crisis in aviation supply, maintenance and availability of aircraft for periods that seemed interminable. As if these problems were not enough, the days were punctuated with either massive bombing raids or "washing machine Charlie" single bombers overhead all night.

From late August 1942, when the Marine Aviation defense operation began, until the end of the immediate threat in mid-November, there were gradual increases in fighter and dive-bomber strength. While most of these came from scheduled commitments of units deployed from Hawaii or the West Coast, during the early weeks, they came from VMF-212 in Efate and VMO-251 at Espiritu Santo, as individual reinforcements on temporary stays. On the same basis, detachments from carrier squadrons flew in for periods sometimes in excess of a month. Also, the Army Air Corps operated similarly and moved pilots in from training bases in the area as soon as they had a bare minimum of training. It was an "all-hands" evolution, for sure, and it was a major factor in saving Guadalcanal and giving the nation a foothold in the Solomons which was never relinquished.

It would be incomplete, indeed, to treat this critical period of Guadalcanal

without mention of those great leaders who "made it happen," the top of Marine Aviation, the Navy and the Army Air Corps. At the very top is Roy Stanley Geiger, who inspired and drove Marine Aviation to the levels of determination and stamina displayed at Guadalcanal. Heading the groups and squadrons supporting him were Colonel Bill Wallace of MAG-23, Lieutenant Colonel Dick Mangrum of VMSB-232 and Major John L. Smith of VMF-223. These were followed by Major Bob Galer of VMF-224 and Major Leo Smith of VMSB-231.

During the early weeks of September 1942, the fighter squadrons were periodically supported by aircraft and pilots of VMF-212, led by Lieutenant Colonel Joe Bauer, and VMO-251, with skipper Lieutenant Colonel John Hart. VMF-212 moved in permanently in mid-October, and VMO-251 (as a fighter squadron) under Major Joe Renner, arrived later. In early October, MAG-14, under Colonel Oscar Brice, relieved MAG-23 and brought VMF-121, commanded by Major L. K. Davis with Captain Joe Foss as Executive Officer; closely followed by VMSB-132 under Major Ben Robertshaw, and VMF-112, commanded by Major Paul Fontana. In mid-November, VMSB-131 and VMSB-142, under Lieutenant Colonel Pat Moret and Major Bob Richard, respectively, rounded out the Marine units participating in the critical August-November phase of the battle.

Units of the Army Air Corps and the Navy, were key participants in winning this lasting foothold in the Solomons at Guadalcanal.

December 1942 saw the beginning of Guadalcanal's establishment and build-up as the principal base for the move up the chain to zero in on Rabaul. The change didn't happen overnight, however. Air raids were somewhat less frequent, and there were daily signs of improvement in runways and taxiways. More aircraft of all types appeared in increasing numbers, and the aviation command was divided generally into a Strike Command at Henderson Field and a Fighter Command at Fighter Two.

There were many changes in command during the development of Guadalcanal as the anchor base for the reduction of the Solomons and Rabaul. Brigadier General Louis Woods relieved General Geiger in November and stayed until just before Christmas, when he was relieved by Brigadier General Pat Mulcahy. At this time, the air command was known as "Commander, Air Cactus," "Cactus" being the code name for the island. When Woods took over, the two tactical commands were newly formed under Colonel Al Cooley as Strike Commander and Lieutenant Colonel Joe