

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



Above, the Grumman-designed TBF/TBM was used only as a regular bomber and rocket-firing aircraft by the Marine Corps. Right, though obsolescent by December 7, 1941, the SBD continued to serve with distinction through the Philippine campaign in 1945.

Bauer as Fighter Commander. Bauer was lost, however, in mid-November, and Lieutenant Colonel Sam Jack took the Fighter Command. By the time Mulcahy relieved Gen. Woods, Colonel Oscar Brice had taken over the Strike Command and in late January Lieutenant Colonel Ed Pugh relieved Jack as Fighter Commander, holding that job until after the assault on Munda, in early July.

In mid-February 1943, a major reorganization of the area command structure took place and Rear Admiral Charlie Mason came to Guadalcanal as Commander, Air Solomons, short-titled ComAirSols. Six weeks later, Admiral Marc Mitscher relieved Mason and stayed in the job until late July, when he was relieved by General Nate Twining of the Army Air Corps. The command passed from service to service until the Solomons were put in the "backwater" category and Rabaul had been bypassed and rendered useless. As these changes developed, and as more fighters, bombers and fields became available, the staffs of the fighter and strike commands grew in size and special qualifications. The switch to assault operations set the pattern for many similar chain-type offensives en route to Japan

The first move forward was taken in late February as troops landed unopposed on the Russell Islands, 55 miles to the northwest. Navy Seabees had completed a field in six weeks, and a Marine air group was in full operation.

There were several other important items which marked the operations in the early months of 1943 as the drive "up the slot" got under way. First, was the arrival of VMF-124 in early February, equipped with the first of the Vought F4U *Corsairs* in the South Pacific theater, the "Bent-Wing Bird" to the Marines and "Whistling Death" to the Japanese. Since the *Corsair* had real performance superiority over the Japanese combat aircraft and much greater range than the F4F, things really began to happen in the daily routine of the air campaign. Within three months, all eight Marine fighter squadrons in the Solomons were not only equipped with the *Corsair*, but each squadron had been thoroughly trained in its employment and maintenance. This was just 12 months after the sorry situation faced by the Marine pilots at Midway.

AirSols routinely struck the airfields of southern Bougainville with escorted heavy bombers, night attacks by Navy

and Marine Corps TBFs, and some mining at night of the harbor areas by the TBFs. The shorter-range SBDs, as well, were invariably escorted in their routine reduction efforts against the fields in New Georgia. However, this does not mean that the defending Japanese had tossed in the towel; their fighter presence was made known repeatedly and invariably with surprise.

Almost as if to make known the fact that they were still "up there," down the slot they would periodically come, attacking ships at Tulagi or standing off the beaches of Guadalcanal. With allied strength at constantly growing levels, these forays were not only literally destroying Japanese naval aviation but, in the process, they were creating an ever-growing number of Marine, Army Air Corps and Navy fighter aces. The change in the character of air operations at this time, from defense to offense,

meant that most of the contacts with Japanese fighters, and in the case of the bombers with AA, were strictly in hostile territory. This increased emphasis on survival techniques, coast watcher networks, and rescue operations — the famed “Dumbo” missions.

The next big show was the assault on the central New Georgia airfields in order to be comfortably within fighter range of southern Bougainville. This began with initial landings of two companies of the 4th Marine Raider Battalion at the southern tip of New Georgia on June 24. The Japanese resisted these incursions fiercely with heavy air attacks and clouds of fighters, but they were met on D-day by a 32-plane, combat air patrol which was relieved on station from the fields at the Russells and Guadalcanal.

On July 9, the planned push from Rendova and New Georgia for the airfield at Munda Point began and, on the first day, the troops advanced half the distance to the field and were then stopped cold. Instead of a quick thrust to the airfield, it took the better part of six weeks to gain it and three Army divisions instead of the originally planned one. It was finally taken on August 5, and in nine days the Seabees had done enough so that two Marine squadrons could commence operations, VMFs 123 and 124. Big

strikes were run day and night against Ballale and Kahili, the major Japanese fields in southern Bougainville. In defending Munda, it is interesting to note that the Japanese expended 358 planes. Of the total, the Marines got 187, with the Army, Navy, New Zealanders and the AA sharing the balance. The cost was 94 aircraft, 34 of them Marine.

During the Munda and associated operations, attempts were made to accomplish a version of what later became the Marine close air support system. However, the difficulties of determining accurate positions in the jungle terrain made it impossible to achieve complete success. Attempts were made, which included air liaison parties with ground units, and a good deal was learned which refined subsequent operations, but it was a long way to the smooth doctrine which became operational in the Philippines,

On August 15, landings were made at Barakoma on Vella Lavella without much problem on the ground. However, as was anticipated, at only 90 miles from Kahili airfield the Japanese were overhead early and often. Again, continuous combat air patrols from Munda, similar to those at Guadalcanal and the Russells, for the landings there ensured that not one ship was hit during daylight. As was

becoming customary, the Seabees built a field for Marine fighters at Barakoma in short order. With that, plus the fields in the Munda area and the newly-formed Bomber Command from Guadalcanal, Kahili, Ballale, and the Shortlands began to feel the allied presence “in spades.” Several names became prominent in the fighter ace category at this stage of the Solomons operation. Famous among them were Marines Greg “Pappy” Boyington, Ken Walsh, Bob Hansen, Donn Aldrich and Wilbur Thomas.

September and October 1943 sounded the death knell for Japanese air operations from southern Bougainville as a result of the intensive operations. Ballale and Kahili began to take on the same lunar-landscape look that had signaled the end of operations at Munda and Vila plantation a few weeks before. But it was not the Japanese custom to give up without making it a costly affair in the air as on the ground.

Almost daily dive-bombing and strafing attacks were the routine life of the Japanese defenders but, in spite of these, operational aircraft continued to appear in the photo coverage of the airfields,

Admiral W. F. Halsey, and Adm. Nimitz had, some time before the reduction of Kahili, Ballale and the Shortlands, made the decision that the last step closest to



Rabaul would involve a total bypass of southern Bougainville. Under consideration were two much more lightly held areas of central Bougainville: Empress August Bay on the west coast, and Kieta on the eastern side. The decision was for Torokina Point at Empress August Bay and D-day was set for November 1. October became an extremely busy month with preparatory attacks from every possible base in the general area, from Rabaul to southern Bougainville. Included were commitments from General Douglas MacArthur for heavy air attacks on Rabaul and Kavieng, and planned carrier air assaults on Rabaul.

The main landings at Torokina put the assault elements of the 3rd Marine Division ashore as planned, with the forward echelon of the 1st Marine Air Wing and its fighter command, on November 1. Opposition was light but very effective. There was no airfield left on D-day, nothing but a narrow coconut grove at Torokina Point. Nevertheless, on D-day plus 1, the fighter command was on the air with radar coverage and air-ground communications, controlling 32 fighter patrol overhead. This continued until the Seabees finished enough of the Torokina strip 40 days later.

In addition to control of the day fighter patrols, a Marine-manned New Zealand ground control intercept radar was landed early in the operation for the control of night-fighters, but was not sited until about the time Torokina airfield was completed. Night-fighters from VMF-531, however, were overhead nightly and were controlled by either the fighter command or by the fighter directors on ships of the task forces in the area. VMF-531 was the first Marine night-fighter squadron and was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Frank Schwable, one of the earliest Marine night-fighter pioneers. The squadron was equipped with Lockheed PV-1 *Venturas*. They were hardly suitable for the task but, until the later night versions of the F4U and F6F became available, they filled the breach.

The Bougainville operation was resisted by the Japanese with air attacks, day and night; by surface strikes against the amphibious force; and by reinforcement of the defenses around the perimeter. When operations began from Torokina Point, the doom of Rabaul was at hand. Large fighter sweeps began in mid-December which were staged through Torokina to top off the fuel tanks, rebrief the various flight leaders and coordinate launch, rendezvous and departure. These sweeps were typically comprised of over 100 fighters and, at first, included P-40s, F4Fs, F4Us and P-38s. Results were usually about eight to 10 Japanese shot down for each allied


loss. The fighter sweeps were later reduced in size to be more manageable and, between December 17 and January 1, a total of 147 Japanese were reportedly destroyed over Rabaul by this tactic. There was no letup in the strikes on Rabaul and its complex of fields. However, it was a matter of bypass again, once the SBDs and TBFs began operating from the Piva strips.

Central Pacific Operations

Even before the demise of Rabaul was imminent, a major push through the central Pacific began on November 20, 1943, with the assault on Tarawa in the Gilbert Islands. This had a significant effect on the relationship between Marine Aviation and Marine ground forces. The Marine divisions were, of course, the spearhead of the amphibious

assaults but, in the bypassing strategy in the central Pacific, the distances were so much greater that there was no way that shore-based Marine Aviation could provide what it did in the Solomons.

While Marine Aviation was equipped with carrier-suitable aircraft, both it and the Navy were caught in a bind, the Marine Corps with respect to carrier training and the Navy regarding availability of ships for the Marine flyers. The net result was that Marine Aviation was relegated to the backwaters of the war, almost entirely from the reduction of Rabaul in early 1944 until the Philippines and Okinawa in 1944 and 1945. There wasn't another chain of islands like the Solomons in all the right places in the central Pacific, or a division of carriers that could take Marine squadrons into the many amphibious assaults that marked the central Pacific route to Japan. Even so, several MAGs were displaced



The B-25 provided the Marines with their heaviest bomber. Its multiple forward-firing guns had twice the fire power of a fighter aircraft.

forward from the Solomons and from Hawaiian areas, notably to Roi, Engebi and Majuro in the Marshalls, and later to Peleliu, Tinian and Guam.

In late July 1944, General Vandegrift made an extensive inspection trip to the Pacific. On his return through Pearl Harbor, conferences were held with Admirals Nimitz, Tower and Sherman; General Rowell, Commander, Marine Air Wings, Pacific; Brigadier General Thomas, Director Plans and Policies; and Brigadier General Harris, Director of Marine Aviation. The decisions reached brought significant changes in the employment of Marine Aviation for the balance of the war. There was a revalidation of the primary role of Marine Aviation as the support of Marine ground forces, with a recommendation that a division of six *Commencement Bay* -class escort carriers be manned with Marine Aviation squadrons for the purpose. The

six carrier groups would be trained at MCAS Santa Barbara, Calif. Each group would be composed of one VMF squadron with 18 planes and one Marine torpedo-bomber (VMTB) squadron with 12 planes, under a Marine Air Support Group known as Marine Carrier Groups, Aircraft, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific.

By the time the units were assembled, trained and qualified aboard their ships, the war was drawing to its end. The first of the Marine escort carriers (CVEs) to deploy was *Block Island*, which arrived off Okinawa on May 10, 1945. In addition to attacks on Japanese installations in the Okinawa area, she also supported the Marine divisions on the island. She was joined by the *Gilbert Islands* on June 1, and both participated in strikes in the Okinawa area and in the Balikpapan invasion. Two more Marine CVEs came out before the end, *Cape Gloucester* and *Vella Gulf*. All four Marine CVEs

participated in various aspects of the wind-down of the war, *Block Island* and *Gilbert Islands* taking part in the surrender of Formosa and the evacuation of approximately 1,000 allied POWs who had been imprisoned there.

The Philippines

During the Leyte operations in the fall of 1944, the kamikaze threat became a serious problem for our carrier task forces. To deal with it, faster climbing fighters were needed with greater top speed in order to reach and shoot down the suicide planes before they could reach their targets. The *Corsair*, which was not then operating in the fleet, had these capabilities and became the solution. Ten VMF squadrons were immediately assigned to carrier duty with Task Forces 38 and 58, two squadrons aboard each of five fast carriers of the *Essex* class. Between January and June 1945, the program operated and helped solve the problem. Since many pilots had no previous carrier experience, the operational accident toll was a little heavy at first. However, all units soon settled down and the only difference was in the uniforms being worn in the ward room. It was an admirable example of the close relationship which exists between Naval and Marine Aviation in training, equipment and operational understanding.

As events began to crowd into each week of the fall of 1944, the two gigantic pushes westward toward the Japanese home islands began to come together. With Peleliu and Ulithi as major air and fleet bases in the southwest Pacific, decisions previously made to also take the Philippines route were being carried out. MAG-12 arrived in early December at Tacloban, and MAG-14 in early January at Guiuan on neighboring Samar. Later, as the landings moved to Mindoro and then to Luzon at Lingayen Gulf, one of the most interesting involvements of Marine Aviation in the Pacific war began to unfold. On Bougainville, now one of the backwaters of the war, Major General Mitchell, ComAirNorSols, and commanding the 1st Marine Air Wing, had his Chief of Staff, Colonel Jerry Jerome, set up a close air support school with two MAGs, a total of seven SBD squadrons. The school was under the charge of the operations officer, Lieutenant Colonel Keith McCutcheon. A formal curriculum was drawn up, including a multilecture course for all pilots, communications technicians, and officers of the 37th Army Division, also stationed at Bougainville and scheduled for deployment to the Philippines. The program was an unqualified success. Once established at Dagupan near the

