The Cactus Air Force: The Story of the handful of fliers who save Guadalcanal
by Thomas G. Miller, Jr.


Death Off Savo

He had come through all of these unscathed, only to meet death through the random, insensate power of a tropical thunderstorm. In these beautiful, dreadful islands, nature killed as skillfully as man.

Admiral Yamamoto's plans were essentially complete by the 6th of November. Like most Japanese operations, particularly his own, they involved intricately scheduled coordination between several widely scattered but interdependent forces, each one of only moderate strength. The over-all objective was the landing of the main bodies of the 38th Division and the 8th Special Naval Landing Force with their heavy weapons and supplies on Guadalcanal on the morning of November 13. Yamamoto long since had recognized that Henderson Field was the key to the success of any such operation. His plan, therefore, provided for a bombardment of the field on the night of the 12th by two battleships of Kondo's fleet, and by both Kondo's and Mikawa's heavy cruisers on the 13th. The Second Fleet was divided into two forces, one built around *Hiyo* and *Junyo*, escorted by two battleships, and another which included two more battleships, *Hiei* and *Kirishima*, and a heavy-cruiser division. The latter force was to bomb the field. Mikawa's Eighth Fleet, operating independently of Kondo, was to escort Tanaka's transport convoy and protect it while it lay off Guadalcanal unloading. Yamamoto's total available strength for the operation was two aircraaft carriers, four battleships, seven heavy cruisers, four light cruisers, and thirty destroyers—all intended to ensure the safe arrival of eleven transports carrying 14,500 infantrymen and their precious equipment to Guadalcanal.

The Cactus Air Force had been slowly rebuilding its strength around the fragments left after its mid-October crisis. A new Marine Air Group, MAG-11, began to arrive on November 1. Its first squadron on the island was Marine Bombing 132, commanded by Major Joseph Sailer. Joe Sailer was blond and compact, a product of Philadelphia private schools and Princeton. In the five weeks of life that remained to him he was to earn a legendary reputation among flying Marines. Another of MAG-II's squadrons, Major Paul Fontana's Marine Fighting 112, started operations from the Fighter Strip on November 2.

By early November, it was clear to all that Roy Geiger, the rock-hard old airman, was suffering from a bad case of combat fatigue. Two months and four days of seeing his always outnumbered young men killed or evacuated, unable to fight any more, had finally broken down even his constitution. Louis Woods was sent up to relieve him as Commander Air, Guadalcanal, on November 7. Geiger was furious and charged his old friend with disloyalty. Woods vainly did his best to reason with his distraught superior, who returned, unmollified, to Espiritu Santo at Halsey's order. In a way it was a tragedy for Jiggs Geiger to be sent back to run his air wing from
a desk six hundred miles from the fighting. He knew that he was about to miss the final battle for the island. But for the Cactus Air Force, it was the best thing that could have happened. Fresh, relatively rested, ten years younger than Geiger, changed by his promotion, as he said, "from a kindly old colonel to a bloodthirsty brigadier general," Louis Woods stepped into the direct command of Guadalcanal's air power at the most crucial hour of its short, tumultuous history.

...that more Bettys were on their way. Seven F4Fs led by Foss scrambled, climbing to 29,000 feet to orbit over the cloud-covered bay and wait. At 1335 the island's radar picked up the Japanese 109 miles away at an altitude of 20,000 feet and tracked them until they were only thirty miles away, over the east tip of Florida. At that point, radar suddenly lost them.

Admiral Turner's transports had been formed up into air defense formation off Lunga Point, and were the first to sight the Japanese bombers. They were Bettys, nineteen of them in a great disorderly gaggles. The usually impeccable Japanese formation had come apart as the big planes dove down from 25,000 feet and swung around Florida Island to head toward Turner's reinforcement group. Their rapid let down had given them great speed and as they turned onto their attack course the Bettys were doing over 300 knots.

Foss saw them too as they emerged from under the clouds that covered Florida and flashed across Ironbottom Sound toward the transports. The seven F4Fs dove at full throttle to head them off. As their airspeed indicator needles drifted past the painted-on red lines at 300 knots, Foss's cockpit canopy suddenly ruptured from unbalanced internal and external pressures and the two walkway strips on his wings blew off. All of the canopies frosted over as the fighters plunged straight down from the cold heights into the warm, muggy dampness near the surface. The Marines, thanks to the tremendous speed of their dive from 29,000, caught the Bettys just as they were starting their torpedo runs. The sky was black with the antiaircraft fire of twenty-seven warships, and white wakes criss-crossed the bay as Turner's transport group swung this way and that to avoid the torpedoes. Just about the time that the seven Grummans from VMF-121 reached the Bettys, they were joined by Major Fontana, with eight more from VMF-112 and by eight P-39s of the 67th.

Now quick bursts of flame and long plumes of smoke began to add to the chaotic pattern of the battle as the American fighters darted in and out of the Japanese formation. Foss pulled up to within a hundred yards of one of the on-rushing Bettys, set its right engine on fire with a short burst, and watched it cartwheel into the water. In less time than it takes to read about it, the now-fleeing Japanese were past the ships, running for their lives from the Army and Marine fighters. One of the flaming Bettys sideswiped the cruiser San Francisco as it flew by, killing or wounding fifty men. As Foss passed over the ships, a Zeke made a run on him; he pulled up, found the Japanese fighter in his sights, gave him a short lethal squirt, and went back to the bomber that he had been chasing. That too went flaming into the water.

The whole thing was over in less than eight minutes. All but two of the Japanese bombers were shot down by the fighters and ships' antiaircraft—Foss counted twelve of them floating on the water at the same time after the fight—at the cost of three Marine F4Fs and one of the P-39s. None of the transports was hit and they resumed unloading the Army troops. The destroyer
Buchanan had been struck by a "friendly" antiaircraft shell and was damaged badly enough to be ordered south; the San Francisco, although she lost thirty men, was only superficially damaged.

By nightfall on the 12th, the stage was being set for what was obviously going to be the biggest battle yet. Admiral Turner's ships, their job done, headed back to Espiritu Santo. The cruisers and destroyers which had protected them remained to intercept the Japanese surface forces closing in on the island. Aircraft reports had come in all day to Vandegrift, Turner, and Halsey as they sighted and tracked the scattered forces deployed by Yamamoto. They found the bombardment force of two battleships 300 miles to the north, heading inexorably toward Guadalcanal. They also thought they had sighted two carriers far to the westward; although this was mistaken ship recognition, it added further to the growing dread felt by the American commanders. Admiral Fitch, recognizing supreme crisis, had been collecting aircraft reinforcements from all over the South Pacific and sending them into Guadalcanal as fast as they could be found.

Eighty-Seven Days

Smith and Galer both left the Marine Corps as colonels, but Mangrum, Marion Carl, John Dobbins, George Dooley, and Paul Fontana all stayed on to become general officers. Dick Mangrum retired in 1967 as a lieutenant general and assistant commandant of the Corps. Carl led some of the first Marine units into Vietnam in 1965 and in 1969 was a Major General. Joe Foss returned to his native South Dakota after the war, became its governor for two terms, and has remained in the public eye in various capacities.

Among the Navy Dyers, Don Felt went on to become a four-star admiral and eventually to command all Army, Navy, and Marine units in the Pacific in which he once fought as an air-group commander. Fighting Five's exec, Dave Richardson, as a vice admiral in 1968 commanded the 6th Fleet in the Mediterranean. Bullet Lou Kim too became a rear admiral, and Turner Caldwell, as a "vice-admiral, is the Navy's senior antisubmarine-warfare officer. Gus Widhelm was killed in a jet crash in 1954 and Jimmy Flatley died tragically of cancer in 1958.

The legendary heroism of the First Marine Division and the Cactus Air Force on Guadalcanal helped to give that fierce, proud old Corps the spirit that was to carry it over the satanic beaches of Iwo Jima and, in a later war, on the long march back from the Chongjin Reservoir. Perhaps the legend still is remembered sometimes along the Seventeenth Parallel by men condemned to relive the trials of their fathers.

Guadalcanal is quiet now, bypassed by history. A new city was built on the island after the war, a little west of the perimeter. Henderson Field and Fighter One still are there, and the faint signs of the battles on the Ridge can be found just to the south of them. Of the desperate days, little now remains to be seen. Small clouds of butterdies now dance over the grassy plain where, twenty-five years ago, men were so frightened and so brave. In the depths of the South Pacific the shattered ships sleep forever. Here and there in the darkness of the jungles, little heaps of torn aluminum and rusting steel lie in the rain, all that is left of the beauty and power of the planes. And over the silent islands the clouds roll and moil endlessly in a sky empty of man.
Appendix:

MARINE FIGHTING SQUADRON 112 (VMF-112)

November 2 into 1943

Pilots (arrival date, remarks)

Maj PJ Pontana (11/2)
Capt RB Fraser (11/10)
2/Lt HW Bollman (11/2)
2/Lt AA Case (11/10)
2/Lt LL Clark (11/2)
2/Lt HG Cleveland III (11/2, Evac 11/15)
2/Lt JJ DeBlanc (11/10)
2/Lt AG Donahue (11/7)
2/Lt F Green (11/10)
2/Lt TH Hughes, Jr. (11/10)
2/Lt JE Johnson (11/2)
2/Lt WW Laird (11/7)
2/Lt JB Maas (11/2)
2/Lt G Percy (11/10)
2/Lt EK Pedersen (11/2)
2/Lt JL Secrest (11/2)
2/Lt FE Sedlacek (11/10, Evac 11/15)
2/Lt FC Thomas (11/2)
2/Lt EV Wagner (11/10)
2/Lt JF Wagner (11/10)
2/Lt WW Wamel (11/7)
S.Sgt WH Cochran, Jr. (11/10, MIA 11/11)
S.Sgt GJ Conti (11/10)
S.Sgt TC Hurst (11/2, Shot down 11/14. Walked in 11/30)