

... AND A  
FEW MARINES:  
MARINES IN THE LIBERATION  
OF THE PHILIPPINES

MARINES IN  
WORLD WAR II  
COMMEMORATIVE SERIES

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MARINES IN THE LIBERATION OF PHILIPPINES (SFT)

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# ... And a Few Marines: Marines in the Liberation of the Philippines

by Captain John C. Chapin, USMCR (Ret)

**I**t was apparently an insignificant event when a few Marine planes flew into a muddy airfield at Tacloban on the island of Leyte in the Philippines on 3 December 1944. All around them were the elements of the massive U.S. Army invasion which had begun on 20 October. Seven infantry divisions and six Army Air Force (AAF) air groups dominated the island scene. It was the start of a major campaign in which Marine aviation would play a major role

The first Marine planes to arrive that day were 12 Grumman F6F Hellcat night fighters of VMF(N)-541, nicknamed the "Bateye" squadron. They had flown the 602 miles from their base on Peleliu in the Palau Islands. A few hours

later 66 Chance-Vought F4U Corsair Marine fighters roared in to join them at the crowded strip, after a series of island-hopping stops on their 1,957-mile trip from Emirau in the Bismarck Archipelago. These Corsairs were the advance guard of the 85 planes coming from VMF-115, -211, -218, and -313 of Marine Aircraft Group (MAG) 12 in the Solomon Islands. They would serve as part of the 308th Bombardment Wing of the Fifth Army Air Force under Major General Ennis C. Whitehead, USA. The same day they arrived, six night fighters of the "Bateye" squadron were already back in the air for their first mission, flying cover for a torpedo boat. It was a small beginning of bigger things to come.

## *Planning for the Philippines*

The deployment of Marine planes to the Philippines was an event which seemed unlikely earlier. General Douglas MacArthur, Commander, Southwest Pacific Area, had been deeply committed personally to the recapture of the Philippines ever since his speedy departure from there in 1942 with the ringing promise, "I shall return." On 12 March 1944, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) issued a directive setting the southernmost island of Mindanao as the first American objective in the Philippines. This prompted Major General Ralph J. Mitchell, commanding general of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing (MAW) in the northern Solomon Islands, to fly to

*With its built-in radar, the Grumman F6F(N) Hellcat nightfighter was directed towards lucrative enemy targets during nighttime missions in the liberation of the Philippines. These Hellcats are shown over Leyte.*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A700605

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**On the Cover:** A Marine combat artist in Manila while the battle there still raged, Sgt Paul Arlt described this wash drawing: "Sharply outlined against rising clouds of smoke, the gutted steel and concrete shell of the nine-story Great Eastern Hotel is one of the countless buildings destroyed by retreating Japs. Down on the rubble-strewn street, a Philippine citizen glances apprehensively over his shoulder as Marine dive bombers of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing sweep overhead. Seconds later, these planes dropped 20 tons of high explosives on enemy ships in the harbor, knocking out Jap antiaircraft batteries . . . ."

**At left:** *Unsung heroes of the air war were the ground crews, who ensured that each squadron would have a high operational rate of its aircraft. Capt Elton A. Barnum Collection*



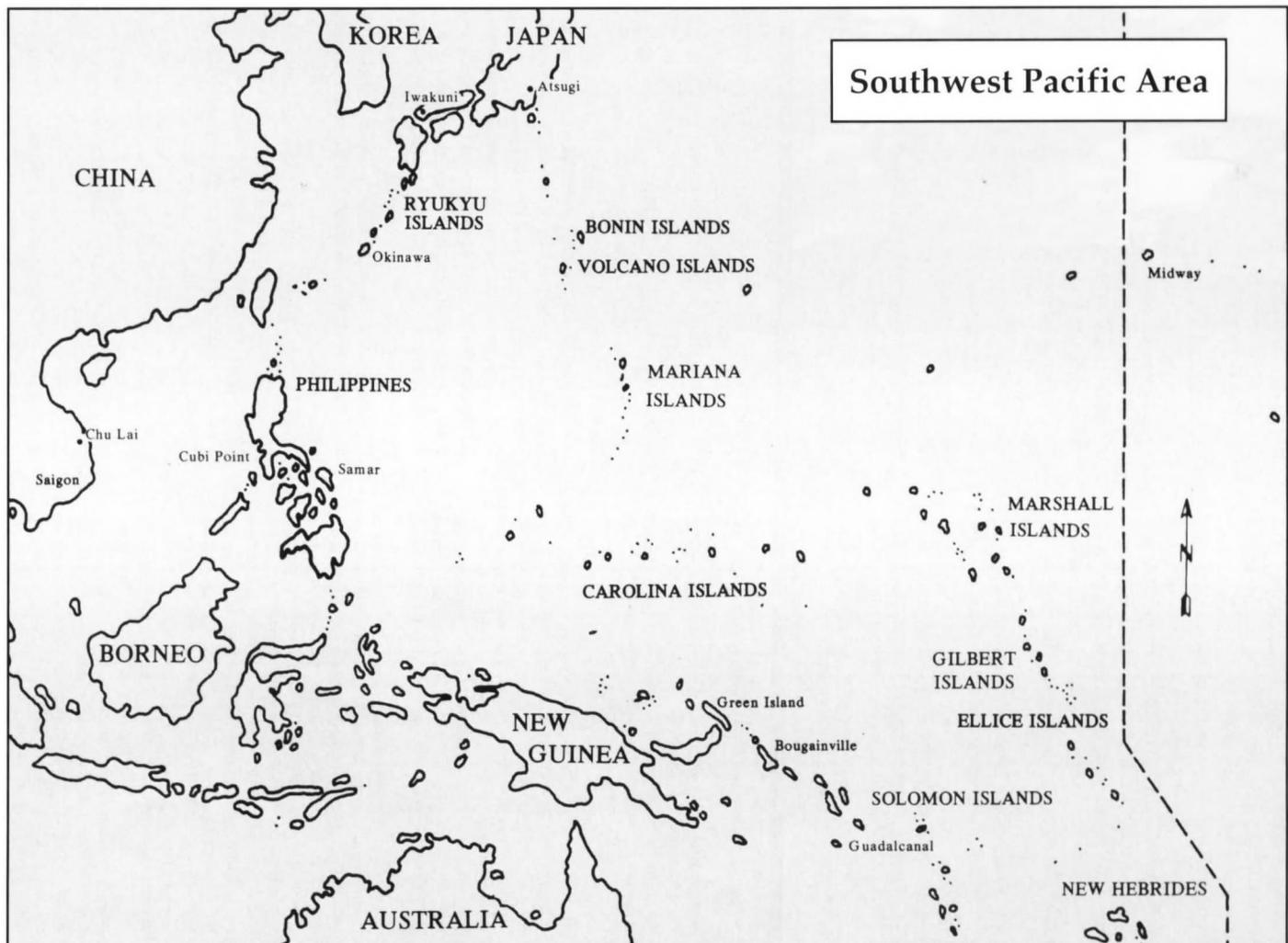
Australia in May, and again in August, to meet with General MacArthur and his air chief, Lieutenant General George C. Kenney, and strenuously urge the use of Marine aviation in the impending campaign. His reasons were compelling: Japanese air power was by now almost wholly eliminated in the northern Solomons and his squadrons were battle-hardened from 22 months of almost continuous air operations. General Mitchell hit a stone wall: This was to be an all-Army operation.

Then a new factor emerged in the strategic planning. Subsequent air strikes on 12 September by Admiral William F. Halsey's Third Fleet fast carrier force, scourging the island of Leyte (in the central Philippines), revealed that Japanese defenses there were much weaker than expected.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A412617

*The fabulous Vought F4U Corsair, the Marines' aircraft of choice in the Pacific War, gave Leatherneck pilots a victorious edge over their Japanese opponents. As a versatile fighter-bomber, it could carry bombs to 1,000 pounds (as shown here) and provided both close and long-range air support.*



Accordingly, the JCS issued a new directive on 15 September 1944, setting Leyte as the target for a 20 October landing. With this objective a considerable distance away from the Marines' Solomon squadrons, the outlook for their involvement in the Philippines campaign seemed not to be in the cards.

### *Marine Artillery Arrives*

On 20 October, four Army divisions made landings on the east coast of Leyte. Following them in on the next day (21 October) was not an element of Marine aviation but the Marine V Amphibious Corps (VAC) Artillery. This anomaly occurred because the normal heavy artillery of the Army's XXIV Corps had been detached to support the Marine assault in the Mariana Islands. Once there, they were not available in time for the Leyte landings, and so the Marines' big guns had been sent from Pearl Harbor to support the Army infantry in the Philippines. Thus, Brigadier General Thomas E. Bourke led ashore the 1,500 Marines of the 11th 155mm Gun Battalion, the 5th 155mm Howitzer Battalion, and the Corps Artillery Headquarters Battalion.

## Major General Ralph J. Mitchell

As Commanding General, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, Mitchell was the original motivating force behind the assignment of Marine aviation to the Philippines. Headquarters duty forced him to remain in Bougainville, with only occasional visits to his subordinates at the scene of action. He was in charge of the 1st MAW from April 1943 to June 1945.

Both the Army and the Navy awarded him a Distinguished Service Medal, and he was also awarded a Legion of Merit.

Born in 1889, commissioned in 1915 after graduating from the U.S. Naval Academy, Mitchell took an early interest in flying. He earned his Naval Aviator wings in 1921, and served with a Marine squadron in Nicaragua in 1929-30. While there he was awarded the

Distinguished Flying Cross.

In 1939 he was Director of Aviation at Marine Corps Headquarters. After the war, he retired in 1948 as a lieutenant general, and he died in 1970.

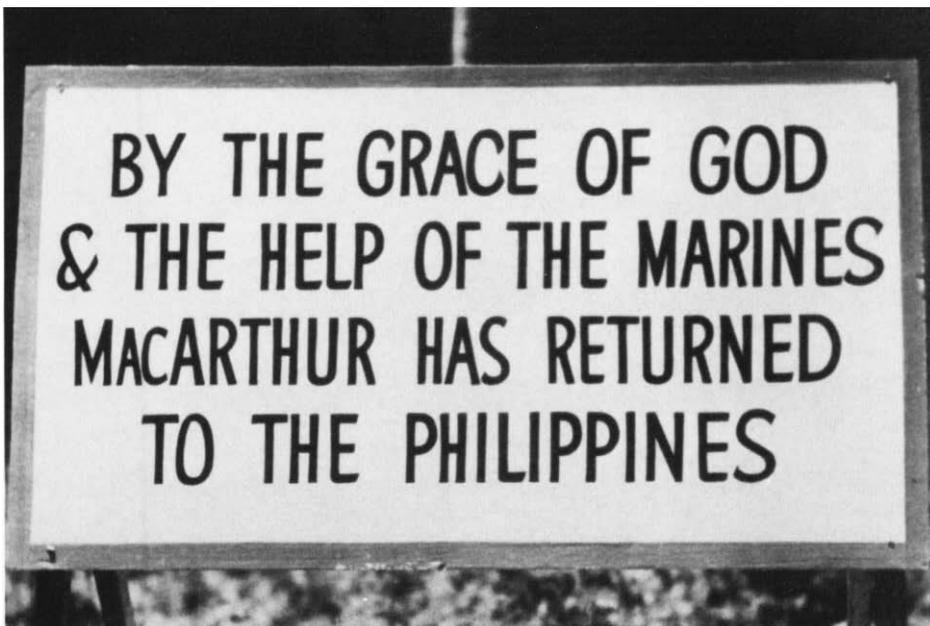


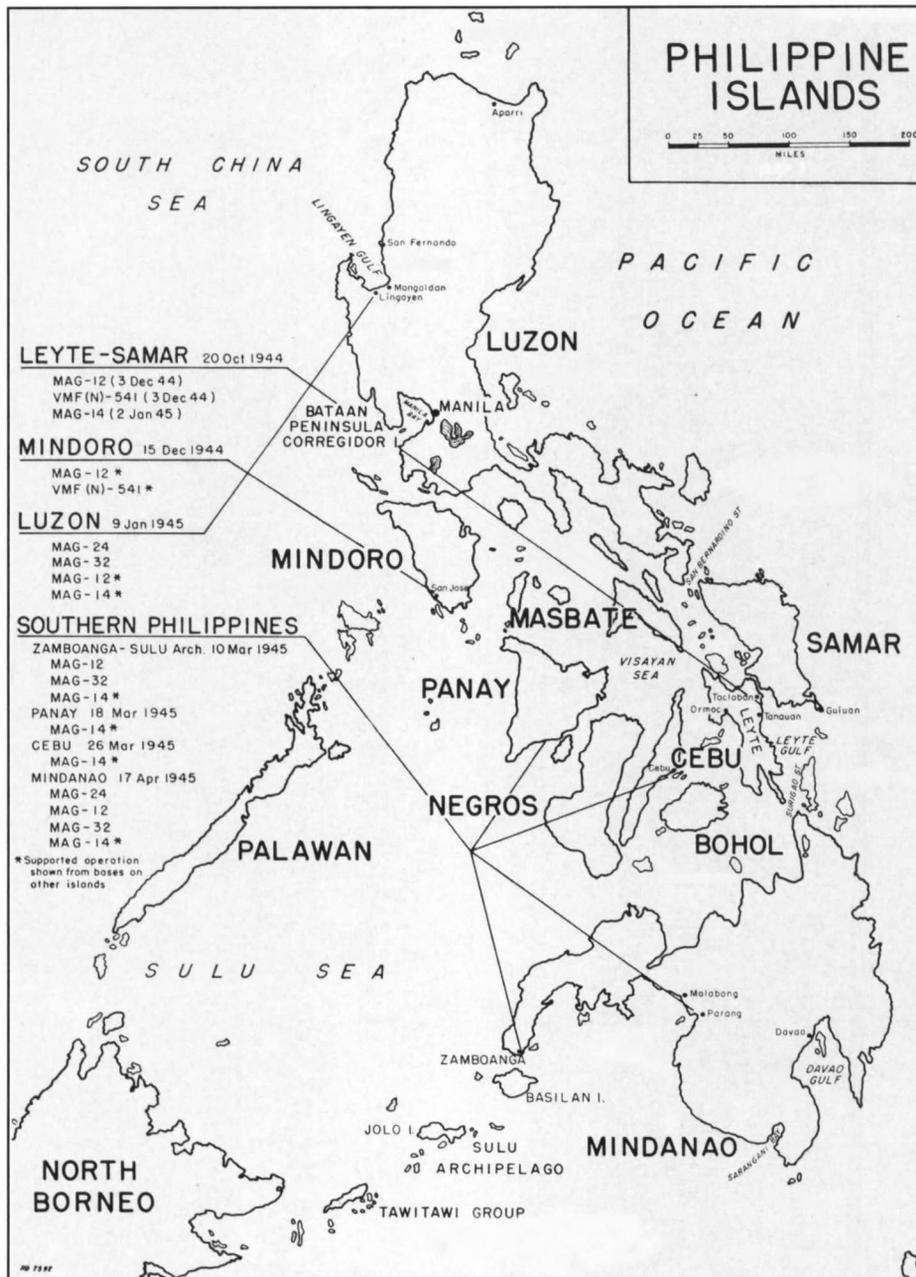
Moving quickly into action, the cannoneers initially fired in support of the Army's XXIV Corps from positions near the beachhead.

Manning one of the weapons in Battery B of the 11th 155mm Gun Battalion were PFCs Frank Pinciotti, Shelby Heimback, and

Walter Dangerfield. As Dangerfield remembered, after they landed and emplaced their gun, the three of them decided that "it was time [for the Marines] to have some recognition." Pinciotti came up with the idea of painting "By the grace of God and the help of the Marines, MacArthur has returned to the Philippines" on the cover of a wooden ammunition box and hanging it over the barrel of their Long Tom. "Soon one of our officers ordered us to take it down, as MacArthur would come around to inspect." Apparently other Marines saw the sign before it came down and according to reports, before long, it appeared elsewhere in the islands. It has also been reported that General MacArthur saw one of the signs and wanted the perpetrator or perpetrators found out and punished. But this perhaps is an apocryphal story.

During the critical naval Battle of Leyte Gulf (23-26 October),





base, and the Americans the other part. Meanwhile, the Cub planes continued to operate on the strip. Finally, the evening of 10 December, additional troops cleared out the Japanese.

That dramatic episode concluded the action by the V Amphibious Corps Artillery on Leyte. It was relieved on the following day when the Army's XXIV Corps Artillery arrived from Saipan.

The Marine artillery battalions left for Guam on 13 December, with an Army commendation for their "splendid performance" in fire support missions for the Army infantry divisions.

### *Problems on Leyte*

Other events on Leyte after the landing brought an unexpected change in plans for the air war. The foul weather of heavy tropical storms, with 35 inches of rain in 40 days, had badly impeded both the advance of the Army infantry and the construction of adequate airfields for American use.

Japanese bombing continued in spite of preemptive strikes by planes from Halsey's fast carriers. Most serious of all, waves of enemy troop reinforcements were continuously being landed at Ormoc on Leyte's west coast. The numbers were distressingly large; some official estimates were as high as 47,900. In any event, it was clear that enemy strength on Leyte had more than doubled. There was also a special problem in the air war. The Japanese night fighter-bombers, the Nakajima Ki-43 Hayabusa called "Oscars" by the Americans, were too fast for the Army Air Force P-61 Northrop Black Widow night fighters.

Late in November, MacArthur acted decisively. He arranged for a switch in which the AAF squadron would go to Peleliu and the Marine night fighter squadron there, VMF(N)-541, with its F6Fs

there was concern for a Japanese naval attack to the rear of the Marine artillerymen. The threat ended when the enemy fleet was driven off. As the infantry divisions fought their way inland, the Marine artillery made a series of displacements to keep pace with the forward movement. Each move was greatly hindered by the heavy rains in November which turned the primitive roads into muddy swamps.

Because of the nature of the terrain, visual observation for fire adjustment was frequently impossible, but the 12 L-4 (Cub) liaison

planes available to the Marine artillerymen proved invaluable for spotting results. On the night of 6-7 December, the Buri airfield where these planes were based was first bombed and then assaulted by a force of enemy paratroopers who had been dropped to join up with local Japanese infiltrators. Their combined force of 350-450 men was met by 30 men of the Corps Artillery Air Section, who fortunately were soon joined by other Marine and Army personnel at the airstrip. A stalemate ensued, with the enemy holding one part of the

and their 313-knot top speed, would come to muddy Tacloban Field on Leyte

Simultaneously, came one of those flukes that change forever the course of events. Halsey was anxious to leave Philippine waters for a strike at Tokyo, and Vice Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid, commander of the U.S. Seventh Fleet, was very concerned about Japanese *kamikaze* attacks on his ships. (*Kamikaze* was the Japanese term for bomb-laden suicide planes whose pilots would crash on purpose into U.S. ships.) So, Halsey recommended a substantial participation of Marine aviation. He later wrote:

I had under my command in the South Pacific a Marine Air[craft] Group [12] which had proved its versatility in everything from [air combat] to blasting enemy vessels. I knew that this group was now under MacArthur's command, and I knew too, without understanding why, that when Kenney was not keeping it idle, he was assigning it to missions far below its capacity.

Kinkaid's complaint of insufficient air cover prompted me to take a step which was more than a liberty; to a man of meaner spirit than MacArthur's it would have seemed an impertinence. I called these Marines to his attention. He ordered them forward, and within twenty-four hours of their arrival, they had justified my recommendation.

### *Full-Scale Operations*

And so it was that those first Marine planes flew in on 3 December. These Corsairs were soon augmented to re-form MAG-12 with its original four full fight-

er squadrons under the command of Colonel William A. Willis: VMF-115, -211, -218, and -313. They went right to work. U.S. naval convoys had to be protected against enemy air attacks; fighter-bomber strikes had to be directed on Japanese shipping and ground installations; ground support missions had to be flown for the Army infantry on Leyte; and, perhaps most vital of all, there had to be interdiction of the Japanese reinforcements pouring into the western ports of Leyte.

Working with the P-38 Lockheed Lightning and P-40 Curtiss Warhawk AAF planes, the Marines quickly were again in head-to-head combat with the famous Japanese fighter, the "Zero" (officially called the "Zeke"), as well as a variety of other enemy planes comprising the *First Combined Air Force* of both Japanese Army and Navy planes, commanded by Vice Admiral Shigeru Fukudome. The Corsair, with its 365-knot top speed and six .50-caliber machine guns, proved to be still as formidable as it had been in the Solomons. The Hellcats, with their speed, special radar equipment, and intensive night combat experience at Peleliu, proved equally effective.

The assigned missions of air cover for friendly forces, as well as attacks on enemy troops, ships, and airfields were not the primary mission Marine pilots of MAG-12 had trained so hard for: close air support of ground troops.

Nevertheless, along with the AAF fighters, they focused on the priority task of shutting down the flood of Japanese reinforcements flooding into the port of Ormoc. For five crucial days, from 7 to 11 December, above the bay it was the scene of a fierce aerial struggle, with swirling dogfights and bombing runs on enemy ships. When those days ended, so did Japanese reinforcement efforts.

There were major differences in the tactics of the Marine F4Us and the P-40s of the AAF. One of the American bombing attacks was described by Captain Rolfe F. Blanchard of VMF-115:

. . . When the ships were sighted (there was a broken layer of cumulus between 6-7,000 feet) the Army started peeling off in groups of two and three planes and dove from 10,000 to about 5,000, released bombs and pulled back through the overcast. They accomplished nothing except to make interesting splashes in the water and wake up the Japs. AA [anti-aircraft fire] immediately became very intense. As the last Army bombs were falling, our Corsairs were in position and coming in fast and low. The Japs never saw us coming until we started to shoot (we received no fire until past the screening destroyers) . . . .

A total of six hits were scored in masthead runs on two troop ships which sank, and there was a near miss which slightly damaged one destroyer in the attack. Second Lieutenant Michael A. Gudor shot down a "Zeke" and then was jumped by two more. He described the action as follows:

. . . I tailed in on my Zeke, fast overtaking him. At approximately 100 yards, I was 10 degrees or so off the dead astern position and put a burst of .50 cal. through the engine and brought it back through the cockpit. The Zeke smoked, suddenly moved down, and spiraled into the sea . . . .

Two Zekes at the same altitude turned towards me, so I

turned into them for the book says, "In a head-on run, a Jap plane will either turn aside or blow up." Evidently this Jap hadn't read the book for he kept coming. We were closing fast, prop to prop. All my six .50 cal. guns were going and pieces were flying off the Zeke's cowling. At the last possible instant I nosed my Corsair violently down. The Zeke passed over and sheared off half the rudder and left stabilizer . . . .

In this desperate crisis, Gudor dove his plane for the ocean. At a speed of 400 knots it vibrated so badly he was afraid it would disintegrate. In addition, the oil pressure sank to zero and his propeller froze. Finally, at an altitude of 800 feet, he was able to level his plane and bail out. All through the night he floated in his life raft and watched the Japanese convoy burn. About 1700 the next day a "beautiful" Navy seaplane rescued him.

And so it went in a busy December for the Marine Corsair pilots. They covered U.S. shipping and the Army landings on the large island of Mindoro. They encountered miserable, overcrowded conditions at Tacloban Field, with a steady dose of bad weather, low ceilings, and very poor visibility. There were operational accidents, such as a plane failing on takeoff and then crashing into a jeep, an ambulance, and a truck at the base, with fires and deaths resulting.

In spite of these problems, the Corsairs flew a full schedule of missions against enemy installations in Japanese-occupied towns on Leyte.

MAG-12 got good news late in December. A new airstrip had just been finished near Tacloban at Tanauan. The Corsairs were then able to move to less crowded con-

ditions and better landing surfaces there.

VMF-212 was one of those busy squadrons. It had had a glorious earlier history at Guadalcanal. There, one of nine Marine aces, its commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Harold W. "Indian Joe" Bauer, had been posthumously awarded a Medal of Honor. Now the squadron's varied missions ranged from Mindoro to the Sulu Sea, from Luzon to the Visayan Sea, from Leyte Gulf to the islands of Cebu and Negros.

With all this MAG-12 action, there was a steady toll of Marine planes shot down, pilots lost, and afterwards rescued. In some cases, there were bizarre experiences. First Lieutenant R. M. Robinson was shot down by fire from a "friendly" PT boat, and then picked up safely by the same boat. Another, Second Lieutenant Walter D. Bean, had a series of memorable episodes after he was wounded and shot down on 11 December. In his official report he later recalled:

. . . I gave up the leaking Mae West [life preserver] and all my clothing; every article seemed to drag me down [in the ocean] and exhaust me further. Not being an exceptional swimmer, the situation became less hopeful. Luck smiled upon me though, for after another 45 minutes of floating and paddling in the raw I spotted a large log bobbing temptingly. Distance and time were exaggerated twofold before I reached and clutched its welcome support . . . .

Semi-conscious that night, carried in random directions by the ocean currents, seeing Japanese destroyers and AAF P-38s, now famished for food and suffering cramps, the pilot stuck it out until

he spotted 10 small fishing boats headed for him. After almost an hour, all of the boats except one turned away. After still another 45 minutes, the last little boat approached and circled him cautiously. His closely cropped blond hair, when they were within calling distance, led them to show further caution. Was he German or American, they shouted? Once in the boat, he lost consciousness.

There ensued a kaleidoscope of being carried ashore and then sleeping, eating, a native doctor, and discovering he was on a small island near the big island of Cebu. Bean continued his story with a description of being taken to the nearby village:

[I was] given the best of food and care. The more wealthy citizens of the town gave me clothes, shoes, soap, toothbrush and all the incidentals I needed. I had been the first American to be seen by these natives since the beginning of the war. Everyone wanted to know when the Americans were going to liberate Cebu . . . . The natives had matches and chocolate bars, sent in by MacArthur in 1942 by submarine, which had emblazoned on the covers and wrappers, "I Shall Return."

While there, Bean was royally treated by the Filipino natives for several days, but his overriding goal was to get back to his squadron. Accordingly, he dictated frequent messages which went out through the guerrilla grapevine. Three days after he had been picked up, two natives in a fishing boat contacted a PT boat. Informed of the rescue of a downed pilot and given instructions as to where to pick him up, the PT skipper suspected that it was a Japanese trick and decided not

# VMF(N)-541 COMMENDED

Two years after its Philippine operations, the Hellcat squadron received the Army's Distinguished Unit Citation, the only Marine aviation unit to be so honored during the war:

The Marine Night Fighter Squadron 541 is cited for extraordinary performance of duty in action against the enemy at Leyte, Philippine Islands, from 3 to 15 December 1944. During a critical period in the fight for the control of the Philippine Islands, the pilots and ground crews of this unit signally distinguished themselves by the intrepidity and unyielding determination with which they overcame exceptionally adverse weather conditions and operational difficulties engendered by lack of facilities and incomplete radar directional coverage.

Their superb airmanship and daring resourcefulness displayed in outstanding night patrol and interception work, which forestalled destruction of airfield facilities, and in the completeness of cover provided for numerous vital convoys and Patrol Torpedo boat patrols, effectively thwarted enemy attempts to prevent consolidation and further expansion of the foothold gained by United States forces in the Philippines.

Achieving a record unparalleled at that time, the unit, composed of but 15 aircraft and 22 pilots, flew 136 sorties totaling 298.6 combat hours, destroyed 18 enemy aircraft in aerial combat without unit loss or damage, and on numerous occasions pitted consummate skill and accuracy against overwhelming numerically superior enemy strength. The extraordinary performance of the air and ground personnel of the Marine Fighter Squadron 541 in overcoming the greatest of aerial hazards and maintenance difficulties reflects the highest credit on themselves and the military service of the United States.

BY ORDER OF THE SECRETARY OF WAR  
Dwight D. Eisenhower  
Chief of Staff

venture into a possible trap.

A day later Bean departed with one native in a sail boat for Leyte Island, a trip of about 50 nautical miles. The trip went smoothly, and they arrived on Leyte. Bean concluded his tale:

After spending the night with an Army artillery unit, I concluded my journey, first on an LSM [Landing Ship, Medium] and, finally, the last leg in an Army colonel's motor launch. It was almost nightfall on 20 December that I arrived in VMF-218's camp area at Tacloban, weary, nervous, and quite run down

from loss of weight.

By the end of December MAG-12 suffered nine pilots killed and 34 planes lost, but it had racked up a remarkable record against the Japanese, despite some severely limiting factors. As a component of the Fifth Army Air Force, missions were assigned in a cumbersome procedure which required requests to go all the way up to Sixth Army. The official Marine Corps history of World War II lists other limitations:

At no time during the Leyte operation did MAG-12 ever receive an assignment

commensurate with its capabilities of giving close air support to ground troops. The [Marine] Joint Assault Signal Companies, equipped with air-ground signal communication facilities, were not used for direct air-ground control. Pilots were briefed on their missions prior to takeoff and targets assigned on the day preceding the air strike. Once the flight became airborne, no further control was exercised from the ground.

Despite these shortcomings, the group had flown 264 missions; destroyed more than 40 enemy planes; sunk seven destroyers, nine cargo ships, and three troop transports; and damaged at least 11 more ships in less than a month. No wonder the Japanese had come to call the Corsairs "Whistling Death."

Meanwhile, the Hellcats of VMF(N)-541 were equally occupied during December with dawn and dusk patrols which brought them their share of 'kills.' At times, these patrols were dispatched during daylight hours at the direct request of the Fifth Air Force, even though the Marines' intensive training and actual practice on Peleliu had been for nighttime operations. The Hellcats chalked up 11 kills in one day (12 December) during the fierce battles over Ormoc Bay. When flying protective cover, they never allowed an enemy hit on an American ship under their care.

One impressive individual record was made by Technical Sergeant John W. Andre. He had previously served two years as an airplane mechanic, earned his wings as a Naval Aviation Pilot (NAP), and was one of the Marine enlisted pilots flying in the Pacific in December 1944.

On 22 December, having shot



## Colonel Clayton C. Jerome

Originally chief of staff of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing under Major General Ralph J. Mitchell in the Solomons, Jerome moved up to take charge, as a colonel, of Marine aviation operations in the Philippines. For his superior leadership during the Luzon campaign, the Army awarded him a Legion of Merit (to add to two previous ones).

Later, as commander of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing in Korea, the Air Force awarded him his fourth Legion of Merit, as well as a Distinguished Service Medal. His last billet was Commanding General,

Aircraft, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific.

Retired as a lieutenant general in 1958, Jerome died in 1978.

His earlier career had prepared him well for such a notable record. He was born in 1901, graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy, and was commissioned in 1922. He saw prewar duty in China and eight different Latin American countries before his two tours in the Pacific.

An Army general who knew him well noted his "forceful personality, quiet dignity and appearance, thorough professional knowledge, and unusual sense of cooperation.

down two planes in the preceding two weeks, he was on patrol near the north end of Leyte. When he saw two Japanese planes, he dropped down to take a look. The two enemy planes saw him and quickly headed north. He immediately followed them for about 70 or 80 miles staying around 2,000 feet behind them. It was now getting dark, however, and he soon lost sight of them.

By now Andre was over Luzon, and he saw a few lights below that looked like they were on a runway. Suddenly, one of the Japanese planes appeared again. The pilot had his wing lights on and was circling to land. Andre later described what happened next:

Just as I was pulling in position to get a burst at him, I saw the second plane coming in from about a mile away so I got behind the second Jap. I opened up on the second Zero just as he was making his turn approaching the field. He crashed and exploded on the field. I kept on and got the first Zero just 50 or 60 feet off the ground.

He nosed over and exploded, and I kept on down the runway strafing. The Japs

were throwing a lot of tracer up from small stuff. I pulled over and came back strafing the other side of the runway. There was one big explosion and two small ones. I think they were probably a gas truck and two planes.

Andre wasn't through. At the end of the strip he did a wingover and came back down the other side. Small fires started and there was another big explosion. All in all he made six strafing runs on the field. On the last one his motor cut out for a minute and that convinced him to get out of there and head for home.

By the end of December 1944, the Army considered that Leyte was effectively in its control, and the campaign to recapture the Philippines shifted into a second phase. At this time, VMF(N)-541 was released to return on 11 January 1945 to Peleliu. Its record spoke for itself: Despite an overcrowded airfield as a base, bad weather flying conditions, unaccustomed Fifth Air Force control methods, in just over a month it had chalked up 924 combat hours, 22 planes shot down, and 5 more destroyed on the ground. Two years later the squadron received

the Army's Distinguished Unit Citation, the only Marine aviation unit to be so honored during the war.

### *Phase Two: Luzon Dive Bombers*

While the Marine fighter planes had been prominent in the first phase of the Philippine campaign, Leyte, Marine dive bombers were soon to be similarly heavily employed. The Army's next major target was Luzon, on which Manila, the capital of the Philippine Islands, was situated. The 1st MAW had learned on 20 September 1944 that seven of its dive bomber squadrons would be used later on for the Luzon campaign, which was to follow Leyte.

Marine Corps aviation recorded its war-time peak at the end of September 1944. It had rocketed from 13 squadrons following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor to 145 squadrons at this time.

Without waiting for that future commitment, on 10 October the Marine scout-bomber squadrons in the Solomons initiated a strenuous close air support training program. Squadrons of two units were involved, MAG-24 and MAG-32. Their squadrons and their colorful nicknames were:

### MAG-24 VMSBs

- 133 - "Flying Eggbeaters"
- 236 - "Black Panthers"
- 241 - "Sons of Satan"
- 341 - "Torrid Turtles"

### MAG-32 VMSBs

- 142 - "Wild Horses"
- 243 - "Flying Goldbricks"
- 244 - "Bombing Banshees"

MAG-32 was commanded by Colonel Clayton R. Jerome, who had been chief of staff to Major General Ralph J. Mitchell in the Solomons. MAG-24 was under Colonel Lyle H. Meyer, who had a brilliant and professionally enterprising operations officer, Lieutenant Colonel Keith B. McCutcheon. It was McCutcheon who assembled all the published material that he could find on the theory and practice of close air support. McCutcheon organized the material for 40 different lectures for 500 pilots and gunners, arranged joint training exercises with the Army's 37th Infantry Division on Bougainville, and supervised the two solid months of extensive indoctrination in close air support tactics and new communication procedures vital to achieve maximum battle results.

These new procedures called for a total change from the AAF practice of control through multiple command echelons to a radically simpler process. There would be a Marine air liaison party (ALP) with every ground unit down to the battalion level. The ALPs would directly control the close air support planes from radio-equipped jeeps, and would be headed by Marine aviators who very often personally knew the pilots making the close air support runs.

On 9 December 1944, MAG-24 was ordered to begin its deployment to the Philippines from the Solomons. For the flight echelon their move meant a long, over-water endurance flight. For the ground echelon it meant a miserably long sea voyage.

Marine Scout-Bomber Squadron (VMSB) 341 undertook such a move. The ground element left its Solomons base on 17 December, and its official history records the tortuous month on board ship that followed:

This was a cargo vessel with no troop accommodations. Shortly after boarding, Tokyo Rose informed the squadron that it would never make it to the Philippines. After several days squadron

personnel had their doubts, too. Field ranges were set up on deck to feed the troops. Shower facilities consisted of a length of pipe with numerous holes drilled in it, secured to the rigging and connected to a fire hose pumping seawater. Head facilities were equally primitive.

When the VMSB-341 ground element arrived at Hollandia, New Guinea, it alternated between that anchorage and the one at Lae, New Guinea, until finally departing for the Philippines on 8 January 1945. The squadron arrived at Leyte on 16 January and continued the trip the following day, arriving at Lingayen Gulf, Luzon, on 21 January. Finally disembarking on the 22d, VMSB-341 proceeded 12 miles inland and then helped establish the airfield at Mangaldan.

Still more Marine air power was on its way. MAG-14, with its Corsairs, was also in the Solomons under Colonel Zebulon C. Hopkins, and on 7 December 1944, Pearl Harbor Day, it was alerted for movement to the Philippines. This was a group with a proud history, having been awarded the Presidential Unit Citation for its

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## Lieutenant Colonel Keith B. McCutcheon

**B**orn in 1915 and commissioned in 1937, McCutcheon had a brilliant career. Awarded an Army Silver Star and three Legions of Merit for his pioneering work on close air support in the Philippines, he went on to become known as "the father of Marine helicopter aviation." This title stemmed from his service as the commanding officer of the only such squadron in 1950, followed by 80 combat missions in Korea.

In Vietnam he was Commanding General, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, and was awarded two Distinguished

Service Medals. Duty at Headquarters, Marine Corps, brought a third DSM and nomination to be Assistant Commandant. A serious illness forced him to forego that honor, although he was promoted to four-star rank by Congress on 1 July 1971. Twelve days later, he died.

The following year, at the Marine Corps Air Station, New River, North Carolina, was dedicated McCutcheon Field. Amid the speeches, there were memories of "his boyish smile, piercing eyes, and youthful, timeless face."



superb record at Guadalcanal.

During the period 2-12 January 1945, its four fighter squadrons, VMF-212, -222, -223, and -251 flew the 2,350 miles to Guiuan Field on the island of Samar. (Their ground echelons would spend five long weeks on board ship enroute.) The field conditions were abysmal: too small for the group, partially incomplete with inadequate living quarters, omnipresent tropical diseases, and dangerous runway surfaces. The men of MAG-14 were glad to be part of the real action again, although the primitive conditions at the airfield led to 19 non-combat plane losses just in the remainder of January.

The worst of these came on 24 January when Second Lieutenant Karl Oerth's Corsair hit bad runway bumps, blew a tire, and careened off the runway, out of control. It struck a rock, and then cartwheeled through rows of tents. When men nearby rushed to try to extricate Oerth, the plane suddenly exploded and became a cauldron of fire. The tragic episode killed 13 and severely burnt 54.

Once Leyte was secured, the aerial pounding of Luzon increased in preparation for the Army's landing on 9 January 1945 at Lingayen Gulf in the northern section.

In the landing with the assault troops were Jerome and McCutcheon. They picked out a site for an airstrip between two neighboring villages, Dagupan and Mangaldan. While the latter name was given to the air base being built, the former was incorporated into a title for Jerome: Commander, MAGSDAGUPAN (Marine Aircraft Groups, Dagupan). McCutcheon became operations officer, and welcomed his former "trainees" when MAG-24 and MAG-32 began flying in on 25 January 1945, ready to begin operations.

## MAG-12 SQUADRONS COMMENDED

A War Department General order (almost two years later) stated:

The Marine Fighter Squadrons 115, 211, 218, and 313 are cited for outstanding performance of duty in action in the Philippine Islands from 2 to 15 December 1944. During this period, at a critical stage in the operations on Leyte, first battleground in the campaign to liberate the Philippines, these Marine fighter squadrons not only carried out their primary mission of providing aerial cover, but also gave close support to our ground troops and intercepted large and heavily escorted enemy convoys.

The gallantry and fighting spirit of the Marine pilots and the skill and tireless fidelity to duty of the ground personnel, who so well carried out their arduous task of maintaining and servicing the aircraft under the worst possible conditions, constituted a major contribution to the success of the Leyte operations and initial American victory in the Philippines.

The first mission went out two days later on 27 January. It was a strike by VMSB-241, a squadron which had been awarded a Presidential Unit Citation for its superb performance during the crucial battle of Midway in June 1942.

By the end of their first month, Marine pilots had already dropped over 200,000 pounds of bombs from their 168 SBD Douglas Dauntless dive bombers. Also crowding the Mangaldan strips were over 200 AAF planes, with the AAF's 308th Bomber Wing in operational control of everything, including Marine planes.

The ensuing four months marked a period when Marine close air support truly came of age. With MAG-12 and its four fighter squadrons on Leyte, with MAG-14 and its four Corsair squadrons on Samar, and with MAGs-24 and -32 and their seven squadrons of dive bombers on Luzon, there was now a sufficient quantity of Marine planes to make a major contribution to the large-scale Army drive to reconquer the Philippines.

Perhaps even more important was the quality of the Marines' role. The ground crews continued to show, under very adverse con-

ditions, a remarkable ability to keep a high percentage of planes ready for their missions. The Corsairs continued to show superb ability in aerial combat and, when operating as a fighter-bomber, equal ability to strike deep tactical targets.

Sadly, however, casualties were a normal part of intensive operations, and there was great concern on Samar when Second Lieutenant Kenneth G. Pomasl of VMF-223 failed to return from a mission on 23 January 1945. His was another fighter squadron with a storied history: first to arrive on Guadalcanal, 83 enemy planes downed, a Presidential Unit Citation, and a commanding officer, Major John L. Smith, who was awarded the Medal of Honor and was one of nine aces in the squadron in those earlier dog fights. (Now he was executive officer of MAGSDAGUPAN.)

On 29 January, a plane arrived from Leyte, and, to everyone's delighted surprise, out jumped Pomasl. He had quite a story to tell. After becoming separated from his flight in bad weather, he found he could not make radio contact, so he flew on instruments for an hour and a half, but was unable to break out of the over-

cast. Then his gas supply finally ran low and he decided to bring his plane down to make a water landing. As he came down out of the overcast, he found himself over land, at an altitude of about 500 feet. When he swung out over the water, he saw he was being fired on by small arms.

He set the plane down easily, tail first. It remained afloat for about a minute, giving him plenty of time to get out of the cockpit and onto the right wing, from which he lowered himself into the water and inflated his rubber boat. It was early afternoon, and land was about half a mile away. After he had been on the water a short time, three small canoes put out from shore, headed toward him. The men appeared to be Filipinos and seemed friendly, so he allowed himself to be placed in one of the canoes, while his rubber raft was taken in tow by another. Pomasl described what happened next:

As we headed for shore we were met by Japanese small arms fire; the natives all dove into the water and swam away, although all the shots landed short. I regained my raft and had begun to drift shoreward, when I noticed a Japanese soldier paddling out toward me in a small boat. A brief exchange of shots sent the enemy scurrying back to land, followed by bullets from my .45 pistol .

...

With a strong current pulling him towards land, Pomasl abandoned his raft and started swimming. Seven long hours after his plane went down, he finally got ashore on a beach. After a stay there of almost two days, he started inland. Suddenly 15 or 20 Filipinos appeared and ran up to him. They seemed to understand

that he was the pilot of the plane which had gone down two days before, and one of them spoke a little English. They took him back into the jungle, where they brought him water and food, including rice, boiled chicken, eggs, bananas, and coconuts. He rested there until early evening on a mat they'd brought him, when his English-speaking friend returned with a pair of Japanese sandals for his feet. He learned then that the Filipino was a member of the Cebu Home Defense Force.

Moving out in the dark, they crossed over to the eastern coast of the peninsula, where they waited three hours for a boat which was to take them to Santa Rosa Island, the first step back towards Leyte. It appeared at about 2200 and

added the two men to its cargo of nine refugees from Cebu City along with their household goods. Pomasl continued his story:

At this juncture, a man who spoke fairly good English identified himself as a captain in the Home Defense of Mactan and took charge of the situation until we made contact with American forces on Leyte. On Santa Rosa, I was hailed as a hero by the people of the island who had not had a white visitor since 1940 . . . .

Again, the lieutenant was overwhelmed with native hospitality, which recurred on every island he stopped at during the boat trip of

The President of the United States takes pleasure in presenting the  
Presidential Unit Citation to  
MARINE AIRCRAFT GROUP TWELVE

for service as set forth in the following citation:

"For extraordinary heroism in action against enemy Japanese forces in the Philippine Islands from December 3, 1944, to March 9, 1945. Operating from the captured airfield at Tacloban, Marine Aircraft Group Twelve employed Corsairs as bombing planes to strike destructive blows at escorted enemy convoys and to prevent the Japanese from reinforcing their beleaguered garrisons by landing troops and supplies on western Leyte. Undeterred by intense aerial opposition and accurate antiaircraft fire, these pilots provided effective cover for ground troops, shore installations and Fleet units and, on several occasions, when ground troops were held up by heavy enemy fire, bombed and strafed Japanese positions, thereby enabling our land forces to advance unopposed.

"As hostile resistance lessened on Leyte, Marine Aircraft Group Twelve expanded its sphere of operations to strike at enemy garrisons on the Visayan Islands and southern Luzon and to support the Lingayen beachheads, neutralizing the enemy's lines of communication, his harbors, airfields and escape routes, and ranging far from base to provide aerial cover for ships of the Seventh Fleet and merchant-ship convoys operating in the area. During February and the early part of March, this courageous group gave direct support to Guerrilla units fighting on Cebu Island and aided in their rapid advance and the ultimate neutralization of the island. Well supported by skilled and dependable ground personnel, the gallant pilots of Marine Aircraft Group Twelve caused the Japanese severe losses in airplanes, installations and surface craft, contributing to the achievement of air superiority so essential to the success of the campaign and thereby upholding the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service."

The Secretary of the Navy takes pleasure in commending the  
MARINE AIRCRAFT GROUP TWENTY-FOUR

for service as follows:

“For exceptionally meritorious service in support of the United States Sixth Army in the Lingayen Gulf and Manila, Philippine Islands Area, from January 23 to April 10, 1945. After landing at Lingayen with the assault forces on D-day, Marine Aircraft Group Twenty-Four operated continuously against Japanese forces, flying a series of more than 8,000 daring and brilliantly executed sorties despite relentless air and ground force opposition. Dauntless and determined, these units penetrated numerous hostile defenses ahead of our advancing troops and, destroying vital ammunition and fuel dumps, bridges, gun bastions and troop concentrations, effectively reduced the enemy’s power to resist and contributed materially to the sweeping victory of our ground forces in this area. The heroic achievements of Marine Aircraft Group Twenty-Four reflect the skill, personal valor and steadfast devotion to duty of these courageous officers and men, and are in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.”

several days to Leyte—including one greeting where he was hoisted on the shoulders of the Filipinos to carry him ashore. Concluding his account, Pomasl said:

. . . Departing the next morning, the 27th, we arrived at Bay Bay on Leyte in the evening. I went ashore and contacted an American Army M.P. detachment and reported to the Philippine Civil Affairs Unit the names of those who had aided me. After securing food for my Filipino friends, I bade them goodbye, drew a clothing issue from the Army, and left the next afternoon for Burauen, where I spent the night. The next day I traveled by jeep to Tacloban, when I was flown to Guiuan airstrip, arriving there on January 29th, six days after I’d taken off . . .

While the Corsairs in MAGs-12 and -14 continued to show the quality of their work in spite of losses, the SBD dive bombers now

at MAGSDAGUPAN would show something new in quality: flexible, pinpoint accuracy in truly close air support, directed right from the front lines of an infantry attack. Targets during just the first week on Luzon were spread in a 180 degree arc from north through east to south, up to 150 miles away, and included 10 towns in five different provinces.

The SBD was, in actuality, an obsolete plane, long since abandoned in its AAF version (the A-24). Over Luzon, however, it proved amazingly effective. Its dive bombing procedure was well summarized in a 1951 Marine aviation history:

The planes approached the objective area at an altitude normally about 10,000 to 11,000 feet above the target. The flight would then extend its formation so that each pilot could locate the target; once they had made positive identification, the attack began. The lead pilot pointed the nose of his plane down, followed by the rest of his

flight, one plane at a time. Dive flaps were opened to keep the planes from gaining too much air speed while in dives approaching 70 degrees.

While the target was held in the pilot’s sights, bombs were released at an elevation of about 2,000 feet. After that the nose of the plane was pulled toward the horizon, and the dive flaps were closed quickly for added speed. By this time the bombers would be about 1,000 feet above the ground, in a slightly nosed-down position.

The planes would continue losing altitude quickly until they were at treetop level. There they used their accumulated air speed for violent evasive maneuvers to avoid the usually heavy enemy antiaircraft fire. Then the planes continued on to a rendezvous point for another bombing attack, or perhaps several strafing runs before gathering for the return flight to the base.

A substantial number of flights were also made with delayed-fuse bombs released at 1,500 feet, and a pull-out at tree-top height. Air speed while using the flaps would be about 250 knots. Bombs varied from 100-pounders, 250s, 500s, and 1,000-pounders.

These kinds of tactics soon led the press to label the VMSB squadrons “The Diving Devil Dogs of Luzon.” Jerome’s own homespun description of their pattern of hitting small targets with great precision was “Pickle Barrel Bombers.” McCutcheon was precise in his definition of the function of the SBDs: “Aircraft in close support are, in effect, aerial artillery. No one claims that they will replace it [ground artillery] or are superior to it; they augment it.”

There soon came a demanding mission to which the Marine SBDs were assigned—while Army and AAF senior officers watched and



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 62393

*A dependable performer for the Marine Corps all through the early years of World War II, the Douglas SBD Dauntless dive bomber was finally phased out in 1945. Early in the liberation of the Philippines, it demonstrated what dive bombers could do in close air support missions.*

waited. It occurred when MacArthur directed Major General Verne D. Mudge, USA, to send a flying column of his 1st Cavalry Division to Manila to free the prisoners who had been interned at the Santo Tomas Camp there since 1942. MAGSDAGUPAN was to provide nine dive bombers to stay overhead at all times. They would scout out Japanese positions and troop concentrations to enable the column to avoid them. If necessary, the SBDs would bomb the enemy's strongholds. One Marine ALP would ride right with the column's commander, Brigadier General William C. Chase, USA, on the 100-mile trip. Chase was correctly concerned about his open flanks, with Japanese troops everywhere between his line of departure south of Lingayen and his target, Manila. The solution: Marine dive bombers would also protect the flanks. This was an excellent opportunity to prove the efficiency of the Marine mission control system using ALPs. Two radio jeeps and a radio truck, with a total of three officers and four enlisted Marines were assigned to

the mission. They would relay the requests of the ground units for close air support missions directly to the SBDs. In reverse, the planes could communicate downward any information from their advance reconnaissance.

An interesting contrast to the handful of Marines in the ALPs and their direct ground-to-air

communication was noted in the official Marine Corps history of World War II. In "astonishment" the Marine ALPs found that the AAF was also attaching its own "formidable" ALP. This consisted of:

... a DUKW [amphibian truck] (complete with Filipino houseboy), a weapons carrier, a jeep, 27 men and two officers ... but its equipment was such that it couldn't keep up with the advance or semiexposed positions. Besides, for air support through that channel, requests would have to be forwarded and approved first by Division, then Corps, then Army and finally by 308th Bomb Wing.

In 66 hours, the column slashed through to Manila, and 3,500 internees were freed at Santo Tomas on 3 February. The Army was lavish in its praise for the performance of the SBDs and their ALPs. From the 1st Cavalry Division history:

Much of the success of the

The Secretary of the Navy takes pleasure in commending the

#### MARINE AIRCRAFT GROUP THIRTY-TWO

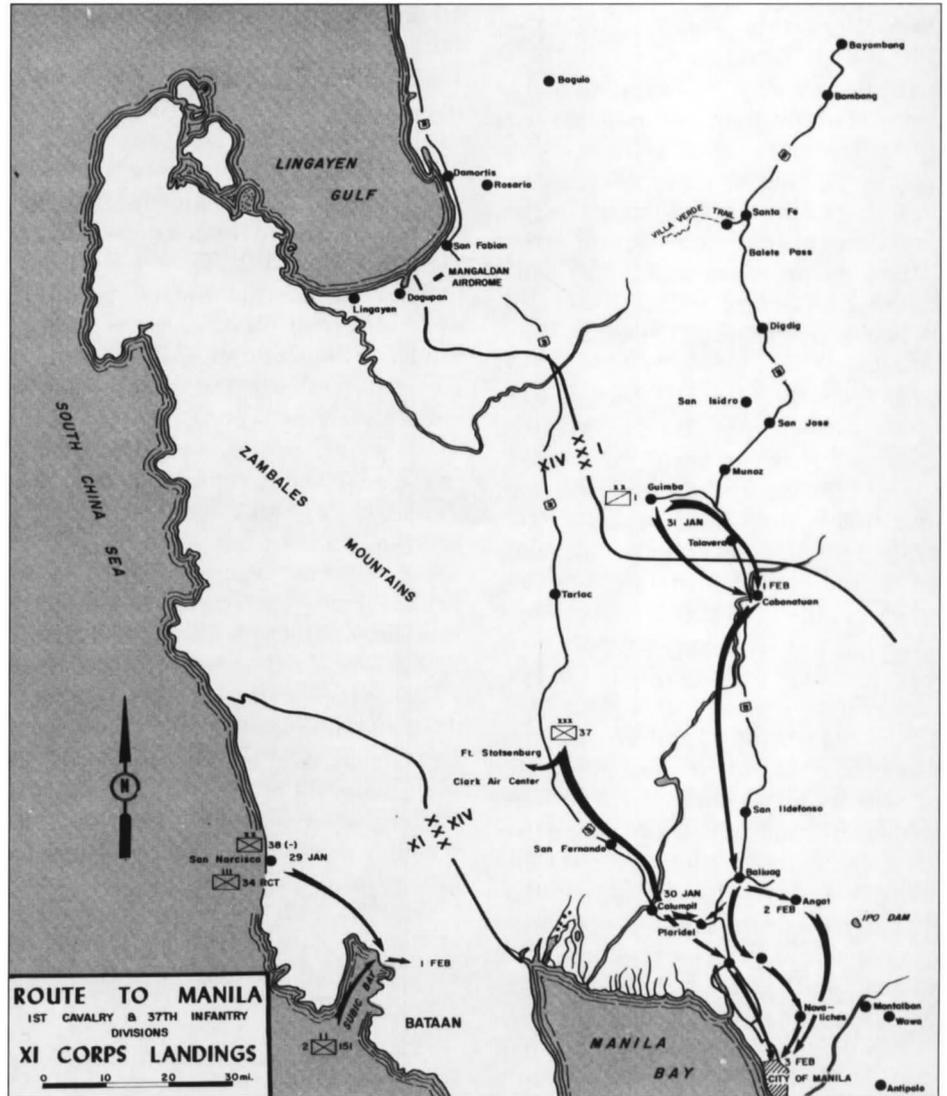
for service as follows:

"For exceptionally meritorious service in support of the United States Sixth Army in the Lingayen Gulf and Manila, Philippine Islands, Areas, from January 23 to March 15, 1945. After landing at Lingayen with the assault forces on D-day, Marine Aircraft Group Thirty-Two operated continuously against Japanese forces, flying a series of more than 8,000 daring and brilliantly executed sorties despite relentless air and ground force opposition. Dauntless and determined, these units penetrated numerous hostile defenses ahead of our advancing troops and, destroying vital ammunition and fuel dumps, bridges, gun bastions and troop concentrations, effectively reduced the enemy's power to resist and contributed materially to our ground forces' sweeping victory in this area. The heroic achievements of Marine Aircraft Group Thirty-Two reflect the skill, personal valor and steadfast devotion to duty of these courageous officers and men, and are in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service."

entire movement is credited to the superb air cover, flank protection, and reconnaissance provided by Marine Aircraft Groups 24 and 32. The 1st Cavalry's audacious drive down through Central Luzon was the longest such operation ever made in the Southwest Pacific Area using only air cover for flank protection.

Mudge had this to say:

On our drive to Manila, I depended solely on the Marines to protect my left flank against possible Japanese counterattack. The job that they turned in speaks for itself. I can say without reservation that the Marine dive bombers are one of the most flexible outfits that I have seen in this war. They will try anything once, and from my experience with them, I have found out that anything they try usually pans out in their favor.



The 1st Cavalry's dash to Manila had some very talented men in its ALPs. One of these was Marine Captain Francis B. "Frisco" Godolphin. He had been a language professor at Princeton University before volunteering at age 40. When he visited the 1st Cavalry before its drive, he ran into a staff officer who had formerly been a student of his. From this chance encounter and personal relationship came the plan to put nine SBDs overhead during the drive to Manila. This procedure circumvented the opposition of the AAF 308th Bomb Wing to direct control by the infantry units of their close air support.

Godolphin not only served in an ALP en route to Manila, but he also spent 38 continuous days in action. A Marine combat corre-

spondent, Staff Sergeant David Stephenson, reported on some of his other exploits:

During the early part of February, the Seventh [Cavalry] Regiment had captured the Balera water-filter plant northeast of Manila. The Japs, determined to destroy the plant and pollute Manila's water supply, had been directing mortar and machine gun fire at the building from four positions. Finally they brought up rockets.

The rocket attack began at midnight. Captain Godolphin went to the roof of the plant with a sextant to determine the azimuth of the rocket position. Six enemy rockets landed within 40 yards of

his CP [command post], but Captain "Frisco" got out alive with enough data to pinpoint the target for the SBDs the next morning. . . .

Godolphin also helped to direct the largest Marine strike on Luzon, an 81-plane attack east of the Marakina River. In preparation for this, it was decided to send a guerrilla lieutenant—a civil engineer graduate of the University of the Philippines—into the area to be bombed. The officer, disguised as a native civilian, sketched and plotted the Japanese positions by night. After sufficient information had been brought back, Godolphin called in the dive-bombers. He radioed his data to Major Benjamin B. Manchester, the air coordinator, who was cir-

cling the target, picking out each point of attack as it was described to him. Then Manchester sent his planes down for the kill.

### *After Manila*

The dash to Manila led to four events. The Army started slowly to clear the city of dug-in Japanese die-hard soldiers; the next objective would become the 50,000 Japanese deeply entrenched and fortified in the *Shimbu* Line outside the city; Jerome and his staff went calling on a variety of Army division commanders to try to explain to them the help that Marine dive bombers could give to their infantry; and the 308th Bombardment Wing directed the Marines to assist the guerrillas on Luzon.

When the Army came up against the *Shimbu* Line, it soon became more receptive to the use of the SBDs. The 1st Cavalry Division was already a convert, of course, and it had an opportunity to give a practical demonstration to the skeptical commander of the

6th Infantry Division, who was visiting it on 8 February. Faced with very heavy enemy fire from a key hill, the 1st Cavalry commander called in the dive bombers. When they had finished their precision work, patrols moved up the hill unopposed and found the shattered remains of eight machine gun and 15 mortar emplacements, with 300 Japanese dead nearby. In addition, 11 unmanned heavy machine guns were found. Now the 6th Division was convinced.

### *Plans for the Southern Islands*

A major planning conference took place on 11 February to make decisions on future ground and air operations. Mitchell and Jerome were able to get agreement that three more Marine squadrons, Marine Bomber Squadron (VMB) 611 and Air Warning Squadrons (AWS) 3 and 4, would be moved up from the Solomons to participate in the next major phase of the

Philippines campaign: the invasion of the main southern island, Mindanao. These squadrons represented two new and different resources for Marine aviation. VMB-611 was equipped with the PBJ North American medium bomber, called by the AAF the Mitchell B-25. It had a range of over 1,300 nautical miles and could carry 2,800 pounds of bombs and rockets. The AWSs were equipped with extensive radar and radio communications capabilities for warning of enemy air attacks.

Also, in preparation for the Mindanao operation, there was a 15 February shuffling of Marine squadrons already on hand: VMSBs-236 and -341 transferred to MAG-32, and VMSB-244 went to MAG-24. This was a prelude to the new plan to redeploy MAG-32's dive bombers from Luzon and MAG-12's fighters from Leyte to Mindanao. Mitchell had wanted a full-scale role for Marine aviation in the upcoming invasion—and he got it.

### *Close Support for Guerrillas*

Another decision of the planning conference also affected MAGSDAGUPAN. The AAF 308th Wing assigned the SBDs to show again their flexibility—this time in support of the growing guerrilla operations in northern Luzon. Accordingly, an ALP team was landed 50 miles behind the Japanese lines on 22 February. There it made contact with a most unusual man, Lieutenant Colonel Russell W. Volckmann, USA, who was the leader of the Filipino guerrillas in northern Luzon. His forces had no heavy arms and were stalled in their attack to capture the important city of San Fernando. Both AAF planes and Marine SBDs were called in to drop their 500-pound bombs on the enemy's defensive positions,

*Enemy anti-aircraft artillery fire could tear big holes in a dive bomber, as this SBD shows after a mission over Manila. The pilot, 1stLt Frank H. McFadden of VMSB-236, made it back to his base on this one of the 113 missions he flew in the Philippines.*

Marine Corps Historical Center



sometimes as close as 100 yards from the Filipinos. After two days of these strikes, it was all over, and the Japanese were routed.

There were many similar occasions where the ALP and its radio jeep and truck found its way to seemingly inaccessible spots to direct close air support for the guerrillas. During the period from 5 to 31 March, for example, 186 such missions were flown, and the heavy enemy casualties could be clearly attributed to the dive bombers, since no artillery fire was available.

### *Close Air Support for the Army*

Together with missions supporting the guerrillas, MAGS-DAGUPAN continued its mission of close air support of the Army divisions—at one time or another working with each of the 10 fighting on Luzon. One refinement, late in February, was the use of airborne coordinators to receive target information and instructions from the ALP, and then make a marking run over the objective when the SBDs arrived for their dive bombing runs.

There were other marking techniques, e.g., white phosphorous shells. An example was a strike against cave positions on 23 February, when 18 planes from VMSB-142 were called in to bomb some Japanese dug into a hillside, from where neither artillery nor mortar fire had been able to dislodge them. First Lieutenant W. E. Dickey, Jr., described the SBD strike that hit the enemy positions:

The air-ground jeep called for Captain Austin Wiggins to dive singly at a given target, marked by white phosphorous mortar shells. He went down and thereafter we went in, one plane at a time,



*A Marine combat artist in Manila while the battle there still raged, Sgt Paul Arlt described this wash drawing: "Sharply outlined against rising clouds of smoke, the gutted steel and concrete shell of the nine-story Great Eastern Hotel is one of the countless buildings destroyed by retreating Japs. Down on the rubble-strewn street, a Philippine citizen glances apprehensively over his shoulder as Marine dive bombers of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing sweep overhead. Seconds later, these planes dropped 20 tons of high explosives on enemy ships in the harbor, knocking out Jap anti-aircraft batteries set up on the hulks."*

each plane having personal control by the jeep on the ground. He would tell us,

"Now the next plane drop your bomb 50 feet west of the last one," or "100 feet south,"



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A700603

*U.S. Army 37th Infantry Division troops move up Highway 5 on Luzon after a Marine dive bomber attack on enemy hill positions.*

etc., until all 18,000 pounds of bombs had been placed exactly where he wanted them.

All the time we were in the attack the [air controller in the] jeep was very elated and would tell us after each bomb hit—"Man, that was right in their laps."

In the end the Army infantry was able to move forward against no opposition.

As Luzon duty drew to a close, the Marine flyers could look at their exploits with some pride. One ground observer, for instance, had reported after a dive bombing strike on 21 February, "Bodies, guns, papers blown all over the place. Kisses from commanding officer of adjacent ground units."

A more formal evaluation came from Major General Edwin D. Patrick, the once skeptical commander of the 6th Infantry Division:

. . . Particularly noteworthy have been the skillfully coordinated and accurate air

strikes of the SBDs of the MAGD based at Mangaldan Field. In one strike made on 28 February against Mt. Mataba, these Marine pilots dive-bombed a pinpointed target located between two friendly forces with accuracy

comparable to that obtained by field artillery. The courage, patience, and willingness displayed by these men deserve high praise.

This kind of punishing performance by the SBDs naturally caused the Japanese to try to strike back against them. They resorted to an ingenious ruse. On 2 March an enemy bomber, flying very high, appeared over the Marine field at Mangaldan, causing great consternation amongst those on the ground. Searchlights sought the plane; every anti-aircraft gun opened up; the troops poured out to watch. Suddenly, roaring in at 300 feet, came two bombers, scattering antipersonnel and 500-pound bombs on the unsuspecting men and their planes. This attack resulted in four dead and 78 wounded, but it was only a limited blow, for operations continued as usual.

Despite such episodes, for the 45 days preceding their departure, the SBDs had averaged 159 sorties a day, running up a total of 49.7

*1st Marine Aircraft Wing Commander, MajGen Ralph J. Mitchell, confers with a Filipino guerrilla lieutenant in northern Luzon in February 1945.*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 112060



percent of the individual sorties by Luzon aircraft with only 13 percent of the planes. (It should be noted that many of the AAF missions were time-consuming and long-range ones, quite different from the continuous requests from infantry units which directed Marine missions to close-by targets.)

This high level of operations took place in spite of various handicaps: limited radio capacity and limited range for the obsolete SBDs; no extra auxiliary fuel tanks for dropping napalm bombs (which burst into flame when ignited by contact); and—although it is hard to believe that after 50 years of American military presence in the Philippines—they had totally inadequate maps.

The combined figures for MAG-24 and -32 for Luzon operations showed 8,842 combat missions and 19,167 bombs dropped. Lieutenant General Walter Krueger, USA, commander of the Sixth Army, had this to say:

... Commanders have repeatedly expressed their admiration for the pin-point precision, the willingness and enthusiastic desire of pilots to fly missions from dawn to dusk and the extremely close liaison with the ground forces which characterized the operations of the Marine fighter groups.

Krueger's citation went on to note the "constant visits" of commanders and pilots to front line units in order observe targets and to gain an understanding of the ground soldiers' problems, the care which Marine commanders and pilots took to insure the "maximum" number of hits, and the "continuous, devoted work" of ground crews in maintaining an unusually high average of operational planes.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 92399  
*The F6F Hellcat night fighter represented a new and very successful weapon for the Marine Corps.*

### *Corsair Action*

The two fighter groups, MAG-12 and -14, had meanwhile been equally busy. One of their more bizarre missions occurred on 23 February when four planes from MAG-12's VMF-115 spotted two small Japanese submarines on the surface near Cebu. Missing on their first attack, they returned to base, rearmed, and went after their quarry again. This time, coming in at a 20 -25-foot altitude, they skipped their 1,000-pound bombs along the water's surface. One submarine was hit; "probably first submarine sunk by Corsair," the squadron reported.

VMF-211 was another squadron in this group. It had been awarded a Presidential Unit Citation for its heroic, hopeless defense of Wake Island in December 1941. Now the pilots called their successor squadron the "Avengers." One of them, Major Phillip B. May, had a grim experience at this time. While attacking an enemy airfield on Mindanao on 27 February, Japanese anti-aircraft fire disabled his plane. So he opened the hood and jumped, landing in a group of coconut trees about 100 yards off

the runway, while his plane burned about 25 feet away. As he hit the ground, he fell and saw that his trousers were on fire and that a piece of shrapnel was embedded in his left lower leg. May later recalled:

Jap bullets were striking the trees all around, but the other planes in my flight started to strafe around me, holding down the ground troops who had started after me. I quickly got out of my parachute harness and ran north along a path, but ran into a Japanese soldier running toward me. I shot twice with my .38 pistol, and the Jap fell and rolled off the path  
....

He continued to run without stopping, falling frequently, until he finally dropped down, tired and thirsty, after an exhausting hour. Within a few minutes, he heard Japanese voices close by, yelling and screaming, and he quickly began to cover himself with grass and leaves. A Japanese soldier slowly approached, and May pulled out his pistol and lay still and ready. The man passed

within five feet of him, but did not look down to where he was lying. Six or seven others in the searching squad were spread out over a large area. Finally they got into a truck and drove off.

Hiding there until dark, May set out on foot again and eventually came to Davao Gulf. His story continued:

I found a canoe there on stilts. I pulled it out into the water, climbed in and set out, using a loose seat board for a paddle . . . . After about two hours of steady paddling, I came upon another small craft with two men silhouetted against the moonlight. I could hear them talking, and assumed they were looking for me, because there were several other boats dispersed about 500 feet apart. I stopped, waiting for them to move on, which they did about an hour later, and then paddled on . . . .

Reaching the far shore of the gulf, he started walking to try to find some fresh water, as he was now very thirsty. Finally he came to a hut with three women, and he kept repeating to them, "I am your friend. I am an American." They listened to his story, and then got him some fresh water, insisting that he go to their hut and rest. The women then informed him that the Japanese were about three kilometers away, but the guerrillas were to the north, and they would help him get to them. May was delighted, as he wanted to get back to friendly troops as soon as possible. The next day two men volunteered to lead him to the guerrillas, so they started out about noon.

All along the beach friendly Filipinos came out to see him and try to talk with him, for he was the first American they had seen in

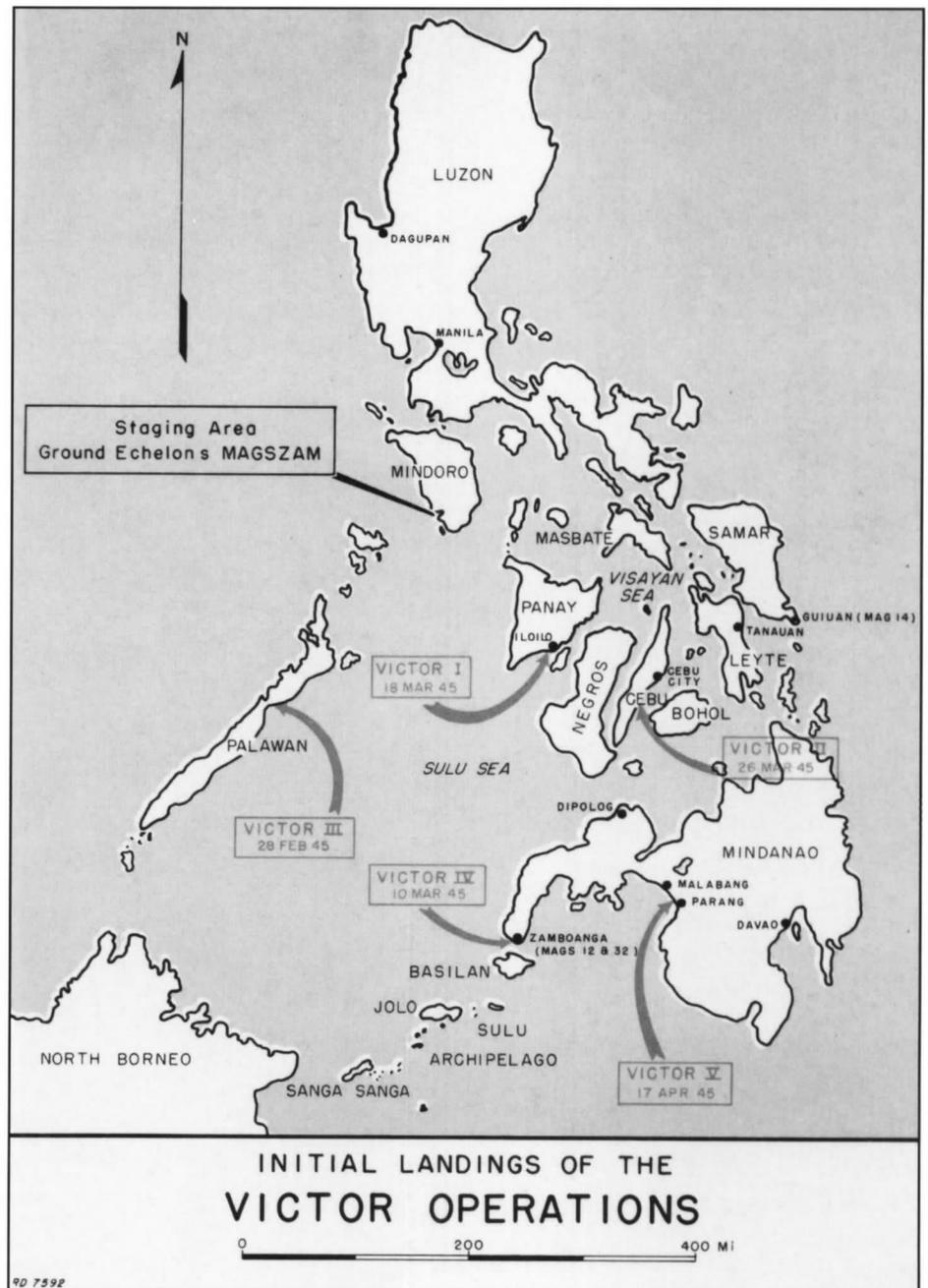
four years. At one point a whole village turned out to welcome him; the mayor made a speech and the villagers clapped and laughed and came up to shake his hand. They were overjoyed to know that the Americans would soon drive the Japanese away from the Davao Gulf area. The mayor then sent runners to the guerrilla lines to have an escort take May to their leader. The pilot's account went on:

When they arrived that night, a squad of barefoot soldiers loaded with hand

grenades and carrying carbines, the village had a celebration in which I played the drums in a four-piece "orchestra" and taught them "The Marines' Hymn."

The next morning he was taken to the guerrilla's headquarters where a doctor treated his leg. They notified the U.S. Navy which picked him up three days later in a Martin Mariner PBM (twin-engined seaplane), and returned him to his base at Tacloban.

May flew back a few days later to bring some badly needed med-





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 116887

*The Army 41st Infantry Division honored MAGSZAM for the close air support it received in its drive in the Philippines.*

ical supplies to "his guerrillas." His story ended on a horrific note:

During my time at the guerrilla camp, I learned that the Japs had tortured and finally killed about 50 Filipinos and their families in the area where I had been shot down, for their failure to produce me.

These varied experiences of pilots were only part of the wide-ranging activities of the two Corsair groups flying out of Leyte and Samar. During just the month of February, MAG-14 flew 1,944 sorties and destroyed 12 Japanese planes on the ground, as well as 90 enemy buildings and 20 vehicles. Similarly, MAG-12, along with its continued strikes on Negros and Cebu, began reaching out a long 320 miles to attack targets on Mindanao. These missions gave it a total of 1,838 sorties in February.

### *Phase Three: Mindanao*

With the first phase of Marine aviation on Leyte long gone, and with the second phase focused on Luzon successfully over, the com-

plex operations in the southern Philippines now took center stage as phase three. The Army planned five major operations (code named VICTOR) to seize eight different islands. Marine planes would be called upon to provide fighter cover and landing zone bombing for these, and then to furnish close air support for both guerrillas and Army divisions as they battled the Japanese. Thus, MAGs-24 and -32 would close down their MAGSDAGUPAN operations on Luzon and move to Mindanao when an airfield was ready to receive them. MAG-12, under a new commanding officer, Colonel Verne J. McCaul, would leave Leyte to join them. Jerome would be in charge of all three air groups. Meanwhile, MAG-14 would remain on Samar to support operations on Panay, Cebu, and also Mindanao. The new squadrons would also play their part: Marine Bomber Squadron 611 with its North American Mitchell PBJ medium bombers and Air Warning Squadron 4 with its electronic capabilities would come into Mindanao early, with AWS-3 joining later.

The attack on Mindanao began

in a unique way. A week before the first Army landing, two Marine officers and six enlisted Marines were inserted behind Japanese lines. They were taken to a guerrilla-held airstrip near the town of Dipolog, 150 miles from the main assault objective, Zamboanga on the far western tip of Mindanao. Within a few days, 16 Corsairs were there on the primitive Dipolog field to support the guerrillas, as well as cover the landing of the 41st Infantry Division at Zamboanga on D-day, 10 March. Also coming ashore on D-day was Jerome; his objective was the nearby San Roque airstrip. Taking over that site, the Marines renamed it Moret Field after Lieutenant Colonel Paul Moret, a well-known Marine aviator who had died in a transport crash after taking off from Noumea, New Caledonia in 1943.

Another D-day arrival was AWS-4. It would set up its radio and radar equipment to serve as the 76th Fighter Control Center, coordinating air-ground attacks. As one veteran aviator noted, "The air warning squadrons were the heart and soul of air defense and air traffic control."

Right behind them came McCutcheon. His assignment was to organize Marine Aircraft Group, Zamboanga (MAGSZAM) at Moret similar to MAGSDAGUPAN which had been so successful on Luzon.

On 15 March, the VMF-115 fighters of MAG-12 came in from Leyte. With Japanese air threats nearing zero, the F4Us would now shift their emphasis to close air support. A Marine aviation history explains the plane's versatility:

The Corsairs, although designed as fighter planes, proved to be well adapted for close support work. They had three bomb racks capable of carrying a variety of bomb

and napalm loadings, and they were armed with six forward-firing machine guns. Faster than the SBDs, they possessed ample speed to get in and out of a target area in a hurry. Also, since Corsairs were equipped with both VHF and MHF radio sets, they fitted into the air-ground liaison system easily, without a necessity for additions or alterations to existing equipment.

When combined with the slow speeds of the L-4 Cub spotter planes, the fast F4Us were able to get pin-point directions for their targets from the jeep radios of their ALP. Then the Marine firepower grew even heavier as the SBDs of MAG-32 came wheeling in from Luzon on 24 March. The combination of F4Us and SBDs at Moret again gave the 41st Division daily close air support to the Army infantrymen. At a ceremony held at Moret on 29 March, Major General Jens A. Doe, USA, commanding the 41st Division, formally presented to Colonel Jerome and his Marines a plaque which commemorated the close cooperation between the Army and the Marines.

The plaque was six feet high and four feet wide, with Japanese naval signal flags, an enemy light machine gun, and a silk Japanese battle flag. The inscription read, "IN APPRECIATION - 41ST INFANTRY DIVISION." At the bottom their combined campaigns were listed: Jolo, Sanga Sanga, Basilan, and Mindanao.

During the ceremony, General Doe spoke of the Marines' "outstanding performance . . . readiness . . . to engage in any mission . . . their skill and courage as air-men, and their splendid spirit of cooperation in aiding ground troops . . . the most effective air support yet received . . ."

As always in war, there was a painful aspect to this massing of squadrons at Moret. First Lieutenant Charles F. Flock later wrote of the cruel fate of one flight to Mindanao when, on 24 March, Second Lieutenant Charles T. Rue (VMSB-142) encountered engine trouble off Panay Island:

One of the escorting transport planes accompanied Rue's SBD to a point over a small strip at San Jose on the SW coast of Panay. This strip had been labeled as friendly according to intelligence reports prior to take-off. Rue executed a safe landing, and he and his gunner, SSgt Robert R. Stanton, were seen to wave by the pilots in the transport before it continued on its way to Zamboanga. (The strip was too short for the heavily-laden transport to attempt an evacuation of the men.)

As it turned out, the strip was actually in enemy hands, and both

Marines were taken prisoner. Later, when San Jose came under U.S. control, it was established that Rue and Stanton had been killed by the Japanese and buried near the airstrip.

Besides the missions on Mindanao, the Marine planes covered the successive landings on Basilan, Panay, Cebu, and Negros. One of the veteran squadrons over Cebu was VMF-251 from MAG-14 on Samar; it had previously been awarded the Presidential Unit Citation (PUC) for its superb record at Guadalcanal.

The squadron history of VMF-115 describes a memorable occasion when it provided close air support for guerrillas. This featured one of the most unusual air-ground tactics used during the entire Zamboanga operation. On 27 March, in answer to a request from the American officer in charge of the guerrillas, Major Donald H. Wills, AUS, a division of four VMF-115 Corsairs (led by Captain Rolfe F. Blanchard) was dispatched to the guerrilla-held airstrip at Dipolog. About 150 Jap-

*2dLt Willard C. Olson, left, and 1stLt Winfield S. Sharpe show how Sharpe doubled up in the cockpit of a VMF-115 Corsair, which supported guerrillas in their rout of Japanese forces threatening the Dipolog airstrip on Mindanao.*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 117637



anese troops, armed with knee mortars, a light machine gun, and automatic rifles, had advanced to within 16 kilometers of Dipolog. They were well-seasoned troops who had been moved into the area from Zamboanga about five weeks earlier. Major Wills felt that an air strike might boost the Filipino guerrillas' morale and damage the enemy at the same time.

However, control of the strike by normal means was impossible, because there were no maps or photographs of any kind available, no method for marking targets, and no means of communication with the troops. But VMF-115 ingenuity found a way:

Into the cockpit of a Marine Corsair climbed Major Wills, who was thoroughly familiar with the enemy positions; after him climbed the smallest of the Marine pilots in the division, First Lieutenant Winfield S. Sharpe. Both men squeezed into the narrow confines of the cockpit, with Sharpe sitting on Wills' lap.

*A Marine flight crew arrives to board a VMB-611 North American PBJ medium bomber (called the B-25 Mitchell by the AAF). Although a late arrival, the squadron made a major contribution with these planes in the Mindanano campaign.*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 123037



Soon afterward, with the major pointing out targets to the pilot, Lieutenant Sharpe's Corsair led a four-plane division in six strafing passes over the enemy's positions. The enemy area was thoroughly strafed, and the Japanese were compelled to withdraw.

The Marines' aerial capabilities were once again dramatically expanded when VMB-611, with its 16 PBJ medium bombers, flew in to Moret on 30 March. Besides their rocket and bomb capacity, its PBJs had a massive array of .50-caliber machine guns, plus radar, long-range radio, and extensive navigational equipment. In a letter, one of the squadron co-pilots, First Lieutenant Willis A. Downs, sketched the varied missions of this squadron:

... During the Philippine campaign we strafed, bombed, skip bombed, fired rockets, photographed, flew observers, were sent on anti-sub patrols, were sent up at night as night fighters, and bombed at medium altitudes. In fact, one member of VMB-611

shot down with his fixed guns, and using his bomb-sight as a gunsight, a Japanese twin-engine light bomber . . . .

During early April there were more Army landings, this time on the exotically named Sanga-Sanga and Bongao Islands. Bongao was a little island that commanded the invasion beach at Tawi Tawi for the Sanga Sanga landing. The PBJs had instructions to knock out the radar and radio installations, then strafe and rocket the barracks area in a night attack. A pilot of VMB-611 remembered years later the squadron's strike after it solved the problem of how to bomb, rocket, and strafe something it could not see in the night:

... Then a pilot (nobody knows who) suggested a simple, yet most ingenious solution. The flight leader would load his bombs (I think they were 500-pounders) with the bottom rack holding a parachute flare of one million candlepower. Each of the other five planes in the flight would load a parachute flare first, followed by the bomb load.

The tactic was simplicity itself. The flight leader would make a dummy run, dropping only his parachute flare. The second plane in the flight would bomb on the first flare, then drop his flare; the third plane would follow suit, followed by the fourth and fifth plane. By the time the fifth plane dropped his flare, the flight leader would be in position to drop his load on the last flare. It worked to perfection.

As the tempo of air operations on Mindanao rose, so did the use of Moret Field. Before long it

housed a total of 299 widely varying types of AAF and Marine aircraft: 96 F4Us, 151 SBDs, 18 PBJs, 2 F6Fs, 18 SBCs (Curtis Helldiver dive bomber), 1 FM (General Motors F4F Wildcat fighter), 2 TBFs (Grumann Avenger torpedo bomber), 5 R4Ds (Douglas Skytrain cargo plane), and 6 P-61s.

During April, MAG-14 back on Samar continued a heavy round of missions on familiar targets: Cebu, Negros, and other islands. Directed by the Thirteenth Air Force on Leyte, the Corsairs reported daily to AAF support air parties, often B-24 heavy bombers, for control of their strikes. In the teeth of poor weather, the group achieved more than 5,800 flight hours that month.

One pilot on Samar who had newly joined VMF-222 had been awarded a Medal of Honor for his record in the Solomons. Captain Kenneth A. Walsh, a former NAP, joined MAG-14 with a record of 20 victories. (He would get number 21 at Okinawa later in the war.)

The Army plans for operations in the southern Philippines were complex—there were lots of Japanese troops on lots of different islands. Besides the main objective of Mindanao, there was a chain of small islands, called the Sulu Archipelago, stretching southwest to Borneo. When all of these were captured, the life line of oil flowing to Japan from the Dutch East Indies would be severed.

The first target in the chain had been Sanga Sanga. Now it was Jolo. On 9 April the 41st Division went ashore there. The division's previous close working relationship with Marine air had led the commanding general and then all the officers of the assault regiments to make pre-landing reconnaissance flights on board the SBDs of VMSB-236. Then VMSB-243 took the commanding general to observe the actual landing.

On Jolo the Japanese had retired

The Secretary of the Navy takes pleasure in commending

### MARINE AIRCRAFT GROUPS, ZAMBOANGA

consisting of the following Marine Aircraft Groups:

Marine Aircraft Group Twelve — March 10 - June 30, 1945  
Marine Aircraft Group Thirty Two — March 16 - June 30, 1945  
Marine Aircraft Group Twenty Four — April 11 - June 30, 1945

for service as set forth in the following citation:

"For exceptionally meritorious service and outstanding heroism in support of elements of the Eighth Army during operations against enemy Japanese forces on Mindanao, Philippine Islands, and in the Sulu Archipelago. After landing with the assault forces, Marine Air Groups, Zamboanga, effected wide coverage of battle areas in flights made extremely hazardous by dense jungles, precipitous cloud-obscured mountains and adverse weather conditions.

The gallant officers and men of these groups penetrated hostile defenses to press relentless attacks and reduce vital enemy targets, disrupt communications and troop concentrations, and destroy ammunition and fuel dumps despite intense antiaircraft fire over Japanese objectives. The vital service rendered during these campaigns in providing convoy cover, fighter defense and close aerial support of ground forces is evidence of the courage, skill and devotion to duty of the pilots, aircrewmembers and ground personnel operating as a well coordinated team, and reflects the highest credit upon Marine Aircraft Groups, Zamboanga, and the United States Naval Service."

to the interior and holed up in Mount Daho, a defensive strongpoint studded with caves and pillboxes. For a week they held off the infantry despite artillery fire and repeated bombing and rocket attacks. One of these, by VMB-611, was later recalled by a veteran:

The first time out intelligence . . . ordered a 12-plane low level attack . . . It's a wonder there weren't some mid-air collisions. We were tooling along at 250 feet alongside Mount Daho when the concussion of one bomb almost blew us out of the air. We strafed the top of the mountain, the target being a huge buried tank. My guess was a water tank of sorts. The tracers just ricocheted harmlessly off the silver-looking object. The entire mission was a dangerous fiasco . . .

The problem was finally solved when one of the PBJ pilots offered a simple solution, "Why not go in at 8,000 feet and drop 1,000 pounders on it and cave the damn thing in." The veteran continued:

So back we came a day or so later. Six of us this time . . . [Our bombardier] took his time and "walked" his three [bombs] right across the top of the mountain . . . Some of the others got two big ones on top, some only one. But all six planes hit it. Results? They walked up Mount Daho the next day. Over 400 defending Japanese Imperial Marines had ceased to exist.

Meanwhile, on Mindanao, the Marines, carrying out instructions to support the guerrillas, flew daily sorties from the Moret and



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 117638

*Filipino guerrillas at Titcomb Field, Malabang, Mindanao, joyfully greet the Marine pilots who came to their aid.*

Dipolog fields. They worked in close conjunction with the Filipinos under the leadership of an American, Colonel Wendell W. Fertig, USA. When the American surrender in the Philippines occurred in 1942, Fertig took to the hills. With radio contact with MacArthur's far-away headquarters and supplies smuggled in by submarine or air or small boats, he built his guerrilla force. By February of 1945, he had 33,000 men under his command, with 16,000 of them armed. Their combined efforts provided crucial information which changed the whole landing plan for the Army's next thrust, this time on the other side of Mindanao.

As Fertig later recalled:

By February 1945, advance planning by X Corps indicated that the initial landing on the south coast of Mindanao would be made in the vicinity of Parang. With the assistance of MAG Zambo, the guerrillas were able to eliminate the strong Japanese garrisons at both Parang and

Malabang. This action presented X Corps with a free beachhead when they landed on 17 April 1945. It would have been impossible for the guerrillas to have completed the elimination of the Japanese garrisons without the assistance of the Marine Air Groups, since the guerrilla troops were not equipped with artillery.

The key Marine in this intelligence coup, the man who gathered the vital information on the situation ashore and then got it to the ears of the X Corps commander, was none other than McCutcheon. He had flown down from Mindoro, borrowed an SBD at Moret, and took off to meet the guerrillas. The events that followed brought him an award of a Silver Star Medal by the Army. The citation read in part:

For gallantry in action against the enemy . . . . He arrived at the airfield five days prior to the landings of American forces. During the

ensuing five days, from positions within close range of enemy machine gun and mortar fire and with utter disregard for his own safety, he reported the situation to the landing force afloat, briefed pilots and supervised the direction of air strikes . . .

Then, flying back to Zamboanga, McCutcheon got in a small boat, put to sea, and intercepted the Mindanao invasion convoy. His citation continued:

. . . His accurate information transmitted to the task force commander afloat enabled the formulation of amended plans and resulted in an unopposed landing on the Malabang area [i.e., near-by Parang] . . . .

Thus the landing took place at Parang 17 miles south of Malabang on 17 April. AWS-3 was the first Marine unit ashore and shortly became the 77th Fighter Control Center. With its two radar search sets and eight radio channels, it

provided a valuable resource for increasing the number and efficiency of air strikes.

Of course, this Army landing was covered by Marine planes flying from their strips on the other side of Mindanao. One of that day's missions was by VMB-611, and one of its pilots later described what his flight encountered:

What happened in the next few minutes was a maelstrom of bullets, shells, and bombs. A Japanese 90 millimeter cannon began peppering away at us from its hiding place in the mouth of a large cave. Events moved too quickly to give an accurate accounting. What was supposed to be a single pass or two, turned into a wild melee. We all lost track of the number of passes.

Finally, a 7.7 machine gun bullet whined through our open cockpit window and out the windshield, and convinced me the Japanese had the range. It was time to abandon the area. Luckily, all planes escaped, although each was badly holed.

Once the strip at Malabang was available, the Marines poured in the dive bombers of MAG-24, which arrived on 20 April from Luzon. One of the first actions taken was to name the strip Titcomb Field in honor of Captain John A. Titcomb, killed while serving in an ALP on Luzon. Operations from there used new procedures. The Army's X Corps had 12 forward air control teams directing strikes for two different divisions (24th and 31st). Moreover, there was a pattern of having a constant air alert overhead for the infantry. Working with the 24th Division, for instance, MAG-24 had a flight report in to the sup-

port air party every hour on the hour from 0800 to 1600 each day.

Describing the concentrated strikes in central Mindanao, one of the pilots, First Lieutenant Thurston P. Gilchrist, said:

... This was the most heavily bombed area of any in the whole Philippine campaign. The Japs were dug in underneath trees and in foxholes so well that we had to blow up the whole area before the Army could advance. Our Marine observers, who were with the ground liaison party in this area, said the damage was terrible and almost indescribable. Flight after flight of planes bombed and strafed this small area for days. When we began it was a heavily wooded area and when we finished there wasn't . . . anything left but a few denuded trees . . . .

The operations numbers for the F4Us told the same story of relentless attack; during February, March, and April the Corsairs of MAG-12 and -14 flew 29,836 hours on 11,642 sorties and destroyed 31 planes of the vanishing Japanese air strength.

For one of their squadrons, VMF-218, this marked a final

*The Douglas R4D Skytrain—known in its civilian guise as the DC-3—was the workhorse for a wide variety of missions while being flown by MAG-25, the South Pacific Combat Air Transport Command (SCAT).*

phase in a diverse range of missions since it had first arrived in the Philippines. Beginning back in December, the squadron had patrolled the air over shipping in Leyte Gulf and Ormoc Bay; had flown cover over American convoys in various Philippine waters; had escorted South Pacific Combat Air Transport (SCAT) planes over Ormoc where they had dropped supplies to ground troops; had flown cover for Army ground forces on Mindoro and Cebu Islands; had covered the landing by Army troops at Zamboanga; had chalked up a number of close support missions on Mindanao; had escorted rescue planes; had escorted transport planes to Mindanao; had provided air cover for SBD strikes; and had regularly been on combat air patrols.

In addition, it had made many close-in strikes on southern Luzon, strafing enemy targets and destroying parked planes, railroad rolling stock, ammunition dumps, and oil storage tanks.

MAG-14 received a tribute from Lieutenant General Robert L. Eichelberger, Commanding General, Eighth Army, in which he noted its "outstanding performance . . . against the enemy at Leyte, Samar, Palawan, Panay, Cebu, and Negros, Philippine Islands." He added, "The enthusi-

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 108687



asm of commanders and pilots, their interest in the ground situation and their eagerness to try any method which might increase the effectiveness of close air support, were responsible in a large measure for keeping casualties at a minimum among ground combat troops."

On 30 April, Marine planes used napalm bombs for the first time on Mindanao. Hitting a hill near the major town of Davao, the fire was terrifyingly effective. The X Corps reported:

From this time on, fire from the air was available, with strikes as large as thirty-two 165-gallon tanks being dropped on a target. In several instances, entire enemy platoons were burned in their positions and in other cases, flaming Japanese fled from positions, only to encounter machine gun fire from ground troops.

As the two Army divisions slugged their way across Mindanao, the PBJs of VMB-611 helped the 31st crack a tough nut. It was a strike near the Malita River that paid off handsomely. The Japanese were holed up in a town that controlled a road. When the Marine fighter planes would come over, the Japanese would dive into a deep gorge that ran alongside the town. When the fighters left, the Japanese would resume their defensive positions. Then someone suggested a coordinated attack with both the fighters and the PBJs. One of the pilots later remembered:

We were loaded with eight 250-pound bombs. The attack was to be low level . . . . The ravine had a big bend in it near the road. The key was to get as many bombs in it as possible, dropping in train.

The fighters chased the Japs into the ravine as we came in low, bomb bay doors open.

When the fighters had passed over, the enemy reemerged— only to find the Marine medium bombers boring in on them. The PBJ pilot continued:

. . . our observer, yelled "Purrfect!" It seems the first bomb hit a small knoll and skipped into the ravine, and the rest of the load "walked" right up the ravine. It was a lucky drop. All the others got their loads in the ravine as well. Results? The entire Japanese force was either killed or so severely shocked from the concussions they were unable to defend the town.

On 8 May, VMSBs-241 and -133 flew what one squadron report termed "the closest support mission yet flown." The Japanese lines were only 200 yards from the infantrymen of the 31st Division, and the enemy was unyielding. Marked with smoke, the tiny target area was plastered with nearly five tons of bombs, and the Japanese position simply disintegrated.

As the end of the Mindanao campaign loomed in May, there were many changes for the Marine aviators. VMSB-244 said farewell to the venerable SBD and was re-equipped with the new SB2C Curtis Helldiver. It was 20 knots faster, more heavily armed, and equipped with rockets. (When the SBD was officially retired on 16 July after its long and productive career, VMSB-244 became the only squadron of MAG-24 to remain active.)

The month of May also brought the new F4U-4 to the fighter squadrons, and with it came 41 more miles per hour of top speed (446 mph).

On 15 May, operations ended for MAG-14 on Samar. During its short four months stay there, it had amassed a total of 22,671 combat hours, 7,396 sorties, and destroyed 28 Japanese planes on the ground. On 7 June it flew off to join the battle then raging on Okinawa.

That month also saw the last serious operations and the most massive strike yet. On 21 June, the 31st Division was facing the threat of a major Japanese troop build-up, so 148 dive bombers and fighter bombers were called in to drop 75 tons of bombs during a four-hour span. Reports afterward estimated 500 enemy killed.

With this kind of help, it is not surprising that Major General Clarence A. Martin, commander of the 31st, made an official report about the "invaluable assistance" of MAGs -12, -24, and -32.

The other division that fought its way across Mindanao, the 24th Infantry, had identical feelings about its Marine air support. Its commander, Major General Rosco B. Woodruff, also issued a lengthy tribute, applauding sorties "flying over enemy territory in the face of enemy anti-aircraft fire . . . flown with determination and courage in spite of losses from enemy fire. Many missions were flown at great risk because of unfavorable weather conditions . . . ."

Amidst this pattern of intensive close air support, a sad, and exceedingly rare, tragedy occurred on one mission in support of the 24th Division. The Marine air coordinator used a system to direct the strike, "Bomb on my bomb!" That day, however, the flight leaders mistook Japanese artillery bursts for the signal bomb and 32 men of the division were killed and wounded. When Jerome went to see Woodruff to express the Marines' sorrow at the accident, the Army general agreed that it was most unfortunate, but

nevertheless he would continue to rely on MAGSZAM for close air support.

On 30 June, Eichelberger declared the Mindanao campaign completed (although 2,235 Japanese would be killed in the ensuing six weeks). The total operational figures for all Marine aviation squadrons on the island were formidable: more than 20,000 sorties in 10,406 combat missions for the X Corps, with 4,800 tons of bombs dropped, accompanied by nearly 1,300 5-inch rockets.

The final recognition of the remarkable Marine performance throughout all the Philippine Islands came from the top. Eichelberger said, "The value of close support for ground troops as provided by these Marine flyers cannot be measured in words and there is not enough that can be said for their aerial barrages that have cut a path for the infantry. From all quarters, commanders down to the men with the bayonets, I have heard nothing but high tribute."

The last mission for MAGSZAM came in covering one more landing (at Sarangani Bay) of their friends, the 24th Division, on 12 July. On 1 August, MAG-24 was dismembered with the decommissioning of VMSBs-133, -236, and -241.

There was one final extraordinary episode which took place in a strike by VMB-611 on 9 August. A Japanese lieutenant, who had surrendered, went in one of its PBJs and guided them to their exact target.

The surrender of Japan on 15 August was preceded (on 4 August) by an order from the AAF for the 1st MAW to move up from Bougainville to Zamboanga. It was ironic that Mitchell and Jerome, the two men who had been so crucial in the Philippine assignment were now gone—back in the United States for a well-

earned leave. Simultaneously, veteran squadron flyers were going home, and new commanding officers were taking over units that remained on active duty.

On 30 August, MAGSZAM was dissolved (but MAGs-12, -24, and -32 would live on to see duty in China after the war). The 1st MAW would move after the battle to China.

### *Turning Point*

The Philippine campaign truly marked a turning point in two different ways. First, in strategic results: the severance of Japan's vital supply lines; the elimination of 400,000 enemy troops and enormous numbers of their planes and pilots; the freeing of the Filipino people from a brutal tyranny; and the American acquisition of multiple bases to carry the war toward the Japanese homeland.

Secondly, the campaign was a watershed for Marine aviation. After the Solomons campaign it had been relegated to milk runs in the backwaters of the Solomons and the by-passed areas of the Central Pacific. Then it had been shoe-horned in by happenstance

with a few planes six weeks after the original landing in the Philippines. However, the Marine aerial effort grew and grew until there were 18 squadrons in constant action at the end of the Philippine campaign. Thus, it came to constitute a major element in an operation which was, nevertheless, primarily an Army show.

Beyond the quantitative aspects, there lay more significant qualitative results for Marine aviation. A previously sketchy doctrine of close air support had been fleshed out, refined, and honed in combat. The infrequent examples of it in the past had been superseded by precision missions running in the end into the thousands. Cooperation with another service—the Army—had begun on a small scale in an atmosphere of skepticism and evolved into widespread intimate interdependence, with MAG-12, as just one example, supporting 26 Army landings.

And so the accolades eventually came in the form of more than 30 letters of commendation and appreciation from every Army command level. Whether Corsairs or SBDs, the Marine doctrine of close

*Col Warren E. Sweetser, Jr., left, commanded MAG-24 in June 1945. His executive officer, LtCol John H. Earle, Jr., is on the right.*

Col Warren E. Sweetser, Jr., CollectionC



# Marine Aircraft in the Philippines

Designation	Manufacturer	Maximum Speed	Combat Horse Power at sea level	Range	Armament	Crew	Name
F4U-1D <sup>1</sup> , FG-1 <sup>2</sup> Fighter	Chance-Vought, Goodyear	365 knots	2250	850 Nautical miles (without Auxiliary tanks)	6-50 cal. (2400 rounds of ammunition) 2-100 lb. bombs 8-5" Rockets	Pilot	Corsair
PBJ-1D Medium-bomber	North American	238 knots	2-1700	1,326 Nautical miles (without Auxiliary gas tanks)	Maximum load: 2800 lbs. of bombs and Rockets	Pilot Co-Pilot Navigator 3 gunners	Mitchell
SBD-6 Dive-bomber	Douglas	234 knots	1300	1,100 Nautical miles	2-50 cal. (360 rounds of ammunition) 2-30 cal. (2000 rounds)	Pilot Gunner	Dauntless
SB2C-4 Dive-bomber	Curtis-Wright	256 knots	1750	1,197 Nautical miles with 1,600 lbs. of bombs and 2 Auxiliary tanks	2-20mm. (400 rounds of ammunition) 2-30 cal. (2000 rounds) 1-1600 lb. bomb 2-500 lb. bombs 8-5" Rockets	Pilot Gunner	Helldiver
F6F-3N <sup>3</sup> Fighter	Grumman	313 knots	2250	1,100 Nautical miles with 1-150 gal. Auxiliary tank	6-50 cal. (2400 rounds of ammunition)	Pilot	Hellcat
R4D-5 Transport	Douglas	200 knots	2-1050	1,555 Nautical miles	None (will carry 27 troops with combat gear)	Pilot Co-Pilot Radioman	Skytrain

#### Explanation of squadron designations:

Preceded by letters V (Heavier-than-Air) and M (Marine); the letters alone or in combination indicate type squadrons using the planes:

F—Fighter. S—Scout. B—Bomber. R—Transport. J—Utility.

Example: VMF-115; Marine Fighting Squadron No. 115.

<sup>1</sup> F4U-1D: F—Fighter, 4—Fourth model of this fighter, U—Manufactured by Chance-Vought, 1-D—Modification of this series.

<sup>2</sup> FG-1: Goodyear version of the Corsair.

<sup>3</sup> Night fighter version.

air support had been validated.

Acknowledgement of this came in a final evaluation by Eichelberger. He commented that the "superb" accomplishments of Marine air stemmed in part from the Marine liaison officers [who] were "always in front lines" with the infantry commanders. They were as familiar with the forward positions as was the infantry. By radio they guided in the planes, and often the target of the strike was no more than 300 yards ahead of the "huddled doughboys."

The official Marine Corps history of World War II made this observation:

. . . A radical departure from orthodox methods was the adoption of direct communications between pilots and ground-based air liaison parties. The performance of Marine aviators on Luzon Island and in the Southern Philippines was to become an outstanding chapter in a long history of excellent achieve-

ments, combining raw courage with skill and flexibility. The activities of Marine air in the Philippines constituted one of the few opportunities that Marine air groups had to show their skill in close air support . . .

The record is clear, and there can be no doubt that Marine close air support contributed to the U.S. victory in the Philippines campaign.

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There are three main sources for Marine aviation operations in the Philippines. They are: 1. George W. Garand and Truman R. Strobridge, *Western Pacific Operations*, vol IV, *History of U.S. Marine Corps Operations in World War II* (Washington: Historical Division, Headquarters, USMC, 1971). 2. Maj Charles W. Boggs, Jr., USMC, *Marine Aviation in the Philippines* (Washington: Historical Division, Headquarters, USMC, 1951). 3. Robert E. Sherrod, *History of Marine Corps Aviation in World War II*, (Washington: Combat Forces Press, 1952).

In addition to these, there is a more popularized account in John A. DeChant, *Devilbirds* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1947). A brief summary may be found in Jeter A. Isely and Philip A. Cowl, *The U.S. Marines and Amphibious War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951).

There are references to Marine aviation scattered throughout the official Army history of the Luzon and Mindanao campaigns: Robert Ross Smith, *Triumph in the Philippines—United States Army in World War II—The War in the Pacific*, vol X, (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1963).

A large collection of LtGen Keith A. McCutcheon's personal papers can be found in the Personal Papers Collection of the MCHC (Box 5A 33) and his report on close air support in the Philippines can be found as enclosure A to "Air Support Reports," Headquarters, USMC.

Also in Personal Papers is some useful material from SSgt Paul Arlt (Box 2B 35, Bx 4), Capt Elton A. Barnum (Box 4A 42), Col Warren E. Sweetser, Jr. (Box 3A 37, Bx 3), and TSgt John W. Andre (Box 5B 26, Bx 1911).

The Reference Section files at the MCHC proved invaluable, both for photographs and documentation. The latter includes two summary studies by the Intelligence Section, Division of Aviation, Headquarters, USMC. One is "Marine Dive Bombers in the Philippines," which covers the VMSB operations in February 1945 on Luzon, written in May 1945. The other, written in June 1945, is "Marine Fighter Squadrons in the Philippines," which covers the VMF Corsair operations of period February-April 1945. In addition, the individual files for the groups and squadrons were helpful. VMB-611, for instance, printed a brochure for a squadron reunion with some of its pilots' memories of missions.



## About the Author

Captain John C. Chapin earned a bachelor of arts degree with honors in history from Yale University in 1942 and was commissioned later that year. He served as a rifle platoon leader in the 24th Marines, 4th Marine Division, and was wounded in action during assault landings on Roi-Namur and Saipan.

Transferred to duty at the Historical Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, he wrote the first official histories of the 4th and 5th Marine Divisions. Moving to Reserve status at the end of World War II, he earned a master's degree in history at George

Washington University with a thesis on "The Marine Occupation of Haiti, 1915-1922."

Now a captain in retired status, he has been a volunteer at the Marine Corps Historical Center for 12 years. During that time he wrote *History of Marine Fighter-Attack (VMFA) Squadron 115*. With support from the Historical Center and the Marine Corps Historical Foundation, he then spent some years researching and interviewing for the writing of a new book, *Uncommon Men: The Sergeants Major of the Marine Corps*, published in 1992 by the White Mane Publishing Company.

Subsequently, he wrote four monographs for this series of historical pamphlets, commemorating the campaigns for the Marshalls, Saipan, Bougainville, and Marine Aviation in the Philippines operations.



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