MARINE CORPS ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Interviewee: Lieutenant General Richard C. Mangrum, USMC (Ret)

Interviewer: Major Thomas E. Donnelly, USMC

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Session I

Tape 1 Side 1

Q: I'd like to welcome you to the Oral History Program of the Marine Corps, General, and ask if you would like to start like most of our interviewers do, by telling a little bit of your boyhood background, your parents, where you came from and this sort of thing.

Mangrum: Well, let me say first that I can't say that I'm happy to contribute to the Oral History Program, but I know as well as anyone, I suppose, how important it is to the Marine Corps and no individual, I dare say, should procrastinate and everyone ought to do his part to provide some of the background which historians may be able to use to advantage some day.

When I was Assistant Commandant and General Greene was Commandant he was the one most active, I think, in the impetus for the Oral History Program, '65-'66, and it was started and I am sure that by now it has proven its worth many times over. I know, from my own experience, that a number of our general officers have had remarkable backgrounds and histories. I think often of General "Tex" Rogers who protested that he really didn't have anything to offer, but I think that his interviews have provided some of

the best history of the early days of Marine Corps aviation that we have. Of course, he's the most comical man in the world and his reminiscences were always funny, and they must make most entertaining reading for anyone who's doing some research in this area.

Well, I'm happy to contribute what I can to the Oral History Program. I recall some years ago, when I was on the faculty of the Naval War College, this was in '48, '49, and '50, and of course we were doing what we could in terms of analysis of some of the operations of World War II. I was either assigned or by interest had done some analysis and research in European operations, particularly in the Mediterranean. I read everything, of course, that I could. Much of the history available at the time consisted of the books and writings and memoirs of the various commanders who had participated in these operations.

And one thing always struck me, after reading everything I could about the history of World War II in that part of the world, was that they all seemed to have a remarkable sympathy for the decisions that they made themselves. It appeared to me obvious that there really can be not too much objective history written of events, particularly of wars as complicated as was World War II, in less than 25 to 50 years, I suppose. By that time, much of the writing of various individual commanders would have been sifted by scholars and researchers and soon the juxtaposition of objective

truth would be brought into the picture. So, for the same reason, it occurred to me that I think we really don't have an objective history of much of the operations in World War II in the Pacific areas that we Marines know. This has been brought home to me in several different ways over the years, and most recently I've read this two-volume work, The Rising Sun, which I think is a very good, objective story of World War II in the Pacific areas. The author has done a right good job in researching the Japanese sources for what motivated the Japanese before and during the Pacific war and during the operations that we, as Marines, are familiar with, during the times that we fought these battles.

Prior to this book, The Rising Sun, I think the best single volume of World War II that I know of was written by our old friend, my old friend, General Sam Griffith, in one of the Lippincott series of books written on World War II, the great battles of World War II. He wrote The Battle for Guadalcanal, which, being the scholar he is, he researched beautifully while he was in Oxford, where he had gotten acquainted with certain Chinese scholars, and they, in turn, had put him in touch with some Japanese historians and scholars. So, we see in his book, The Battle for Guadalcanal, a portrayal of events as we knew them laid against, to an important degree, the events as the Japanese knew them. And this, I think, has made for a

very valuable history of this time.

Between these two books, it occurred to me that we really don't have yet, you might say, a thoroughgoing objective analysis of our operations in any single Pacific campaign. I, of course, was familiar with the early days of the Guadalcanal operation and nor do we as yet, I think, have a real objective history of that operation. I think that each of us who was present could well have observations to make which would help some future historian do what I would call a real, final, objective history of the operation.

Q: Just as the, presumably, final objective histories of the Civil War are now being written.

Mangrum: Yes, indeed, and, of course, we have no better documented history in the world than our own Civil War. Why?

Well, for two reasons. Number one, manifestly both sides spoke the same language, which, of course, solved immense problems right off the bat. But, number two and I think very important is that everyone, from general to lowest private, kept a diary, he wrote home about the operations, and an infinite millions of pieces of correspondence, which, in turn, revealed something which all fitted together in some way to make for this sort of objective history.

I think one of the great tragedies of World War II was the order that no one keep diaries, and,

of course, I think that we had to admit that a certain amount of censorship of correspondence was, perhaps, required. I'm sure that we leaned over too far backwards in enforcing this sort of thing. I kept no diary, following the orders. I've regretted it many times since that I didn't keep one regardless, because I find that in a fast-moving military operation, there simply isn't the time, or the person simply doesn't have the ability to remember all the details and put them together later unless there is some sort of thorough-going diary, and by that, I don't mean the unit diary that every unit is supposed to keep, which may have some basic facts and figures.

But, in terms of historical analysis, they are probably important to some degree, but I would think worthless in a larger sense. My own experience and that of my little organization was that in round-the-clock operations, no one really had time in those early days to keep any sort of official or unofficial record of operations, and I see great gaps in every account of those operations, which I hope someday some historian will fill.

My career, in some respects, was quite unique in a lot of ways. I think that my 39 years or so was at a point of, during a period of, a great deal of transition in the Marine Corps and the military affairs of this country. I couldn't help but think, of course, if I can

just remark a bit on some of my early start, which will illustrate, I think, the point. When I finished college, the reserve program of Marine Corps aviation had been organized only two or three years, in the middle '20s.

It became apparent, after World War I, I think, that although we had a very, very small military establishment left after the cutback following World War I, that, in terms of any military position of this country, there was a requirement for backup. There was a requirement for a reserve. And this was started in the '20s and in the middle '20s, I believe, is when the so-called Naval and Marine Aviation Program was organized. By the time I finished college in 1928, although the numbers that were involved in this program were quite small, it was a start.

At the same time our regular establishment was quite small. I think that at that time we may have had only some 280 aviators in the entire Marine Corps. I was fascinated, of course, by flying. I was fascinated by Marine Corps history. I was fascinated by the Marine Corps, and therefore, when this opportunity was presented to me, I seized it forthwith.

In those days, the program ran something about like this: This was prior, of course, to the development of the term "aviation cadet," which didn't come along until 1935, when the program was vastly expanded. In those days, the aspirant in the Marine Corps Reserve was enlisted as a private

and promoted promptly to private first class, which provided him with the status of flying student. And if I remember correctly, the Navy reserve boys were seaman second class. Following a rather brief sort of flight training, the candidate was commissioned in the reserve and he had obligated himself to serve one year on active duty, as, in my case, a second lieutenant.

Thence he would return to civilian life and be able to some degree to keep up with his flying and constitute a reserve force which was available in time of national emergency. This was a peculiar program that I think that the rather small and insular regular services at that time simply didn't understand, and, amusingly enough, nor did they accord it quite the social status, let's say, that was attached to a career in the military service at that time. This was amusingly enough brought out to me many, many, many years later when, if I can jump over many years, I became in the fall of '63 the so-called Grey Eagle of Naval Aviation. A fairly dubious distinction, I used to say, and having mainly to due with pious, abstemious living and good health and long life rather than having to do with any good sense particularly.

But, at any rate, the title was accorded to that naval aviator of the Navy or the Marine Corps, or the Coast Guard, who carried, while on the active list, the earliest date of designation as a naval aviator. So, in the fall of 1963, I became known as the Grey Eagle of Naval Aviation, and I believe that I am the only Marine that has carried this

distinction.

Well, what I'm coming to is simply this--that initially the title "Grey Eagle" had been based on the naval aviator number, which every naval aviator was supposed to have been given at the time he completed his flight training and was awarded his insignia, his wings. When it came time for the determination in the late '50s of who might be the oncoming Grey Eagles of Naval Aviation, it turned out that there were a great many naval aviators of the one-time early reserve who had never been given a naval aviator's number. So this had to be adjudicated in some fashion. Properly enough, it was decided that the title of Grey Eagle went to that person whose date of designation as naval aviator was the earliest of any still remaining on active duty.

Well, now, why therefore did I and some others not have a naval aviator designation number. It seemed that in the early and middle '20s, when this reserve program of which I spoke was being organized, it was deemed sufficient that a fairly modified and briefer course as a naval aviator would suffice for these officers who were being trained primarily for the reserve. The Navy and the Marine Corps were extremely dubious about this program, in the main; whatever else they thought about these reserve naval aviators, they apparently thought that we were not here to stay and therefore it was quite unnecessary to provide these individuals with a naval aviator number.

This was most amusing to me over the years. Well, it

turned out then, of course, that as this program and the requirements of the national defense of this country developed, naval aviators, Navy and Marine Corps, had to be trained in larger and larger numbers. In 1935, the new legislation provided the term, or the rank of aviation cadet, and at that time, the powers that be in naval aviation decided, "Well these people really are, after all, here to stay." So they decided then to provide them naval aviator numbers in the same progression as the regular officers.

Some years went by and then they discovered that there was this whole block of people who had been trained between 1926 and 1935, I guess, who didn't have any numbers. So, what to do? What was done finally was to go back and give them naval aviator numbers that just picked up consecutively from that date on, which also puzzled no end a great many of my naval aviator flag officer colleagues in the Navy, how I could have the early date of designation and yet a number perhaps which was 2000 later than some of them.

Well, this was only by way of illustrating, insofar as our buildup of military strength during those years, some of the peculiarities of that entire program. Many, many aviators of the Marine Corps, I am sure, who have already participated in the Oral History Program, many of my revered colleagues of some years' prior service to mine, have, I am sure, commented many, many times on the difficulties of aviation within the Marine Corps, in establishing

itself as a military weapon of importance, and that it was here to stay. I think it unneccessary for me to elaborate on that, and their history of this particular time is, of course, extremely valuable because it shows the degree to which military aviation was not perhaps wholly accepted as a necessity of the fabric of this nation.

Well, then, to make a long story short, these things were changing, developing, up through and into, well through World War II, and I come back then to the original part of my thought with respect to the Solomons Campaign. I think there are great gaps in the story of military operations throughout World War II, but particularly in the early part of this operation.

As I indicated, the facts and figures which certainly, in my case under the circumstances of the Solomons operation, were extremely difficult to recall. It seems to me that certain thought and analysis which could might lead that be made / someone to do some historical work some day/could be a useful contribution.

I have felt that, if I can pontificate for a minute, we don't have any kind of history of air operations that are, in my opinion, worth a damn. Maybe it will always be that way; maybe it has to be that way, for perhaps a good and simple reason. The association of people in any combat situation is really the core of any account of exactly what happened. Now, in an infantry unit, for example, people are

shoulder to shoulder, there is continuous communication between individuals, events are extremely dramatic in a heated combat situation every step of the way until the combat action ceases and troops are disengaged. There is much to describe. The time-space factors are such that they can be described. The infinite interplay of human emotion at a time of intense ground combat is something that lends itself to description.

It can be described and therefore all correspondence, all narrators, all historians, all reports of combat action are couched in such a way that the finest details of that action can and usually are described.

Now, what happens in an air situation? Preparations for combat manifestly need to be in a secure area of an airfield, where you can protect your installation, protect your weaponry, protect your people. You might say that up to the time that the airplane has left the ground and is en route to a combat situation, it's similar to an approach march of an infantry unit approaching combat. There isn't much to talk about at a time like that. There isn't much to say. On the other hand, when an air unit is in combat, whether it be a fighter organization or interceptor organization, or whether it be a bomber organization or devoted to some other purpose, when that individual, when those individuals are actually in combat, things happen too fast! It's extremely difficult to describe what happened other than in terms of results. Hence, I think that, and it may be a regrettable truth, that it is ex-

tremely difficult to impossible to analyze or describe air operations in such a way that brings into any sort of juxtaposition the people, the events, the emotions, the things that actually take place in combat.

Well, so much for pontificating. This is simply by way of saying that I think it has been extremely difficult for us to portray a good half of what we're very proud of in the Marine Corps, that is our air-ground team. We didn't have an air-ground team really until well into World War II. The genesis was there all during the prior years. The trend was in that direction, and yet we really didn't have the cohesiveness, the closeness of spirit which I think characterizes our air-ground team in more recent years, and certainly so, it seems to me, today.

And yet I can deplore one or two articles I've recently read in Marine Corps Gazette, which started quite an argument. Some young man writes in an article that the Marine Corps has got too many aviators--we don't need all of these people. Well, this is neither here nor there, but the important thing is that we've developed over a great many years, the philosophy, the concept of our air-ground team and I think that we've got something unique in military annals anywhere in the world. We should be extremely careful in our critiques among ourselves to make sure that nothing we do does damage to this in any way.

Well, back to what I was talking about. We've developed over a great many years this concept and the philosophy

which I think has been so successful in more recent years--certainly so in the Vietnam war. But it wasn't always that way. So I go back then to the early part of the Solomons Campaign, but I think that I need to go back even earlier than that.

My squadron was Scout Bombing Squadron 232, and was based at Ewa, Hawaii, all during 1941. We were wiped out, as was practically all of MAG-21, during the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941. We lost practically all of our aircraft to a real first-class strafing attack by Japanese Navy fighters, and it was a long time before enough...

Q: Did any of your planes get off the ground?

Mangrum: No, none. And it was a long time before the air group was rebuilt as new aircraft began to be available, and new units were formed, and this was the operation all through the Spring of 1942. We were reforming, joining new pilots, splitting squadrons like amoebas, and each half became a new squadron. Gradually, very gradually, new aircraft were becoming available. Manifestly, as far as aircraft were concerned, the first requirement was for the carrier force...

Q: General, let me interrupt for a minute and ask what your personal reaction to Pearl Harbor was. You know, we talk about the sneak attack, et cetera. Did you have a grudging admiration for these Japanese that had come over and executed such a strike?

Mangrum: Well, grudging is, I think, perhaps not the adjective that I might use. Of course, we were all extremely angry at the time in light of what was happening. We felt that war was imminent and an acute sense of embarassment that we were caught literally with our pants at half mast. I think to a man, every one of us, had a whole admiration, not a grudging one, for the professionalism of the Japanese force and a rather complete amazement that they were, in effect, as effective as they were. Our knowledge was sketchy of the Japanese, and I suppose that in the junior ranks we reflected much of the general popular opinion that by no means could the Japanese be as efficient as we nor could they carry out operations of that nature with the tremendous effectiveness that they did. So it was a surprise, certainly, to all of us. On reflection, I think that every one of us felt that they were entitled to the most complete sort of admiration for the way the job was done. It was a real professional job. That was their first line of experienced, well-trained carrier aviatiors, which, as we know, they lacked in sufficent depth to/be able to continue very long.

I think that the decline, as far as they were concerned, certainly occurred after Midway, when they lost a great share of those same experienced carrier aviators.

Well, to go on. We were training as hard as we could in the Hawaiian area, until July of 1942 and I can recall being summoned to a conference in our group commander's

office on, I think it was the 5th of July 1942, and being told then that my squadron and Fighter Squadron 223 under command of then-Captain John L. Smith would be departing for Guadalcanal on the 1st of August. I was reasonably dumbfoumded because my squadron within the month had been divided again. I had joined on the 1st of July some 12 new pilots who were just fresh out of flight training in Pensacola. Looking at their flight log books, I was appalled to discover that none of them had much over 200 hours in the air and that two of them had slightly less than 200 hours of flying of all types in the air, and none in the aircraft which we were equipped.

So, we had one solid month of working as hard as we could, day and night, to try to bring these people up to some degree of combat effectiveness.

Well, back to the conference on the 5th of July in Colonel Claude Larkin's office. I shall never forget being, of course, admonished that this was of the utmost top secrecy and that no one, NO ONE!, even my executive officer or no one else in my squadron was to be told where we were going. We were to be ready for combat, ready for departure on the 1st of August and no one was to be told where we were going.

So, I left the colonel's office and went back to my squadron's headquarters where I was greeted by my sergeant major, and the first question he asked me, he said, "Major, where's Guadalcanal?" And it had been practically a closed gate ever since Pearl Harbor.

It was not considered necessary for anybody to have a day off. Along about April, the group commander said that if any of my officers or men were beginning to show strain particularly strongly that I might give him a day off to go to Honolulu or somewhere. And very few seemed to be showing signs of strain enough that I felt warranted doing that. I hadn't had a day off since before December 7th, and eventually on the 1st of August we were ready to go to...

Q: Were you getting equipment in large quantities in at this time?

Mangrum: Oh, no, no. As a matter of fact we were utilizing all during the Spring of 1942 aircraft which had been, some of them, battle-damaged on the carriers, returned to aircraft repair at Ford Island, reconditioned to what extent that was possible with the facilities that they had, and as new aircraft were coming out, they were being sent to the carriers. Rightly so--no one can quarrel with that, although, of course, we were much incensed at the time, and we made do. The Douglas SBD airplane that we had during most of the Spring were SBD-2s.

Every modern airplane that we had was sent to Midway when the battle there was impending and we were right back where we started. You see, this was June. During June, I began to get a few more newer airplanes, quite new, coming out from the United States. These were the SBD-3, a slightly later model of the same aircraft.

Well, when the decision had been made for my squadron to go to the Solomons operation, very rapidly I was provided with 12 new SBD-3 aircraft, which were newly delivered from the United States. Now, you must also note that this was only two-thirds of the normal strength of a squadron at that time, but there weren't any more available. Finally I left for the Solomons with 12 aircraft and 15 pilots. Only three spare pilots for the 12 aircraft. If you recall, the real requirements of military operations extend around the clock, and it was later decided that a full squadron would be 18 aircraft with 53 pilots in order to provide depth.

But, we went to the Solomons with 15 pilots and 12 aircraft. Well, now, as I reflect on it, here again one can be critical. Here again was the lack of planning, prior planning. You must remember, that by this time, by June--I've forgotten just when--the 1st Marine Division was en route to Australia. In short, that division had been sent to Australia without provision for immediately available air support. None.

As I read back on the operations of the time, it appeared to be quite an afterthought to provide aircraft, and then only after it was discovered that the Japanese had built this field on Guadalcanal. If you recall, the strategy was for the 1st Marine Division to land there and seize this area before the Japanese

had an opportunity to utilize that field for further operations to the south. Hence, planning had been quite deficient in providing for the essential air half of the air-ground team.

Now, one can go back into a lot of early history of the Marine Corps and find some of the reasons this was perhaps so. Command relationships in the Pacific area were, in my opinion, notably deficient because we did not have then a Fleet Marine Force commander who was in command of both air and ground. The air echelon/which was in Hawaii, for example, reported to a commander in San Diego, and he, in turn, not to an overall Fleet Marine Force (we didn't even have the term then) commander--but technically through a Navy chain of command for aeronautical supplies and equipment and / administratively directly to the Commandant of the Marine Corps.

So, we lacked a great deal of the essential planning which since, of course, has been so wisely accomplished, in the Marine Corps. You might say that it was an afterthought that our two air units had to be hastily put together, bob-tailed units, and thrust onto a carrier, and dispatched to Guadalcanal.

We sailed, (I believe the date was the 4th of August) on the old USS Long Island, one of the first of what we knew as jeep carriers. The reason for the delay being, if you recall the Alaskan operations were underway, a good part of the Pacific Fleet had been sent up in that

area in connection with part of those operations, and the Long Island was with that force and belatedly detached and sent to Pearl Harbor to take us to the Solomons.

So, I think that at all of 8 knots we proceeded to the Solomons campaign. Of course, we were well at sea standing south when the 1st Marine Division landed on Guadalcanal on August 7th. Following that, you will recall the debacle of the Battle of Savo Island which took place the next day or two. The wind was up everywhere and we were sent into the Fiji Islands to see whether, apparently, there was any purpose in our going any further.

I must go back a little bit, too, to say that matters had become quite critical in our own carrier operations in that period, and not least of the things which had to be done before we left Pearl Harbor was to qualify every pilot on board an airplane carrier. There was a possibility, in line with Marine aviation's secondary mission, that we might have to operate from one of the Navy carriers in the South Pacific. So this carrier qualifying took a great deal of time. It interfered much with bombing and gunnery training. Nevertheless, it had to be done and was done. When we got into the Fiji Islands, we didn't know where we were going, whether or not we would be based ashore on this secret place called Guadalcanal, or whether, in fact, we might have to be transferred to one of the big Navy carriers to replace losses which they were suffering.

As matters turned out, the 1st Marine Division was

not driven back into the sea after the Battle of Savo in spite of the fact that the division got ashore with so little of its equipment...

End, Side 1, Tape 1

Begin Side 2, Tape 1

Mangrum: We were at the Fijis for what, I think, turned out to be only for a half a day or so, and then moved on to the South Pacific--well, to jump ahead of considerable tedious detail, we were launched some 200 miles off Guadalcanal.

Q: Was this any trick getting off a jeep carrier, General? I think of them being pretty small.

Mangrum: Well...actually it was; I suppose I could touch on that, but first let me just complete the thought. We were launched 200 miles off Guadalcanal in the middle of the afternoon, the reason being that the 1st Division was daily experiencing air raids in the middle of the day. Because of the distance the Japanese had to travel, they would leave after daylight and come all the way down to Guadalcanal from Rabaul, which was at the extreme limit of their range. Thus, Guadalcanal was being bombed in the middle of the day.

So, we were ordered to delay our departure from the ship until the daily air raid had already transpired, and we landed late afternoon.

But, to go back a little to answer your question. Yes,

of course, that ship was so loaded with 18 Grumman fighters of then-Captain Smith's fighter squadron and my 12 SBD dive bombers that there was, of course, no running space for take-offs, so we had to be catapulted. That seemed to be no particular problem, although we worried down through a good part of the doldrums area of the Pacific because there was no wind over the deck and simple mathematical calculation required us to have something like 15 knots of wind over the deck in order to be catapulted safely. Then this was further complicated because during the time that we were en route between the Fijis and the New Hebrides, we got a signal from the fleet that directed that all my dive bombers depart the ship with a bomb attached. The ship had only 500-pound bombs, so we had to hang 500-pound bombs on each of our aircraft, the reason being that the supplies that had been put ashore on Guadalcanal now were so limited that our source of ammunition supply was a little precarious. Therefore we were directed to take ashore with us one bomb.

Well, this worried us a great bit because at the time we were steaming through a flat calm and we figured that we could hardly be catapulted safely off the ship without bombs. So to add a bomb caused us some concern, but as it turned out, by the time we got to the launching area, there was a good wind over the deck and we were catapulted without any trouble.

We landed then on Guadalcanal on the 20th of August,

and if ever in my whole life I have experienced the marvelous thrill that I think all of us get from the concept and reality of what we like to call our air-ground team, it was evident then, because the 1st Division had been on Guadalcanal for 13 days without any air support. The carriers, of course, had to be withdrawn after the first couple of days of the operation, so the division had no protection whatever from enemy aircraft, and no means whatever to intercept any enemy ships that were coming into the area.

So, to put it mildly, the 1st Marine Division was real glad to see us! Then I think that it became what I was referring to earlier, it became apparent to me over the time we were there, how difficult it was for air operations to be really described. I don't think that any Marine living is unaware of the role of every element of the Marine Corps air-ground team and what it does. But the difficulty is in describing the operation. General Vandegrift's first concern had to be the security of that perimeter, which was very small. His second concern was the ability of the Japanese to reinforce.

It became apparent, of course, that the Japanese on Guadalcanal itself were in limited strength. But it also became immediately apparent that they had every intent of hanging on to that place and retaking it, and therefore their strategy, as has become so evident from reading the history of their side of the war,

was to reinforce Guadalcanal as rapidly as they could and to seize the beachhead and drive us into the sea. Our role, our aircraft role, therefore, insofar as my unit was concerned, became primarily one of intercepting, interdicting the Japanese reinforcements. The fighter squadron role, of course, was obvious. Their job was to keep enemy aircraft off the backs of the 1st Marine Division, and they did a magnificent job of that, I think much to the dismay and astonishment of the Japanese, who lost aircraft by the 100s during that whole operation, however much we were understrength and undermanned and really on a shoestring operation.

Q: Did you get any replacement aircraft during this period?

Mangrum: By dribbles and trickles. Not the least of our replacement aircraft in the entire time that we were at Guadalcanal resulted from the fact that an aircraft carrier might be damaged, its aircraft had to be put ashore, and Commander, South Pacific, ordered those aircraft, Navy units, into Guadalcanal, to be shorebased and operate under General Vandegrift.

History, I think, portrays their participation and role in that operation quite well in terms of the units that were there and results that were accomplished. In terms of replacement of our own aircraft--there were none, for some time. The supply line had simply not been built up that far in the Pacific. Again, the demands, as far as aircraft were concerned, of our carriers were paramount and it was extremely difficult for weeks and weeks and

months, really, for any replacements to be sent directly to us.

Our role, then was to intercept and destroy, if we could, Japanese ships that were bringing in reinforcements, and we had fair success over the period of the operations. It was extremely difficult to operate because of the condition of the field, the condition of the runway, which was simply a dirt gravel strip about 3,000 feet long, which was marginally adequate, even for the aircraft that I had.

There could be no such thing as, what you might call, close troop support as we have known it in succeeding years. The main priority was to stop the Japanese if we could from reinforcing. It became immediately apparent that the Japanese were reacting by the time we got there, that is, since the landing on the 7th of August, which surprised them, and they had begun to marshal their forces and were beginning to make a concerted effort to reinforce Guadalcanal.

Q: Were you getting good intelligence of the ship movements and this sort of thing?

Mangrum: I, honestly, from a personal standpoint can't answer that too well. Actually, I think that it was not too good insofar as we were concerned on Guadalcanal, because, communications between Guadalcanal and Headquarters, South Pacific, was marginal and the ability to transmit intelligence quickly and directly

was extremely limited.

Q: Were you sending your planes out just to look or were you reacting...

Mangrum: We began scouting operations the next day after we were there to search the sea areas for any sign of Japanese shipping, and these aircraft of mine were a little bit limited on range, or effective radius, that is; our effective radius was a scant 200 miles. But we hadn't been there more than two or three days when we were involved in operations.

As you see, the Japanese had learned that they could get down into that area undetected at night, attack the beachhead in the middle of the night, and be gone beyond any aircraft range by daylight of the next morning. The beachhead had already, before we got there, been shelled two or three times by ships that had come down there in the middle of the night.

In fact, we were shelled--and here's where I don't have the records with me now, and I would need something to remind me of dates and times--I think that it was about the 23d ...after we had gotten there, we'd gotten there the 20th...it was about the 23d when we were shelled briefly. Expecting this, I had scouted the area. We had put some jury-rigged lighting on the runway. A portable lighting unit that lighted about one-third of the runway, and by putting a jeep with its headlights on at the far end of the run-

way to provide us a take-off target, we were able to launch at night. After this particular episode of being shelled in the middle of the night, we began launching aircraft in three-plane sections. I took a three-plane section off and we climbed out and there was a sliver of moon left and standing around the end of Florida Island we could make out Japanese ships and we attacked them.

The first bomb I ever dropped on a Japanese was at 2 o'clock inthe morning. We couldn't tell if we hit or had done them any damage whatever, and the next morning we found some oil in the area, but it was meaningless. I think that it certainly gave the Japanese something to think about, that finally we had a capability of some sort; perhaps not too effective at night.

Well, so much for that. These kind of operations were carried out many, many nights throughout the period of operations there. I'm sure that it had some deterrent effect on ships attempting to reinforce units.

Q: Did you catch any sizable group of Japanese ships during the day?

Mangrum: I'm coming to that. I think that it was about the 24th when intelligence began to trickle in to General Vandegrift that there was a Japanese carrier task force somewhere in the area, and our carrier task force was extremely limited. I think that we had only the Enterprise and the Yorktown, maybe the Saratoga, in the area at all.

I can remember that we were operating during this particular night, it must have been the 24th, against Japanese ships that had shelled the beachhead. At about 3 o'clock in the morning, we got intelligence that there was a Japanese task force in such a position that it appeared most probable that the beachhead would be attacked by Japanese carrier aircraft by daylight or so the next morning. And this could be extremely dangerous to the whole operation because they were extremely effective. We had very little to defend the perimeter with against that kind of attack at that time.

So, there was a feverish operation involved to get our aircraft that had been operating during the night refueled and rearmed. That was extremely slow because of the lack of facilities that we had, and it was barely completed by daylight. In the meantime General Vandegrift had gotten another position report, either by submarine or by some means of another position of this Japanese carrier task force. Again it appeared that it was quite imminent that we would be attacked that morning and early.

So we launched at daylight. Unfortunately there was a squall area over the Florida straits and we simply could not get through with the kind of equipment we had in those days and we had to return, return and rearm and refuel, and we took off again. By that time, some of that squall area had moved on, and we could get through. So now it's middle morning and we hadn't yet been attacked, fortunately.

We took off to the north searching for this Japanese carrier task force. Chances are that if we ever found one, none of us would have ever returned, because of the limited strength that we had. We searched to the north and found nothing. We did the pie-shaped pattern on the search leg. You go out on this bearing, cross over, and come in on that bearing, which searches one whole sector. And it was during return on this sector...in the meantime we had outdistanced the radius of the fighters and they had to come back, so we were on our own. And here, on that return leg, we found a very large Japanese transport force, which was standing south to Guadalcanal, protected by a cruiser and several destroyers.

This outfit we attacked, and I think with some success. We hit the cruiser and I think sunk one of the transports, did some damage, as I recall, to some of the others, and stood home for Guadalcanal to refuel and rearm as rapidly as we could, because we were still nervous about the presence somewhere in the area of this Japanese carrier task force.

Well, now, this force standing down--I don't have the figures in front of me--was a major part of a Japanese division that was standing in to reinforce Guadalcanal and would have reached Guadalcanal during the hours of darkness. Whatever damage that we did, plus the surprise to them of being attacked in this position, they turned around and went away. And here, I think, is the extreme importance

of the contribution of that kind of air, or dive bomber air, in an operation of this nature. That outfit was turned away. To that extent, our operations in terms of destruction and damage caused was probably average or even minimal, but nevertheless, they turned away and Guadalcanal was spared at least that reinforcement.

The Japanese, apparently, gave up for the time being trying to bring troops in by transports. The next thing that they tried was to run them in by destroyers, fast-operating. Manifestly they were capable of computing reasonably, our radius of operation and knew that they could be beyond our radius at last light, stand in at high speed for Guadalcanal, discharge troops, and be beyond our radius of operations again by first light in the morning. But it took them a little time to figure this out, because late one afternoon, two or three days later, one of our search planes frantically radioed in a contact report that there were four Japanese destroyers standing down the channel, and this was not over 100 miles from Guadalcanal.

Fortunately, we were rearmed and ready and I was able to get off with eight or nine aircraft, I think, and we attacked this outfit. We sunk one destroyer and did some damage on some of the others, and all these destroyers were simply loaded with troops.

Q: Did they turn back?

Mangrum: Oh, yes, yes. I have since read Japanese reports of how many hundreds of troops they lost there and then,

and we said at the time that we thought we sunk three destroyers and one got away. I'm not sure that that's entirely correct, but I think one was sunk outright. I watched it blow up. Another one was heavily damaged we knew, because it was turning in circles and we think that one sank, and one appeared to be getting away at high speed, and one limping, trailing oil. I think the important thing here is that, again, this force was turned away, and of course it lost a lot of troops in the process.

To proceed with the main part of military operations, the Japanese, at that time, I think, got smart. After that, they came racing down there during hours of darkness. We knew that they were offshore, and I remember the first time that we attacked a Japanese destroyer that we found down the beach from the beachhead. As we attacked him, whether we hurt him very much, I don't know, but he returned our fire, and there was this great array of anti-aircraft tracers, and so on, which I don't think hurt anybody, but it gave us a point of aim. There was no moon at this time. It was difficult to impossible to see these ships, but their AA fire gave us a point of aim. But the Jap was smart, again, and he very soon discovered that if he just laid doggo, and showed no lights whatever, we were just almost totally ineffective. Couldn't find him, and if you could find him against any low visibility at all, by the time a pilot had pushed over in his dive, he would

lose him again, and we simply had no point of aim. So they laid doggo, and they did in fact, as we know, land a number of troops in this fashion.

Even so, I think that it became more and more expensive for the Japanese to attempt this kind of operation and their next tactic was to try to run troops in small craft from the Shortland Islands area down through what we dubbed "The Slot," lying doggo against the shoreline heavily camouflaged during daylight hours and then proceeding on during hours of darkness. Eventually a great many of them got to Guadalcanal that way.

But we discovered this concept in operation and went after them, and we found literally hundreds of these boats in various places along Choiseul Island and other just little indentations in the shoreline. They'd be pulled up, several of them, side by each, and heavily covered with,hastily covered with limbs and branches and so on. They were very hard to see and I'm sure we didn't see all of them. But we saw many of them. Unfortunately, we didn't have the proper type of armament against targets of that nature. The only bombs we had were demolition bombs with fuzing for ships.

We'd come down time and again and put a bomb right through a good-sized landing barge and, of course, it would blow it to hell, but probably not hurt the one 20 feet from it, whereas if we'd had...

Q: Did you have a strafing capability?

Mangrum: No, that airplane had no strafing capability that was worth a damn. Two .30 caliber machine guns was all it had, and they weren't any use particularly. We had no rockets, we had no cannon such as we have now, and we had no fragmentation bombs which would have been much more useful. But I think my point in mentioning this is, that again, a great many troops were stopped from ever getting to Guadalcanal. On the other hand, a great many of them did get to Guadalcanal and, of course, we know in great detail in which ground combat can be described of the infinite number of operations around the perimeter and the problems that General Vandegrift had and so beautifully solved, and how he protected that perimeter. And this I think is a great thrill to any Marine who ever reads about the operation.

But, the difficulty of portraying what air did in that operation goes back, I think, to my remark that fundamentally and generically, it's almost impossible to describe. I would have trouble trying to describe in detail, the kind of detail that's so readily available to describe a ground operation--what actually happened and did happen in terms of air operations. To that extent, it just seems to me that the history of the operation has always been deficient to a degree and whether it can ever be padded out and portrayed with realism that existed at the time is something perhaps for some future historian to ponder.

Well, there are infinite other incidents that occurred

, I think,
during this period. The difficulties of operation/that we had there were never repeated fortunately at any time later in the Pacific War.

Q: Did General Vandegrift have a colonel air officer on his staff?

Mangrum: Yes, he did. It was Colonel Kenneth Weir and he was General Vandegrift's air officer.

Q: I suppose that you had constant liaison with him.

Mangrum: Oh, yes, quite. Quite. In the early period, the group executive officer was there, Colonel Charles Fike, for whom none of us present had too high regard, and some two weeks after we got there, Colonel Wallace, who was MAG-23 commander, arrived with the second echelon of MAG-23. Immediately after that, General Geiger, the 1st Wing commander, arrived and put his inimitable vigorous command into the operation. There was a long time before the operations in that area were anything but the most flimsy of a shoestring./We had a great deal of luck, and it was fortunate that we made out as well as we did.

It was extremely hard on men and equipment. I lost most of my squadron, some to combat in the air, some to shelling on the ground, one to an accident, one to an unfortunate occurrence where ships in the harbor became panicky and somebody shouted, "Enemy aircraft!" and it was one of my planes, and they shot him down. These things happen in war. In short, my unit, my squadron was pretty well

used up by the end of September. And as history records, the whole of Marine Air Group 23 was pulled clear out of the Solomons by the middle of October. Other units, which had long since been launched from the United States and began to arrive in the South Pacific/were finally readied and then could be injected into the operation...

Well, now I hope that this has been useful, and will be profitable somewhat, sometime. I think that there's much of the detail of those operations which has never been written, and/which, perhaps, someone can put together someday. If this interview/helps any, I've been glad to do it. And I'm out of time this morning.

End, Side 2, Tape 1, Session I