



Welcome to the WAR



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Welcome To The War!

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Following several days of getting VMF-121 familiarized with the Henderson Field complex and the islands and waters around Guadalcanal, we were assigned duties as one of several combat-alert squadrons. Upon hearing the approach of enemy warplanes, ours would be among the first planes to scramble aloft. Other fighter squadrons based at Cactus, as Guadalcanal was known, escorted bombers on raids up The Slot, the double chain of islands stretching from southeast of Guadalcanal to Bougainville, which was about as far as our fighters could reach.

My first air-alert scramble at Guadalcanal was on June 12, 1943. It was to be my first intercept and my first combat.

I was then the squadron flight officer and, on June 12, was flight leader of VMF-121's two four-plane alert divisions.

Pilots not already waiting in their cockpits were in the squadron ready room, a large tent near the end of the runway, within sprinting distance of our Corsairs.

At the alert, I ran toward the airplanes, which were waiting like cow ponies in the dispersal revetments beside the taxiway.

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I climbed up on the left wing of the first plane I could find and vaulted into the cockpit. With the aid of the plane captain, I shrugged into my seat and parachute harness and plugged in my throat mike and earphones. As the plane captain climbed down off the wing and got out of the way, I checked the lever that was set to lock me into the cockpit.

Then, one by one, I heard the thrumming high-performance engines, which had already been turned up by the plane captains, roar to full power. At this point, all the pilots checked the two magnetos to be sure they were each



Above: Our airplanes sat on dirt runways, and were always ready for us thanks to our excellent ground crew support.

Right: This picture is a very good example of our departure from the ready room and into the waiting aircraft.



bearing a full power load. If the magnetos gave a low reading or if some other problem was noted, the pilot would quickly shut off the engine, reverse the entry procedure, and head for the nearest spare plane, of which there were always one or two. Sometimes, if too many airplanes were down, some pilots would miss getting into the air.

The eerie thing about scrambles was the complete absence of radio chatter. The entire evolution was so automatic that, except in an extreme emergency, there was zero conversation. We just boosted power and rolled out to take off into the wind.

As my airplane vaulted into the air, I pulled up its landing gear lever with my left hand. Then, as I climbed beyond danger of hitting the earth, I switched the joystick to my left hand and pulled my birdcage canopy shut with my right. Then I strapped on my oxygen mask, which was mandatory above 10,000 feet.

Within a few minutes, my half-squadron was crawling for an altitude advantage over the onrushing enemy, seeking to meet that enemy as far from friendly bases as we could manage. As we climbed, each of us charged and test-fired all of his Corsair's six .50-caliber wing guns. There was no point in flying on if the guns were inoperable.

The formation pretty much took care of itself. We nearly always had a few stragglers or gaps in our formation right after reaching altitude. That meant that we had to reconstitute two-plane elements and divisions on the way to combat.

We were at 18,000 feet and heading northwest, toward the Russell Islands, which were about 80 miles from Henderson Field. The remainder of the squadron, and three other alert squadrons, were dispersed right behind us, covering different altitudes and sectors. Thus we had 32 Corsairs and Wildcats flying as a leading wedge and

nearly an identical number coming on as a follow-up force. The New Zealanders managed to launch another 30 P-40 fighters.

For all the long months of practice and performance in Samoa and at Turtle Bay, I did not have a calm cell in my

Fear doesn't overwhelm you; you let fear overwhelm you.

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body. It is unusual to sweat at altitude, even in the tropics, but bodily fluids were running off me in rivulets. I was even concerned that my canopy would fog up from so much moisture. I had no fear, but my bloodstream had an overabundance of adrenaline and, I’m sure, other life preserving substances that gave off a rank odor and copious amounts of perspiration. In a way, my discomfort shielded me from dwelling too much on the possible consequences of the onrushing confrontation. I do not think I was ever as exhilarated as I was during that flight.

The Russells had been recently seized by Marine Raiders, and a new forward fighter strip was under construction. It was unclear if the approaching Japanese wanted to strike at the new base or if they were bound for Guadalcanal. Whatever the case, we barely had enough time to intercept them on the northwest of the Russells.

There was no end on chatter among the Corsair pilots, especially “bogies”— unconfirmed, presumably hostile radar contacts from our ground controllers at Guadalcanal.

We were over the Russell Islands within 30 minutes of the alert. Below, I could see the wakes of boats as they plied the blue waters. I was scanning the entire sky, looking for telltale movement among the distant thunderheads and the lacy white cumulus clouds set against a splendid blue canopy.

I was just commenting to myself what a beautiful day it was when my earphones suddenly crackled with an incoming all-squadrons message: “Tally ho! Zeroes at eleven o’clock. Angels 25.” This meant that enemy fighters had been spotted as they flew in at an altitude of 25,000 feet and on a bearing just to the left of dead center. (Imagine a clock. Dead ahead is 12 o’clock, dead astern is six o’clock, right is three o’clock, and left is nine o’clock.)

I charged my guns and turned on my reflector sight, which cast an image of a gunsight, complete with distance calibrations, on the windscreen in front of my face.

Within seconds, I saw silvery glints against the bright blue sky. The enemy fighter formations were coming in from all directions.

No enemy bombers had been reported by coastwatchers occupying various covert observation posts further up the Solomons, and none was sighted as the opposing forces rushed at one another in excess of 500 miles per hour. We were encountering a fighter sweep, pure and simple. Over 70 Zeros had come this far, simply to challenge our fighters.

As I approached the swift silver streaks and tried to lock onto one of my own, I could see in the middle distance that other Corsairs — from my two divisions, as it turned out — had already engaged, for there was a large brown smudge set up against a lacy cumulus cloud to mark the spot where a Zero had blown up. I saw no parachute.

Then we got into it. To my left, my own division’s second element suddenly broke away to take on an oncoming Zero. I had only enough time to watch the first spurt of tracer erupt from one of the Corsair’s six .50-caliber wing guns.

All the best training in the world could not abate the instant of sheer surprise when my eyes locked onto a target of their own.

The Zero was going to pass me from the right front, to left rear, as he dived on one of the Corsairs of my engaged second element, which by then was behind and below me. I was sure the Japanese pilot never saw me as he opened up with his 30-caliber machine guns. I saw his pink tracer reach out past my line of vision, which was obscured by my Corsair’s long nose. Then, for a good measure, he fired four 20mm canon rounds, which passed in front of me like fiery popcorn balls; I was shocked to see how slowly they seemed to travel.

I never consciously pressed my gun-button knob. I had practiced this encounter a thousand times, and I seemed to know enough to allow my instincts to prevail over my mind. My guns were bore-sighted to converge in a cone about 300 yards ahead of my Corsair’s propeller spinner. Anything within that cone would be hit by a stream of half-inch steel-jacketed bullets.

My Corsair shuddered as all the guns fired, and I saw my tracer just passing over the Zero’s long birdcage canopy.

Then he was past me. I pulled around after him, to my left. So, I hoped, as did my wingman, 1st Lieutenant Phil Leeds, who was echeloned to the right and rear, just off my right wing. My turn was easy. I did not pull many Gs, so my head was absolutely clear. I came up with a far deflection shot and decided to go for it. I gave the Zero a good lead and fired all my guns again. As planned, my tracers went ahead of him, but just at the right level. I kicked my left rudder to pull my rounds in towards his nose. If that Japanese pilot had flown straight ahead, he would have been a dead man.

Instead, that superb pilot presented me with a demonstration of the Zero's best flight characteristic, the one thing a Zero could do that could carry its pilot from the jaws of death just about every time. I had heard of the maneuver I was about to witness, from scores of awed F4F and F4U pilots, but I had no conception of how aerodynamically fantastic the Zero fighter really was until that split second.

As soon as my quarry saw my tracer pass in front of his airplane's nose, he simply pulled straight up and literally disappeared from my reflector sight and, indeed, my entire line of vision. My tracer reached out into empty space. I was so in awe of the maneuver that I was shaking with envy.

I had time to inscribe a fleeting image of my surroundings upon my mind's eye — the sky was filled with weaving airplanes, streamers of smoke and flame, winking guns, and lines of tracers set against that superb blue background, with its distant thunderheads and lacy clouds. I pulled my joystick into my belly and banked as hard to the left as I dared.

There he was! My reflector sight ring lay just to the right of him but he was just beyond my reach. If I was to get a clear shot, I would have to pull up in an even steeper climb. Even then, he had the better climbing speed, and he was steadily opening the range. It didn't matter — I wanted the son of a bitch.

I held my breath and sucked in my gut to counter the pressure, but I felt the forces of gravity steadily mount up and press me into my seat. I felt the blood being sucked from my brain. I couldn't quite get him into my sights; he was just a little too high and a little too far to the right.

He had me in a tight loop by then. I knew I would not be able to maintain this maneuver indefinitely and it struck me that I might be running low on ammunition. All the alarm bells went off in my head at the same time, but I hung on despite the gray pall that was passing over my eyes and filling my mind.

I finally reached the top of the loop, a point where all the forces were in equilibrium. Suddenly, the G forces relaxed. I was not quite weightless, but neither was I of full body weight. There was a moment of grogginess, then the gray pall totally cleared. I noticed that the horizon was upside down and that the Zero was...in my sights.

He was about 300 yards ahead of me, at extreme range, and slowly pulling away. It was now or never.



Left: The fleet of F4U Corsairs, F4F Wildcats and P-40 Warhawks heads off at 18,000 feet to intercept the incoming Enemy Aircraft.

Below: A formation of F4U Corsairs fly in formation toward their destination.



I blocked everything else out, except that silver Zero and the tools I had at my disposal, now mere extensions of my mind and my senses. Nothing else mattered more than staying on that Zero's tail. I would have flown into the ocean at full throttle if that enemy pilot led me there.



Top: Japanese A6M fighters, referred to as Zeros, were the type of fighters we encountered during this engagement.

Right: We relied on our ground crews to keep our fighter-planes airworthy and ready at all times.



I squeezed the gun-button knob beneath my right index finger. The eerie silence in my cockpit was broken by the steady roar of my machine guns.

The Zero never had a chance. It flew directly into the cone of deadly half-inch bullets. I was easily able to stay on it as the stream of tracers first sawed into the leading edge of the left wing. I saw little pieces of metal fly away from the impact area and clearly thought I should nudge my gun-sight — which is to say, my entire Corsair — a hair to the right. The stream of tracer worked its way to the cockpit. I clearly saw the glass canopy shatter, but there was so much glinting, roiling glass and debris that I could not see the pilot. The Zero wobbled and my tracer fell into first one wing root, then the other, striking the enemy's unprotected fuel tanks. The Zero suddenly blew up and evaporated.

I instinctively ducked, certain that I would be struck by the debris, which was hurtling by at hundreds of miles per hour. I could feel things hitting the Corsair, but I was quickly through the expanding greasy cloud of detritus and soaring through clear sky.

As I fell back into the ironclad routine of rotating my head left, right, and up in search of enemy planes, I felt rather than saw Phil Leeds closing in on my tail. Only then did I realize that trusty Phil had followed me all the way through the grueling chase and on through the debris cloud of the evaporated Zero. Now it was his turn.

Only seconds after my kill, another Zero flashed by directly in front of us. Phil was in the best position to get him; we both knew that. While Phil attacked, like a hawk after a mouse, I dropped back and locked on to his wing.

Phil peeled off to the left and struggled mightily to grab hold of the Zero's tail. As he turned however, I saw a stream of pink tracer flash past his windscreen from the right rear.

My eyes quickly shifted to my rearview mirror on the right and caught the glint of the sun on our assailant's silvery fuselage. Phil saw the second Zero and led me sharply around to the left.

Phil followed through, right into a diving head-on attack against the third Zero. Even as pink tracer from the second Zero's guns flashed by from the right rear, I saw that Phil was scoring solid hits on the third Zero. I also noted that there was no return fire.

Then it was time for me to get out of the way. We reversed course by flying up into a tight loop. The instant we completed the high-G maneuver, the second Zero overtook us and hurtled out from under my wing. Phil simply fired all his guns at the second Zero as it passed beneath his wing.

“Phil radioed that he wanted to take a crack at him, though he had no idea how many bullets he had left.”

I lost track of Phil’s bullets and all the Zeros for just an instant as I checked to see if any more Zeros were converging on us. When I next looked around, all I could see was a huge white parachute opening beneath a great puff of black smoke. Nearby, the remains of the lifeless second Zero spiraled down toward the sea. Neither the first nor third Zeros were anywhere in our part of the sky. I don’t think Phil’s kill took more than ten seconds.

The sky around us was empty; The air battle had passed us by. Far off, I could see airplanes maneuvering against the backdrop of clouds. I briefly considered joining the action, but I was worried about our supply of .50-caliber ammunition. I knew that only very foolish pilots knowingly use all their bullets when enemy fighters are still around.

I motioned Phil to fall back on my tail, which he did. I checked our position on my strip map. As soon as I had fixed on a distinctive island below, I climbed back to 18,000 feet and shaped a course for home, well to the southeast.

Only then did I realize that my flight suit was dripping wet from perspiration. I could feel a heavy pounding in my temples, indication that a vast quantity of adrenaline was coursing through my bloodstream. My breathing became shallow and I felt ever so faint. I took a few deep pulls of pure oxygen, and that cleared me right up.

After a return flight of under 30 minutes, we made landfall over Cape Esperance, Guadalcanal’s northwestern tip. It was about 1130. There, Phil and I both spotted a solitary Zero circulating right over the beach at about 5,000 feet. I had a vague impression that the pilot might have been speaking by radio with someone on the ground.

I knew I was low on ammunition and would have left that Zero alone, but Phil radioed that he wanted to take a crack at him, though he had no idea how many bullets he had left.

I turned the lead over to Phil and followed him in a steep dive, right out of the sun. The whole thing was over in seconds. Phil simply nailed the Zero, which turned its nose down and dived straight into the sea. It never even flamed.

We circled the Zero’s grave once, then turned for home, where we made a routine landing and taxied out to the dispersal area to see how our comrades had fared. As it happened, Phil and I were the first ones back. We accepted handshakes from our plane captains after telling them the good news, and then we bided our time by checking our Corsairs for damage. Neither of the airplanes had sustained any bullet holes, but my airplane’s nose and leading wing edges were pitted from debris, and there was a large black smudge, probably flaming oil or aviation gasoline, on my prop spinner and the nose of my fighter.

Everyone was back within 30 minutes or so. It turned out that VMF-121 was the only squadron that scored that day. Captain Bob Baker was credited with a probable Zero; Captain Ken Ford got two solid kills and a probable; Captain Bill Harlan got one kill and two probables; I, Captain Bruce Porter, got one kill; and 1st Lieutenant Phil Leeds got two kills. That was six kills and four probables against no losses of our own. It was very good day!

I had not only weathered my first combat, I had scored my first kill. I had been baptized. I had won my spurs. It did not dawn on me until late that night that I had also killed a man.

Not enough can be said about the devotion and pivotal importance of our ground crewmen. They labored mightily out of the limelight while young kids like me sucked up all the glory. Factors of heredity — great eyesight and reflexes — placed us in the cockpits of airplanes that could never have gotten airborne without the loving attention provided by our plane captains and mechanics.

Often, ground crewmen worked 24-hour days, with little time off for meals or catnaps. They suffered debilitating illnesses and life threatening diseases because they took better care of our Corsairs than their own bodies.



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