

Air and Space this Week

Item of the Week

Four Guadalcanal Aviation Heroes

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The United States was rocked back on its heels in the immediate aftermath of the attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941. As Admiral Yamamoto predicted, the Japanese military would “run wild” for about six months, then after that, the outcome would be less clear. The US worked diligently to build out and protect the sea lanes to Hawaii and the South Pacific (including a fueling station at Bora Bora), and to inhibit Japanese advances with the naval Battle of the Coral Sea (stopping an invasion of New Guinea) and the Battle of Midway, which broke the back of Japan’s fast carrier attack capability. Thus was the stage set for the invasion of Guadalcanal, in the Solomon Islands chain, just over six months after Pearl...

The focus of the Item of the Week will focus on four heroic aviators from that dark time.

U.S. Marines went ashore on Guadalcanal on August 7, 1942. We invaded at that time, even though our forces were not immediately up to the task, because the Japanese had started to build an airfield there, from which they could interdict attacks on their base at Rabaul and project attacks against the sea lanes to Australia. If that move wasn’t countered, the road to Japan would be longer and more difficult.

The invasion was covered by US aircraft carriers *Saratoga*, *Enterprise*, and *Wasp*. Our guys were up against some of the best pilots Japan ever produced, and the vaunted Japanese Zero fighter, which was generally superior to the US planes in service at that time. Our carrier pilots were no slouches, but they had their hands full, and many were shot down (one [dogfight](#), between Saburo Sakai and “Pug” Sutherland, was [one for the ages](#)).

The first order of business was to consolidate and prepare defensive positions against Japanese counter-attacks, and to finish the airfield the Japanese had started. It took almost two weeks to make the field suitable for combat operations; it was christened “Henderson Field” for a Marine diver bomber squadron leader KIA at Midway, and would retain that name officially until a few years ago, when it took the name of the city, Honiara, that flourished on the site since WWII.

The only aviation unit able to be inserted into Guadalcanal in time to support the post-invasion defense of the island was Marine Air Group 23, comprising two fighter squadrons (VMF-223 and VMF-224) and two dive bomber squadrons (VMSB-231 and VMSB-232).

Marine aviation had taken a beating at Midway. Fighter squadron VMF-221 had suffered heavy casualties there (of the twenty-eight pilots participating, 14 were KIA or missing, and 4 were WIA). The squadron survivors were assigned to VMF-223 or 224, earmarked for Guadalcanal.

Both VMF-223 and 224 were undermanned (and were transitioning from the Brewster Buffalo to the Grumman Wildcat) in the two months between Midway and Guadalcanal. The majority of both squadrons were rookies just out of flight training, with zero combat experience and very little flight time. Many of the Midway survivors should have had more recovery time from their Midway trauma, as it was, most were of limited value in the coming combat.

Getting the aircraft to Guadalcanal was not easy, either. Planes were needed as soon as the airfield could be completed; there was not the time, manpower, or facilities to send crated aircraft to Henderson Field for assembly. MAG 23 would be transported in two waves, using tiny aircraft carriers converted from merchant ships. VMF-223 and VMSB-232 would go in first, followed by VMF-224 and VMSB-231 a week or so later.

The first two squadrons were to be loaded on the [USS Long Island](#), (CVE-1; our first “escort carrier”) at our base at Efate, carried near the island of San Cristobal, and launched toward Guadalcanal on August 20, 1942. Two squadrons strained *Long Island*'s carrying capacity (19 Wildcats and 12 SBDs). While the *Long Island* was *en route* to Efate, her captain learned of just how green the VMF-223 pilots were, and under his suggestion, VMF-223 swapped temporarily a dozen of its greenest rookies for more-experienced pilots from Efate-based VMF-221, where they could have a little more training time to get up to speed.

Four heroic aviators now come into focus: Robert Galer (CO VMF-224), Robert Mangrum (CO VMSB-232), John L. Smith (CO of VMF-223), and Marion Carl (VMF-221 survivor, VMF-223).

Later in the War, the outcome of individual battles was seldom in doubt, and the overall outcome never so, but in August, 1942, the sides were more-or-less evenly matched. The outcome was in doubt for several months. There were many heroes at the Canal in those Dark Days, but these four are worthy of particular note.

The first few weeks after the invasion were pretty rugged for the US team. The invasion itself was a walk-over; the island was not heavily defended, and the Japanese and their laborers fled when the invasion began. Initial gains were rapid, and we began to consolidate the beachhead and finish the airstrip. Shore parties labored to off-load supplies without the benefit of port facilities.

The day after the invasion, the Japanese navy made a night attack, the Battle of Savo Island, arguably the worst defeat suffered by the US Navy in its history. *Five* Allied cruisers were sunk. Japanese ships suffered negligible damage. The aircraft carriers did not tarry without cruiser protection and the invasion supply transports, only fractionally unloaded, now without Navy protection, were withdrawn, leaving Marines ashore without adequate supplies of almost everything. Fortunately, a large amount of Japanese food, equipment, and other material had been captured, but things were pretty grim. Until August 20th.

Marines stood and cheered when Smith's Wildcats and Mangrum's SBDs flew in. The new pilots were a bit bewildered at their reception, and moved to get their organization set up and operational.

That very night, the pilots were serenaded by nearby gunfire, the famous, if mis-named, Battle of the Tenaru River. Japanese troops assaulted the airfield from the east, but were repulsed by desperately-heroic machine gun fire, grenades, and hand-to-hand combat. The ferocity of the fighting made a huge impression on the troops. The Japanese neither gave nor asked for quarter. Their wounded would try to kill our medics tending them; none would ever surrender. After daybreak, US forces were able to encircle the Japanese positions, and tank-supported infantry pushed them into the sea, where they were exterminated. VMF-223 pilots first shots in anger were aimed at survivors of this invasion attempts.

Now, for our four heroes. Two photos are important here, one of Smith, Galer, and Carl ([here](#)) and one of Smith, Mangrum, and Carl ([here](#)). Each of the four had exemplary roles in WWII and were successes after the War. But things did not go well for all of them....

Richard C. Mangrum was CO of VMSB-232, the scout/dive-bombing group that flew to Guadalcanal off the *USS Long Island* with Smith's VMF-223 squadron. He was born on October 27, 1906, in Seattle. He graduated from the University of Washington in 1928, then enlisted in the Marine Corps to become a Naval Aviator, completing his flight training on August 20, 1929. By Pearl Harbor day, he was CO of VMSB-232. Twenty of their SBDs were destroyed on the ground in the attack. Re-equipped, the squadron was earmarked for early Guadalcanal service, along with the other squadrons of MAG 23. He flew 28 combat missions there (in only 29 days), including 10 strikes, and won the Navy Cross and DFC for his actions in the [Battle of the Eastern Solomons](#). He was the only member of the squadron to leave the Island while still able to walk, on October 14. He served in a variety of important State-side roles during the rest of the War and on into the Korea Conflict area, earning a Legion of Merit for his work commanding MAG 12. Additional billets would follow, culminating in promotion to BGen on July 1, 1956. Additional service followed for another decade. On July 1, 1965, he became the first Marine "[Gray Eagle](#)," the earliest-designated "Naval Aviator" on active duty in the Navy/Marines.

General Mangrum's final billet was Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps, serving in that role from July 1, 1965 (when he was promoted to LtGen) until his retirement on June 30, 1967. He passed away on September 28, 1985, and was buried at [Arlington](#).

Robert Edward Galer, like General Mangrum, was also a University of Washington alumnus. Born on October 24, 1913, in Seattle, Galer graduated in 1935 with an ROTC commission, and began flight training. He was commissioned on July 1, 1936, and won his Naval Aviator wings in April, 1937. He was assigned further study and then served in Marine VMS-3, promoting to 1Lt in July, 1939. In June, 1940, he was transferred to VMF-2, stationed on the *USS Saratoga*. On August 29, 1940, he was test flying a repaired Grumman F3F-2 biplane (!) fighter near San Diego, when its engine failed. He survived the ditching, and subsequently, the aircraft would be found in June, 1988, and recovered on April 5, 1991. It was [restored](#) at the San Diego Aerospace Museum and is [now on display](#) at the National Naval Aviation Museum in Pensacola.

Galer was then sent to Hawai'i and became a Captain in March, 1941. He was with VMF-211 at the time of the Pearl Harbor attack. Galer took command of VMF-224, and was sent to Guadalcanal on August 30, 1942. His squadron would follow Smith's into action. His task was a bit tougher, because many of his pilots were green as grass, and the few that weren't were chastened survivors of Midway. At Guadalcanal, Galer had 11 confirmed victories and won both the Congressional Medal of Honor and the British Distinguished Flying Cross, in spite of being shot down three times in the process. He was deemed too valuable to risk in further WWII combat, so he served in several important non-combat billets for the Duration.

During the Korean Conflict, Galer first served as the Assistant Chief of Staff (G-4) of the 1st Marine Air Wing; on May, 1952, he promoted to CO of MAG 12. He personally led a maximum effort strike on targets near Pyongyang on July 11, 1952, for which he was awarded his second DFC. On August 5, Galer led a flight of attackers against Wonsan, but he was shot down far behind enemy lines by AAA. 1Lt. E.J. McCutcheon, flying a [HO3S-1 helicopter](#), came in and rescued Col. Galer. His final billet was Acting Director of the Guided Missile Division of the Navy BurAir. He retired as a BGen on July 31, 1957.

After his military service, General Galer was VP of [Ling-Temco-Vought](#) and later was an executive with [Bright & Company](#). He passed away on June 27, 2005.

In February, 2006, the University of Washington [erected a memorial](#) to its graduates who had earned a Congressional Medal of Honor. General Galer was included, as was Pappy Boyington. The memorial was [upgraded and dedicated](#) on Veterans' Day, 2009.

John Lucien Smith was born in Lexington, OK, on December 26, 1914. He attended the University of Oklahoma as a member of their ROTC program, graduating in May, 1936. He was initially appointed as a 2Lt. in the Army Field Artillery, but he resigned in order to accept a Marine Corp commission a few weeks later. He began flight training in 1938, becoming a Naval Aviator in 1939. He was named CO of VMF-223 after it was commissioned in May, 1942. He was a fine, well-respected leader, and was credited with 19 victories before VMF-223 was removed from combat on October 16. He was a hit at home, too, appearing on the cover of the December 7, 1942 [cover of Life Magazine](#) (a very big deal, especially for this issue, exactly one year after Pearl Harbor). He received the Congressional Medal of Honor, from the hand of FDR, on February 24, 1943. Now, like Galer, he was too valuable to risk in combat, he served in a variety of fund-raising and leadership-behind-the-scene roles.

After the War, he served as the Marine aide to the Chief of Naval Operations and was on the staff of NATO after that. He would later command MAG 33, and hold other important posts, before retiring on September 1, 1960, after over thirty years of service. He won a number of awards in addition to his MoH.

Like many senior military officers, he [went to work](#) in the defense industry, in this case, Grumman Aerospace and Rocketdyne. By the early 1970s, the defense industry was contracting, and he was laid-off. Despondent, Smith took his own life on June 9, 1971, and was buried with honors at [Arlington](#).

Marion Carl was the only one of our four heroes who did not command a squadron at Guadalcanal. He served in Smith's VMF-223, but he was arguably the best pilot of the four. He also did something else the other three showcased here did not do: He started his military career as a private in the Army and ended up a Marine general!

Marion Eugene Carl was born on November 1, 1915, on his family's dairy farm in Hubbard, Oregon, a small town near Portland. He learned to fly while attending Oregon State College, graduating in as a Lieutenant in the Army Reserve. He tried to enlist in the Army Air Corps, but the local recruiter had filled his monthly quota and turned him down. So he went to the local Navy recruiter, and was accepted into the naval aviation cadet program. That August, he reported for duty in the Navy, going in one day from a 2Lt in the Army to a Seaman Second in the Navy to a PFC in the Marines! Of the eight other men recruited with Carl, only he was qualified for the Marines (they required a full four-year college degree); of the eight, three washed out during flight school, and the other five became Naval Aviators.

Pearl Harbor found Lt. Carl serving with VMF-221, flying the antiquated Brewster F2A Buffalo. His squadron was loaded onto the *USS Saratoga*, and started out to relieve Wake Island. However, a controversial decision to write off Wake redirected VMF-221 to Midway, where they re-enforced that strategic island. Little happened there until May, 1942, when more re-enforcements were sent. Our codebreakers knew Midway was in Japan's crosshairs, and a number of B-17s and other planes were sent in, including half of the ill-fated Torpedo Squadron 8. The Japanese attacked on the morning of June 4, 1942. VMF-211 rose to defend their base. Most of VMF-211 was still flying the Buffalo, and totally outclassed by the experts manning the Zeros coming in, but Carl was piloting a somewhat-more-capable Grumman F4F Wildcat.

The attacking Japanese aircraft were poorly situated, not that it mattered. The escorting Zeros were too high and too far behind the incoming Kate and Val bombers, so the Marines got a good first crack at them. A few bombers went down before the vastly more-numerous and vastly more-capable Zeros decimated the defenders. Carl would damage a bomber in the initial attack, and shoot down a Zero late in the battle, before returning his more-sieve-than-airplane to Midway.

Half of the pilots in VMF-221 were shot down. Only two of its fighters remained operational. The US dive bombers fared as badly, with their leader, Lofton Henderson, getting shot down as he led his planes to attack the *IJN Hiryu*.

After Midway, Carl was transferred to John Smith's VMF-223, and flew to Guadalcanal with them on August 20, 1942, just in time to help defend the Island during the Battle of the Eastern Solomons. On August 24, Japanese carrier *IJN Ryujō* launched an attack on Guadalcanal. Carl was leading a division of four fighters, and he accounted for two Kate bombers and two Zero fighters, making him the first USMC pilot to achieve "Ace" status.

NOTE: There is some discrepancy in Carl's record. He shot down the Zero at Midway for sure, then he shot enough airplanes in his first combat at Guadalcanal to become the first USMC ace. Some sources say he got three at Guadalcanal but got two at Midway, others say it was four at Guadalcanal and only one at Midway. Another says that Carl got one at Midway, three on 8/24

and became an ace on 8/26. I could not find a definitive accounting. In any case, by August 26, Marion Carl was the first Marine Corps Ace.

Carl would shoot down two Zeros on August 26. One of them almost certainly was piloted by Japanese Ace Junichi Sasai, a highly-successful pilot beloved by his squadron mates.

Carl's tally continued to rise, and he had a good-natured ongoing contest with his CO, John Smith, to be top scorer for the squadron. They were running neck-and-neck, with Carl ahead by one, on September 9.

The Japanese had mounted a bombing attack, and Carl and his division were at altitude awaiting their arrival, thanks to a Coastwatcher's warning. Carl used an attack maneuver called an "overhead run" that was gaining popularity with those fighting against the Japanese "Betty" bomber. The attacking fighter would fly parallel to the bomber target, above and ahead of it. A quick half-roll to inverted flight and a strong pull back on the stick would put the fighter in a vertical dive, with the pilot looking up through the canopy at the bomber approaching below. If timed correctly, this would allow the fighter to fire vertically into the Betty, avoiding its cannon tail gun and coming in where the Betty had limited defensive fire. This day the Zero escorts were again out of position, and Carl managed to shoot down one Betty, then zoom back to altitude to repeat the overhead run against a second victim. So far, so good. Carl and his teammates usually used the overhead run once, maybe twice, then headed back to the Henderson in a screaming dive no Zero could match. The goal was to break up today's bombing attack, then live to break up tomorrow's bombing attack. But this time, Carl pressed his luck, and the Zeroes got him.

He bailed out, and was rescued by one of the several very brave Coastwatchers in the area. It took him five days to make it back to Henderson. He was given a warm welcome, and a teasing rebuke from General Geiger, commander of the Marine force on Guadalcanal, about how John Smith had gotten ahead of him while he was making his way back to base. "What are you going to do about that?" said the General. "Goddammit General, ground HIM for five days!" was the response, to laughter from all in earshot.

When VMF-223 was evacuated from Guadalcanal in October, Smith was the leading Marine ace, and Carl was number two. Both were slated for a whirlwind tour to sell war bonds and boost home front morale.

Carl returned to the USA to a hero's welcome. His accomplishments at Midway and Guadalcanal, his good looks, and his small-town attitude, and marrying the "girl back home" made him "good copy" to the newsies looking for stories for the home front. He and new bride, nee Edna Kirvin, were given a full-scale photo spread in *Life Magazine's* [February 15, 1943 edition](#) (a very, very, big deal!). The story is on page 98 (this issue provides an interesting cross-section of WWII-era American culture!).

He returned to action as CO of VMF-223 in 1943, shooting down two more Japanese aircraft over the Solomons, increasing his total score to 18.5.

After the War, he was in the first class of Naval test pilots at Patuxent River NAS. He conducted tests on jet operations off carriers, and later commanded VMF-122, the first Marine jet squadron. In 1947, he, along with WWII hero Turner Caldwell, was selected to set flight records with the new Douglas D-558. He set a speed record in that aircraft that stood until Chuck Yeager's sound-barrier-breaking flight in the *Glamorous Glennis*. He would later set an altitude record in a newer variant of the D-558 (83,000 feet).

On April 1, 1952, Col Carl escaped death, jumping from a Grumman AF-2S Guardian caught in a flat spin. His ejection seat failed, and he managed to finally jump just before his plane hit the water.

Col. Carl also flew some reconnaissance missions over China out of Taiwan in 1954. He served as Director of Marine Corps Aviation briefly in 1962, in spite of still being only a colonel. He was promoted to BGen in 1964, and then took the 1st Marine Brigade to Vietnam. He flew a number of combat missions, despite his high rank, in helicopter gunships and jet fighters in 1965.

General Carl got his second star in 1967, and took command of the 2nd Marine Air Wing from 1968 to 1970. After that, he served as Inspector General of the Marine Corps until his retirement in 1973, leaving service with over 13,000 flying hours.

He retired to his native Oregon with Edna, and co-wrote his memoirs, "[Pushing the Envelope](#)," with author Barrett Tillman, in 1994.

On June 28, 1998, a 19-year-old [neo-Nazi](#) punk named Jesse Fanus invaded the Carl home, holding Edna at gunpoint demanding money and her car keys. General Carl heard the commotion, and rushed to Edna's defense. Fanus fired in surprise, grazing Edna's head, then turned his shotgun on the heroic airman, 82 years old, and killed him in front of Edna's eyes. General Carl was buried at [Arlington](#) with full military honors.

Fanus was an inept criminal, and was quickly caught by police. In April, 1999, he was convicted of two counts of aggravated murder, and a number of other serious crimes stemming from his spree. This sentence was [upheld in 2003](#), but the conviction and death penalty were [overturned](#) by the Oregon Supreme Court in 2012, in large part because of a citizen movement to abolish the death penalty in that state. Fanus was re-tried, convicted, and [sentenced to life without parole](#). He sits rotting in an Oregon jail to this day. The murder and trial, of course, [weighted heavily on Edna](#), but at least she didn't have to put up with the conviction overturn, re-trial, and avoidance of the death penalty; she passed away in 2007.

IF this story doesn't make you angry, see a doctor immediately!

Additional References

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