



COURTESY OF SAM FOLSOM

Sam Folsom and his F4F-4 Wildcat on Faeloa in American Samoa. The nose art, painted by Folsom, shows the cartoon character Popeye wearing Marine Corps dress blues.

Nearing his 100th birthday, Sam Folsom, a VMF-121 Marine, Remembers the Cactus Air Force

Guadalcanal Fighter Pilot

By Patrick Reed

As he flew through the formation of Japanese G4M Betty bombers in the skies over Guadalcanal, Sam Folsom, then a second lieutenant, recalled, “I rolled over on my back to dive down on them and spun out!” Not having had enough speed on his dive, Folsom had lost control. Recovering his aircraft and returning to the bombers, he said, “I flew around, did everything just right, got right on the tail of the Japanese plane, pressed the trigger and nothing happened.” His guns had literally frozen up. “So my first experience with the Japanese was spinning through a formation of 12 to 15 Bettys,” Folsom recalled. “They were on both sides of me, and there was nothing I could do but look!”

This was the first combat experience for many of the Marines of VMF-121, a Marine Corps fighter squadron introduced to the fierce fighting on Guadalcanal in October of 1942. The guns on Folsom’s F4F-4 Wildcat had frozen at the bombers’ altitude of 24,000 feet, the Marines unaware that lubricant would cause them to do so at such a height. Aside from being their first engagement with the enemy, this was also the first time many of the Marines had flown above 10,000 feet, breathed oxygen through a mask, or fired at an aerial target. Though inexperienced, these men would soon become legends for their role in the taking of Guadalcanal as members of the Cactus Air Force—Guadalcanal’s amalgamated force of

aircraft from the United States Army Air Force, U.S. Navy, U.S. Marine Corps and Royal New Zealand Air Force.

Early Training

When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, Sam Folsom was an aviation cadet in Jacksonville, Fla. He had wanted to fly since he was a young child, influenced by the ballyhoo surrounding Charles Lindbergh’s 1927 trans-Atlantic flight. After completing training on the obsolete Grumman F3F, Folsom joined VMF-121 in March 1942 during their training at Camp Kearny Mesa, little more than a dirt strip with tent housing. Here, he and other Marines of VMF-121 had mere months to train for overseas combat with





COURTESY OF MARINE CORPS HISTORY DIVISION



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Above: A hangar on Henderson Field billows smoke after a Japanese bombardment, September 1942.

Left: Sam Folsom, far left, stands in front of an F4F Wildcat with other aviators of the Cactus Air Force on Guadalcanal.

Japanese G4M Betty bombers fly low over the water to attack American ships at Guadalcanal.



USMC

just a few F4F-4 Wildcats belonging to the squadron. In September of 1942, the largely inexperienced flyers and the squadron's ground echelon embarked on ships headed for Guadalcanal. By the time they were shipped overseas, Folsom had accumulated only 25 flight hours in the Wildcat, a number higher than many of his squadronmates, some of whom had as little as 14 flight hours. In Folsom's own words: "We were absolutely, positively, greenhorns."

Guadalcanal and the Cactus Air Force

The capture of Guadalcanal immediately stopped Japanese expansion toward Australia and served as the first rung in an offensive ladder toward the Japanese stronghold of Rabaul. Marines of the 1st Marine Division landed on Guadalcanal on Aug. 7, 1942, just nine months after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. By Aug. 8, they had captured the island's incomplete airfield, and within a week, the airfield, code-named "Cactus," was expanded and ready for use. Henderson Field's Marine aviators began to call themselves

the "Cactus Air Force." The nickname stuck. The arrival of aircraft in late August was a relief to the Marines on the ground. They had been exposed for nearly two weeks with no protection from enemy aircraft or ships. By Oct. 10, 1942, Folsom's VMF-121 was at fighting strength on Guadalcanal. As fighter aircraft, their mission was to keep Japanese bombers away from Henderson Field and Allied ships as well as support Marines on the ground.

"There was no such thing as a squadron flying as a squadron," Folsom remembered. Aircraft from multiple squadrons would go up and fly together, using as many available aircraft as were needed for the day's mission. Each pilot would fly roughly every other day and spend his spare time dodging bombardments, trying to make living conditions a little nicer or resting from the struggles of life on the island. Often, 15 to 20 Japanese bombers

Sam Folsom at Henderson Field after returning from the strike on *Hiei*. Note the patches on the aircraft. Each patch represents one or more bullets from a Japanese fighter. (Photo courtesy of Sam Folsom)





COURTESY OF THE COLONEL CHARLES H. WATERHOUSE ESTATE, ART COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE MARINE CORPS

This painting by Col Charles H. Waterhouse, USMC (Ret), depicts aviators on Henderson Field running to their aircraft.

would attack Henderson Field from a high altitude of roughly 25,000 feet with a fighter escort. Marines at Henderson Field often had early warning from a combination of coastwatchers and an air-search radar system delivered by the Navy.

The day that Folsom claimed his first aerial victories, however, the Japanese came in low. Waiting for the bombers at 30,000 feet, the Marines were surprised to hear over the radios that the Japanese were attacking the fleet anchored below. The Marines dove toward the enemy aircraft.

“I came down and saw two Betty bombers right on the surface, literally 15 or 20 feet off the water,” Folsom recalled. Lining up behind one, Folsom said, “I shot him down. He hit the water with a great big splash right in front of me.”

Sliding to one side, Folsom lined up behind another Betty, which he downed as well. At this point, having spent all of his ammunition and with bullets from the swarming Japanese fighter aircraft bouncing off his seatback armor plate, he flew evasively. He managed to return to the fighter strip at Henderson Field, albeit with his airplane’s throttle shot away and many holes in the fuselage. It was a lucky escape for Folsom, and it wouldn’t be the only time he would return to Henderson

Field with a beat-up plane. “I got shot up more than I shot down,” Folsom joked, noting that the fresh American pilots were facing a far more experienced enemy who possessed a faster and more agile aircraft.

Alone With the Japanese

He found himself in a similar position in November 1942 on a mission to sink the Japanese battleship *Hiei*, which had been crippled by American ships in a naval battle. Folsom had identified *Hiei* on a scouting mission prior to this attack, and now he and other fighter pilots were set to strafe the smaller Japanese warships defending it while dive-bombers attacked the floundering battleship itself. After completing the strafing run, Folsom, the last in the line of the attacking fighter aircraft, realized that he had made a mistake. “I pulled up and went back to look, and everybody else had dove down and gone back home.”

He found himself alone in the sky in the midst of a formation of Japanese fighters.

“They shot the hell out of me,” Folsom recalled. “I was ashamed of them, shooting up a poor guy like me!” he joked. After escaping into some nearby clouds for a while, he popped back out, only to be caught once again by the enemy air-

craft. At this point, Folsom flew away from Guadalcanal in an effort to lose his pursuers. Eventually nursing his smoking plane back to Henderson Field and nearly crashing on his approach, a wounded Folsom was greeted by his wingman who, while picking his teeth, casually remarked, “Where you been?”

Danger and Drudgery On the Ground

The danger didn’t stop for the Marine pilots once they’d landed. As soon as he had stepped out of the plane upon his arrival to Henderson Field some weeks earlier, Folsom was handed a shovel and told to dig in. Japanese bombers relentlessly pounded the airfield, attacking at a regular time nearly every afternoon. The Japanese Navy shelled the airfield, notably with the 14-inch guns of their battleships. Folsom recalled sitting shoulder to shoulder in trenches dug in a coconut grove during a naval bombardment. “Until you’ve heard one of those slide over your head, you haven’t lived!” Folsom recalled, referring to a 14-inch shell. “It’s quite an experience.”

The bombings were occasionally effective, destroying planes and materiel and causing casualties among the Ma-



COURTESY OF MARINE CORPS HISTORY DIVISION

Mud and thick foliage were commonplace on Guadalcanal. The rains also led to an abundance of mosquitoes; all but two Marines in VMF-121 contracted malaria.



COURTESY OF MARINE CORPS HISTORY DIVISION

A Marine on Guadalcanal digs a trench to provide some protection from the Japanese bombardment of the island.

lines. “You didn’t think about it, it just happened, you put up with it.” Folsom said. “You sat there and said ‘Jesus, that was close!’ ”

Along with experiencing regular shelling and bombing, the Marines also had to contend with the elements. Like everywhere else on Guadalcanal, Henderson Field turned to mud anytime it rained, and sleeping in floorless tents, it was a battle for the aviators to stay dry. When the rain stopped, the sun baked the field, turning it into a fine powder that blew

around with the breeze. Marion Carl, an ace with VMF-223, once remarked that Guadalcanal was “the only place on earth where you could stand up to your knees in mud and still get dust in your eyes.”

Most Marines had few extra clothes, if any, and lived in the same uniform for months at a time. Aside from the physical and psychological toll the adverse conditions took on the men, the mud and dust wrought havoc on the aircraft, keeping ground crews constantly working to maintain them. The rains also led to an abun-

dance of mosquitoes and all but two Marines in VMF-121, contracted malaria. Folsom and his wingman were the lucky two. Food was not plentiful, and all dealt with frequent bouts of diarrhea. This was life at Henderson Field.

Though subject to great losses, the men of the Cactus Air Force didn’t have the time or luxury to grieve the loss of a friend or worry about what might happen to them. Folsom remembers his fellow Marines being nervous, but not too torn up about the potential of being injured or killed, something he attributes to naivety.

“It had nothing to do with bravery,” Folsom recounted. “We were just sent out to do something and we did it.”

VMF-121 would lose 17 of its 40 pilots in enemy action on Guadalcanal. The squadron would go on to produce the most aces and have the highest number of aerial victories of any Marine Corps fighter squadron in World War II. Folsom flew with one of these legendary Marine aviators, Joe Foss, a Medal of Honor recipient for his actions with the Cactus Air Force, and a member of VMF-121. Folsom himself earned a Distinguished Flying Cross and a Purple Heart during his time with the squadron, and before leaving Guadalcanal, added a third victory to his tally after he shot down a Japanese Val dive bomber.

After “Cactus”

After Guadalcanal, Folsom spent time in Samoa and Funafuti, an atoll with little but a coral runway. After returning to the United States, he became an instructor in the F4U Corsair and eventually worked his way into a night fighter squadron, hoping to get back to combat. He wound up as the executive officer of VMF(N)-533 during the Battle of Okinawa and became its commanding officer in July 1945. On Okinawa, VMF(N)-533 helped to pioneer the use of radar intercept night fighting and became the top-scoring night fighter squadron of the war. Still on Okinawa when the war ended, Folsom was soon sent to occupation duty in Japan and eventually back to the United States. He spent time at the Naval Air Test Center in Patuxent River, Md., where he tested the Navy’s brand new partial pressure suit which would eventually be developed into the suit John Glenn wore on his first spaceflight. He flew a multitude of aircraft, including some of America’s first jets.

Korea and the “Frozen Chosin”

Folsom would face war one more time in the skies over Korea. Originally slated to be a night fighter pilot, he was transferred to a staff job as the wing intelligence officer where he was able to fly an F4U

Chinese troops attack a U.N. position during the Battle of the Chosin Reservoir.

Corsair alone, with no wingman. It was in this role that he flew over the Chosin Reservoir on a bright November day in 1950.

“It had snowed the night before. It was a beautiful, sunlit day. The ground was absolutely white.” Folsom remembered. “I could see just about everything that took place on the ground, the dark people against the white snow.” He found himself with a front-row seat to the Battle of the Chosin Reservoir. As he flew alone over the snowy landscape, Folsom could see encircled Marines on the ground sticking together to repulse Chinese attacks. At the direction of a Marine forward air controller called “Boyhood 14,” Folsom found an Army unit, part of “Task Force Faith,” trapped on the road with Chinese soldiers attacking down the steep hills above.

“I expended all my ammunition and my rockets,” recalled Folsom, holding back tears, “and I was so desperate I was thinking of cutting them down with my propeller ... It was an earth-shaking experience.”

Folsom later connected with an Army officer who had been trapped on that road and who told him that his attack had enabled some of the soldiers to escape across the ice to the Marine lines on the other side of the reservoir.

“I hope I helped,” Folsom said.

Legacy

Folsom finished his time in Korea as part of an F9F squadron, attacking ground targets in Chinese-occupied territory. After Korea, he finished out his career



COURTESY OF CHINESE MILITARY SCIENCE ACADEMY

in the Marines with a tour in Norway as the assistant naval attaché and then a tour as commanding officer of VMF-312.

“It’s something I have never forgotten, and I never regretted, in all my life, spending my years in the Marine Corps,” Folsom, soon to turn 100, said, reflecting on his service. Though he’s received nationwide attention for his military service, especially his service on Guadalcanal, he doesn’t attribute this attention to anything particularly heroic about his service. “There’s nobody left, that’s why,” he says. “In the 1950s, I was a war veteran. Now I’m *the* war veteran.”

As the number of WW II veterans in our nation declines, keeping their stories

alive is becoming more crucial. Sam Folsom has been an eyewitness to critical moments in our nation’s history, and his memories will serve to inform and inspire Americans for years to come.

The legacy of the Cactus Air Force, too, will live on. Their role in the taking of Guadalcanal was pivotal, having secured Henderson Field from repeated Japanese attempts to destroy it, and helping the Marines on the ground secure the island. In the course of almost three months, from late August to mid-November of 1942, the more experienced and better-equipped Japanese were repulsed in a savage war of attrition by the freshly minted pilots of the Cactus Air Force. The total losses to the Cactus Air Force were high—148 planes lost, with 84 pilots killed. But thanks to the skill, courage and tenacity of the men of the Cactus Air Force, a blow had been dealt to Japanese air power from which they would never recover. “We just did what we had to do,” Folsom said. “We got into combat, we did what we could, and we got back if we were lucky.”

Author’s bio: Patrick Reed is currently an undergraduate student of history at Abilene Christian University and a graduate of Westwood High School in Austin, Texas. He is an active member of the Commemorative Air Force Central Texas Wing and has authored multiple research papers, and one other article for Leatherneck. His interest in Marine Corps aviation and history has taken him across the nation to interview veterans, including many WW II aviators.



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As an air wing intelligence officer during the Korean War, Folsom flew missions in the F4U Corsair.