

Kenneth Walsh



By February 1943, examples of the new Chance Vought F4U Corsair had arrived with **VMF-124**. Although the squadron's first missions were not as successful as hoped, the big, gull-winged fighter soon became the mainstay of the shore-based Marine Corps fighter organization, quickly supplanting the veteran Wildcat. The first Corsair-mounted Marine ace was 1st Lieutenant Kenneth A. Walsh, a former enlisted pilot.

Deliveries of the F4U to VMF-124 started in October, 1942, when the squadron was still stateside. The planes needed a lot of refinements and the pilots needed a lot of training in them. But after a few short flights in the Corsairs, they were sent to the Pacific, where they were badly needed to carry out escort missions that the Wildcats couldn't handle, because of their limited range and combat capability. Only Corsairs and P-38 could provide the long-range escort required. VMF-124's twenty-four Corsairs went to Espiritu Santo in the jeep carrier *Kitty Hawk* in January, 1943. The pilots caught up with the planes and flew up to Guadalcanal on February 12. They had already been assigned a mission for that same day! The mission was to escort a PBY Catalina which was going to rescue a couple Wildcat pilots off Kolomabangara, [Jefferson DeBlanc](#) and James Feliton, who had ditched earlier and were now in the care of coastwatchers on Vella Lavella. The Catalina also made an unplanned stop to pick up an Army P-38 pilot who had ditched off New Georgia, only 50 miles from a large Jap Zero base. But the newly-arrived pilots of VMF-124 finished their escort mission without incident, some pilots having logged nine hours flight time that day.

While Ken Walsh and the other fliers of VMF-124 had hoped for some time to familiarize themselves with the area, the islands, and the locations of enemy troops. But the next day they were escorting B-24s to Bougainville, 300 miles up The Slot. On this mission Lt. Walsh led the third four-plane element (group of 4), thus he was number 13. He was not superstitious and the number stuck; he usually flew number 13 thereafter. The flying continued on the following day (February 14), Walsh's first exposure to actual combat. Again, they were escorting B-24 bombers, this time to [Kahili airdrome](#) on Bougainville, but the Zeros were ready for them, having been warned by the Japanese' own coastwatchers. The Americans lost eight planes, the Japs three, in what was inevitably called "The Saint Valentine's Day Massacre." As one of the first Corsair squadrons, the pilots of VMF-124 were anxious to establish a tactical doctrine for the Corsairs that later squadrons could build on. When they asked one of the early, well-known, high-scoring Wildcat pilots about how to approach combat with the Japanese, they were told "you've gotta go after 'em." Walsh quickly learned the importance of altitude, as this was one of the Corsair's key advantages over the Zero. He also learned to avoid slow speed dogfights, because of the Zero's superior maneuverability at speeds below 300 mph.

His first kill came on April 1, 1943, on patrol over the Russells. The Marine F4Us circled their assigned area quietly for two hours, then were relieved by some P-38s, which were promptly jumped. Walsh alerted his flight and turned them back from their homeward course to help the Lightnings. As a wild melee was taking place, the Zeros didn't notice the Corsairs in time. Walsh lined one up for a deflection shot and missed, but his wingman scored, burning up the Zero. They came undetected upon a second Zero, and Walsh hit and destroyed him.

He gained three more kills on May 13.

By mid-August, he had doubled his score to 10, when VMF-124 moved over to the newly captured airbase at Munda. On the 12th, Walsh's wingman, Lt. Johnston, saved his life by getting a Zero off

Walsh's tail. Walsh had been badly shot up, his plane was on fire, and the Zero was about to finish him off when Johnston flicked him off. Walsh managed to get back to an emergency strip at Segi, New Georgia, but landing without much control, he smashed into another Corsair on the line. Both planes were lost. It makes one wonder if the Jap pilot got credit for two kills that day.

On the 15th, Walsh was flying CAP over the invasion beaches at Vella Lavella, when the fighter director warned of bogeys coming in. Some Zeros and Vals came in, and Walsh shot down two, before a Zero clobbered him, hitting his starboard wing tank. The plane could still fly, and Walsh headed for home, only to suffer an attack of vertigo and looping wildly. He was able to recover control and land safely, but the plane was scrapped and used for spares. One wing was all shot up, and they didn't have facilities in the field to change wings. But they felt they had accomplished their mission in turning back the Vals from the landing zone.

On August 30, Walsh fought an incredible battle against 50 Japanese aircraft, shooting down four enemy fighters before he had to ditch his damaged Corsair. Assigned to escort bombers headed for Jap bases on Bougainville, his plane soon developed engine problems. He landed at an advanced base at Munda, and immediately secured a replacement Corsair. He continued on, now alone, but hoping to catch up with his squadron. From his isolated vantage point, he attacked a gaggle of Zeros that were going after the B-24s, shooting two of them down. On the return he picked up a message from other B-24s, in trouble over Gizo. He flew off to help, and again downed two Zeros. But one of the Japs damaged Walsh's Corsair, and he was forced to ditch off Vella Lavella. It was his third water landing in six months.

He was awarded the Medal of Honor for this mission.

He ultimately scored **21 kills**, of which 17 were Zeros. He lost five aircraft: three times shot down and the two noted above on August 15. His first combat tour in the Solomons lasted seven months, from February to September, 1943. He returned for a second tour with VMF-222 later in the war, flying the advanced F4U-4. He scored his last victory on June 22, 1945, downing a kamikaze Zero over northern Okinawa.

By mid-1943, Guadalcanal was secured, and attention turned to the island-hopping campaign that would bring the Allies to Japan's doorstep. Nov. 1 brought an assault on Bougainville, largest of the Solomon Islands, which yielded an important airfield from which to support Allied bombing raids. This period was truly the heyday of Marine aces.

James N. Cupp

In March of 1943, **VMF-213** arrived in the Solomons, equipped with Wildcats, but re-equipped with Corsairs before entering combat. With **13 kills**, Captain Cupp was one of the highest scoring aces of this outfit.

His squadron suffered some early confusion, in the switch-over to Corsairs but they started to operate from Henderson Field on April 1. Their first job was to learn the geography of the Solomons: the islands, The Slot, the location of enemy troop concentrations, the airstrips, etc. Typical missions involved escorting bombers up to Bougainville, a Jap stronghold in mid-1943. Their CO, Major Britt, drilled them for months on the importance of sticking together in combat. Sometimes Cupp had to work at this because his plane (its engine overdue for an overhaul) had a disconcerting tendency to flood its carburetor and cut out, usually when right over their objective.

VMF-213 took six weeks of R&R in Australia from mid-May through late June.

June 30, a typical day of that period, saw VMF-213 fly an intercept mission to Rendova in the morning and went out again in the afternoon to cover shipping in the same area. They flew for three and a half hours, but could not locate any enemy planes. Others in the squadron (Maj. Weissenberger and Lt. Wilbur Thomas) were more successful, and shot down a number of Zeros.

On an escort mission to Kahili on July 17, he tangled with some Zeros, and finding himself alone, he fell in with a group of returning bombers for protection. He caught up with them while they were playing cat-and-mouse in the clouds with two Zeros. Cupp took advantage of the situation and flamed one of the Zeros.

While on patrol over Vella Lavella on September 17, Cupp and his section intercepted a large group of Vals and Zeros. They took out a few Zeros before attacking the Vals. The dive bombers were old and so slow that it was difficult for the Corsairs to get in a good burst before passing over them. It was a "pathetic" battle, as the Marines disintegrated the Vals about as fast as they could line them up. They had brought down several when they were jumped by four Zeros. Cupp was hit by a 20mm shell, and he considered ditching, but happily discovered that his Corsair responded well when he shoved the throttle forward, and he ran for home.

The next day, he took off on dawn patrol, to catch "Washing Machine Charlie," the regular Japanese nighttime nuisance bomber. Taking off at 0500, he spotted a Jap Betty in the distance. After a long chase, he caught up, and approached the plane from his supposedly unprotected belly. To Cupp's astonishment, the bomb bay doors opened up, to reveal a cannon, which instantly hit him three times. His Corsair caught on fire; Cupp was badly burned, and forced to bail out. He was picked up by Americans, and spent the next 18 months in the hospital, undergoing 14 operations.

In late 1943, VMF-214, the famed Black Sheep Squadron, commanded by [Pappy Boyington](#) scoured the Japanese fliers in the Solomons. VMF-214's five-month tour of combat created eight aces.

Read a [squadron history of VMF-214](#), The Black Sheep Squadron.

Read profiles of [8 Black Sheep Aces](#)

One prominent Black Sheep was 1st Lieutenant [John Bolt](#), who shot down six Japanese aircraft. Remaining in the service after the war, Bolt served an exchange tour with the U.S. Air Force in Korea flying the F-86 Sabrejet. During a three-month period there, Bolt shot down six Russian-built MiG-15s, becoming the Marine Corps first and only jet ace, and one of a very select group of pilots who became aces in two wars.

Robert M. Hanson

The most successful Corsair pilot in the Navy or Marine Corps was Marine Lt. Robert Murray Hanson of **VMF-215 with 25 victories** - all made between August 1943 and February 1944, scoring 20 of these kills in a 17 day period.

The son of missionaries, he was born in Lucknow, India, and became the heavyweight wrestling champion of the United Provinces before the war. On a bicycle trip in pre-war Europe, he was in Vienna in 1938 when the Nazis took over. He attended Hamline University in St. Paul, where he continued wrestling.

VMF-214

Hanson started his combat career with the original VMF-214, when the unit was known as the "Swashbucklers," before [Pappy Boyington](#) and the "Black Sheep" assumed the squadron number. Other pilots noted Hanson as somewhat belligerent, who easily took a dislike to other fliers. But he was an excellent gunner.

On Hanson's first combat mission, August 4, 1943, he flew wing for 1st. Lt. Stanley "Chief" Synar. Returning from a strafing run against the Shortlands, the Swashbucklers were jumped by the Japanese. One pounced on Chief, dived and then came up beneath him. His gunfire struck the cockpit and injured Synar. But Hanson got behind Synar's attacker, and "shot his ass off," only to get shot up himself, his Corsair taking a 20mm rounds between the guns, in the flap, and in the right stabilizer. In a probable case of mistaken identity, Hanson reported his victim as a Zero, although the more experienced Synar described the white spinner, in-line engine, and rows of exhaust stacks that almost certainly indicated a Ki-61 Tony. Later that month, in a landing mix-up, he stomped on his brakes, flipping over and destroying his Corsair (#18072).

The next day, August 26, Hanson scored his second victory on a B-24 escort. His supercharger was acting up, and he lagged behind his division, permitting him to surprise a lone Zero that rashly attacked the Corsairs. Hanson's first shots had little effect, but he closed in, gave another burst, and the Zero flamed from the wing root and went down.

(Hanson's VMF-214 experiences are taken from Bruce Gamble's [Black Sheep: The Definitive Account of Marine Fighting Squadron 214 in World War II.](#))

VMF-215

His first combat tour with VMF-215 included the Bougainville landings on November 1, 1943. He achieved ace status that day when he downed a B5N and two A6Ms over Empress Augusta Bay at about 1345 hours. He was shot down himself and was shortly picked up unhurt from the water. But during his second combat tour, he really ran up his score, shooting down Japanese planes in clumps of three, four and five. On January 14, 1944 he downed five Zeros, on the 24th he claimed another four, on the 26th three, and on the 30th two Zeros and a Tojo.

On February 3, 1944, one day before his 24th birthday, Hanson participated in a fighter sweep. On the return flight, he left his flight path to strafe a lighthouse on Cape St. George, New Ireland, that had proved troublesome as a enemy flak tower and observation post. His friends watched from above as Hanson's big blue-gray Corsair ran at the tower, its six machine guns peppering the structure. Suddenly, they were horrified to see Hanson's aircraft shudder as its wing disintegrated from flak hits. The young ace tried to ditch, but his aircraft hit the surface, cartwheeled and crashed, leaving only scattered debris.

Medal of Honor Citation:

Rank and organization: First Lieutenant, U.S. Marine Corps Reserve. Born: 4 February 1920, Lucknow, India. Accredited to: Massachusetts. Other Navy awards: Navy Cross, Air Medal.

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life and above and beyond the call of duty as fighter pilot attached to Marine Fighting Squadron 215 in action against enemy Japanese forces at Bougainville Island, 1 November 1943; and New Britain Island, 24 January 1944. Undeterred by fierce opposition, and fearless in the face of overwhelming odds, 1st Lt. Hanson fought the Japanese boldly and with daring aggressiveness. On 1 November, while flying cover for our landing operations at Empress Augusta Bay, he dauntlessly attacked 6 enemy torpedo bombers, forcing them to jettison their bombs and destroying 1 Japanese plane during the action. Cut off from his division while deep in enemy territory during a high cover flight over Simpson Harbor on 24 January, 1st Lt. Hanson waged a lone and gallant battle against hostile interceptors as they were orbiting to attack our bombers and, striking with devastating fury, brought down 4 Zeroes and probably a fifth. Handling his plane superbly in both pursuit and attack measures, he was a master of individual air combat, accounting for a total of 25 Japanese aircraft in this theater of war. His great personal valor and invincible fighting spirit were in keeping with the highest traditions of the U.S. Naval Service. Hanson was the third and last Marine Corsair pilot to receive the Medal of Honor and the youngest.

Besides Hanson, VMF-215 also boasted two high-scoring aces, Captain **Donald N. Aldrich** and Captain **Harold L. Spears**, senior flight leaders of the squadron. Aldrich had been turned down by American recruiters before Pearl Harbor because he was married. Undaunted, he enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force and got his wings in November 1941. When the United States entered the war, Aldrich was able to return home, where he eventually got his wings of gold as a Marine aviator. Spears graduated from flight training in August 1942 and went out to the Pacific with VMF-215.

USMC: Nightfighters and the End of the War (Baird, Porter, Thomas)

Like other military services, the Marine Corps established a nightfighter arm, equipping several squadrons with variants of such aircraft as the Lockheed PV-1 Ventura, Vought F4U Corsair and the Grumman F6F Hellcat. The F6F-3/5N models equipped five Marine nightfighter squadron, the most successful of which was VMF(N)-533, credited with 35 kills. Six of those victories went to Captain **Robert Baird**, the only Marine nightfighter ace.

Major [Bruce Porter](#), commander of VMF(N)-542, had three kills in the Solomons flying Corsairs with VMF-121 in 1943. His specially equipped F6F-5N Hellcat had a mixed wing-mounted armament of two 20 mm cannon and four .50-caliber machine guns. On June 15, 1945, Porter used his special Hellcat to shoot down two Japanese aircraft, becoming the only Marine aviator to score kills in both the Corsair and the Hellcat, and ending the war with a total of five kills. (See [Porter article](#)..)

One of the most accomplished Marine fighter aces was 1st Lieutenant **Wilbur J. Thomas** of VMF-213, who shot down four Japanese Zeros on June 30, 1944. By the time his squadron left for the States in December, Thomas had scored 16.5 kills in just five engagements. He scored two more kills during a tour aboard the carrier *Essex* (CV-9) during a mission over Tokyo on Feb. 16, 1945.

Marines had flown from carriers since the 1930s, but had never been permanent members of the air groups, for various political and occasionally tactical reasons. By 1944, however, Marine fighter squadrons were flying from several ships, especially the small escort carriers. By this time, the F4U Corsair had been cleared to operate from American flattops; the British Fleet Air Arm had been flying their Corsairs from their carriers for a year before the U.S. Navy approved carrier operations.

Thus, Leatherneck squadrons went to sea, taking with them the experienced aces of the Solomons campaign, as well as untried, but highly motivated and capable young pilots. By February 1945, eight Marine Corps Corsair squadrons were embarked in four Navy aircraft carriers.

The invasion of Okinawa began on April 1, 1945, and carrier-borne Marine corps fighters were in the thick of the action, protecting Navy ships from kamikaze suicide attacks. A few aces added to their scores. Walsh got one Japanese aircraft off Okinawa in June 1945 while shore based with VMF-222 on the newly secured island. Carl took command of his old squadron, VMF-223, when it transitioned to Corsairs, and shot down two more Japanese fighters in December 1943. But to a large extent, the heyday of Marine aces had passed.

Marine Corps pilots and air crewmen shot down 2,345 Japanese aircraft during the war. The 125 official Marine aces accounted for 976 enemy aircraft, or 42 percent of the Marine aerial victories.