

Above and Beyond

The following chapter is from Pat Weiland's book, "Above and Beyond", which chronicles his WW2 days. Pat served with VMO-251 and then went on to command VMF-452. VMF-452 ended up on the USS Franklin by March 1945. On March 19, 1945 the USS Franklin was severely damaged by Japanese aircraft and was knocked out of the war. It sailed home to New York under its own power once the fires were brought under control. Fleet Carrier Air Group 5, of which VMF-452 was a part of, was also knocked out of the war. To order this book and others on military history, write to Pacifica Press, 1149 Grand Teton Drive, Pacifica, Ca. 94044. Used with permission of the author.

Chapter 5

The Waiting Game and Listening Watch

In early October 1942, a new coral airstrip was being completed eleven miles up the line at Turtle Bay. This would be the new area of operations for the squadron. The Seabees had cut a swath through the coconut move was made and camp set up on a point of land just a few feet from the seashore.

It was at about this time that I received the belated news of my promotion to captain. The time element between Headquarters, Washington, D.C., and the forward area made it about two months late, but that didn't seem to affect the elation I experienced. This meant that I was now ranking officer next Captains Yeaman, Campbell, and Longley in the squadron. But I really never was the rank-conscious type. Lieutenant George S. Kobler was to underscore that attitude when he said, "Ho, ho, ho, you'll never be a captain to me. You'll just be the same good ol' Pat Weiland." Needless to say, what superiority complex I may have had dropped a few notches. My first captain's bars were forged out of two silver fifty-cent pieces by a PX steward.

Later in October, things started to heat up again. Lieutenant Colonel Joe Bauer, commanding officer of VMF-212 from Efate, came through with his outfit on the way to Guadalcanal. It was the same with Joe Foss, another friend from the Pensacola days. Then, suddenly, Capt Soupie Campbell, Lts Doc Livingston, Herb Peters, and Mike Yunck, and Sgt Andy Anderson got orders to proceed to the combat zone.

Heroic stories began to trickle back-also heartfelt losses. Joe Foss became the top ace of the war with twenty-six planes to his credit. Likable Joe Bauer had tallied up ten enemy aircraft, but Bauer became a fatality, failing to return after an air raid. Our own Andy Anderson was shot down behind enemy lines on his third hop and presumed lost. Jack Conger and many others became aces in short order while others, whose fate was not destined for such glory went down gallantly and heroically. Our other four squadron mates fared particularly well. Doc Livingston

and Herb Peters were credited with having bombed and sunk a Japanese destroyer. Soupie Campbell shot down three Zeros, and Herb Peters was credited with four and a half.

We were always eager for news of the Guadalcanal campaign. Trickle-down information was usually sketchy and unreliable. It was sometimes months, even years, later that history provided us with the real facts. But, eventually, learned what was really going on. The Japanese were determined to recapture Henderson Field, and they came close many times. For instance in the latter days of August, about eight Japanese destroyers made successful night runs to Guadalcanal to land thousands of troops. Submarines had also off-loaded troops and supplies-all under cover of darkness.

In early October the U.S. Army 164th Infantry Regiment was sent to the island to reinforce the hard-pressed 1st Marine Division. The Marines mounted an offensive to prevent the Japanese from establishing artillery positions that could bombard Henderson Field. On October 8 several Japanese cruisers and destroyers shelled Henderson Field while eight of their transport ships simultaneously disembarked troops and equipment.

Two days later a U.S. Navy task force intercepted a Japanese naval squadron en route to bombard Henderson Field. Our task force sank a cruiser and a destroyer and crippled two other cruisers.

These were crucial times at Guadalcanal. On October 15, a well-planned coordinated attack by two Japanese cruisers, bomber aircraft, and long-range howitzers knocked out Henderson Field and the new fighter airstrip No.1. Most of the Cactus Air Force was destroyed, too. The shelling continued for three days, blowing up ammunition and gasoline dumps.

Resupply of aircraft was effected by dive-bombers and fighters flying in from Espiritu Santo. The gasoline supply was critical. It was only by the super-human efforts of all personnel that the runways were repaired and gasoline salvaged from destroyed aircraft. R4D cargo flights and destroyers also helped alleviate the gasoline situation. But the Cactus Air Force had dwindled to only thirty-four operational aircraft by this point.

It was also on this day, October 15, that a Japanese convoy of six ships unloaded five thousand troops and their supplies in broad daylight only 10 miles from the American beachhead.

As Brigadier General Roy Stanley Geiger's aide and personal pilot, Maj Jack Cram flew a PBY-5, a Consolidated Catalina flying boat. He devised a scheme to hang two torpedoes under the wings of the Catalina. It was purely a Jury-rigged affair, as Jack had no experience in torpedo tactics whatsoever. I watched this hanging operation on Espiritu Santo just before he took off for Guadalcanal. Jack got permission to make two twin torpedo runs on that six-ship convoy landing

troops on October 15.

He made his run in the lumbering old Catalina and scored a hit on one of the three passenger-cargo ships, which burned all day. The Zeros pounced on him but, despite the bullet holes, he made it back to fighter field No.1.

Intelligence indicated that a battle was looming both on land and sea for the seizure of Guadalcanal by the Japanese. A fleet of four carriers and other units were moving into position for this decisive battle.

Vice Admiral William Halsey's task force included only one carrier, the Hornet. At the last minute, another task force, with the carrier Enterprise, joined up.

Early on the morning of October 26, the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands began. Three successive enemy air attacks dropped bombs and torpedoes on the Hornet, dealing her a mortal blow. All efforts to save her were to no avail. Procedures for abandoning ship were under way. She was taken under tow temporarily, but a Japanese pilot dropped a final bomb on her flight deck, and the ship was enveloped by fire, so the tow was cut loose. To prevent her from falling into enemy hands, our own destroyers attempted to sink her. This failed even though she was burning from stem to stern. The Japanese were closing in, and she was finally sunk by torpedoes from Japanese destroyers.

The Enterprise was damaged by two bomb hits. Others of our fleet suffered major damage, and only one Japanese ship was sunk. Hornet pilots seriously damaged the huge carrier Shikoku, however, and it would be months before she again became operational. The Japanese fleet withdrew, postponing the big push to recapture Guadalcanal.

In preparation for the big push, air attacks on Henderson Field had accelerated. Combat and operational accidents had taken their toll, and the Cactus Air Force, under the command of Gen. Geiger, now had only thirty operational aircraft remaining to confront the Japanese.

The U.S. Army Air Force was hard-pressed by Gen Douglas MacArthur to lend a hand to Gen Geiger's Cactus Air Force at Guadalcanal. We watched increments of the 67th Pursuit squadron out of Brisbane, Australia, stage through Espiritu Santo on August 22, 1942, with the first five Bell P-400 Airacobras. This was followed shortly by the 68th Pursuit squadron with P-39 Airacobras. Then the first eight of twenty-five Lockheed P-38 Lightnings came through on November 12, part of the 339th Fighter Squadron. This was followed up immediately by Curtiss P-40s.

Once again in November, a small group of Airacobras of the 67th Pursuit Squadron set down at

Espiritu Santo and stayed overnight. I became acquainted with one of their pilots, a Lt. Hansen, and we engaged in a lively conversation about airplanes. The conversation grew serious as we conspired to swap airplanes the following day. Secretly, I would fly his Aircobra and, in turn, he would fly my Grumman Wildcat.

The next morning, I taxied the Aircobra down the coral strip into takeoff run, and it started tearing down the runway. It was only natural to ease the stick forward to lift the tail. It was beginning to trot to the left toward the palm trees. Hell! This plane had tricycle landing gear-the tail was already up. When I eased back on the stick, it fairly leaped into the air.

This beautiful little airplane with a cockpit so compact that it fit me to a tee. This Bell P-39 had 1,150 horsepower, with its liquid-cooled, V-12 Allison engine aft of the pilot's seat. The propeller drive shaft ran forward under the pilot's seat to the nose. In the nose cone, a 20mm cannon was mounted in the propeller shaft.

This plane was highly maneuverable and, with its engine placement aft, it afforded unobstructed visibility. I came in for a landing, and the roll-out was fine.

Then it was Lieutenant Hansen's turn. It worried me somewhat as those pilots had the reputation of landing hot and long. I had cautioned him about this the night before; the airstrip wasn't all that big. I had also cautioned him about it on takeoff.

"Be sure to keep your eyes glued to the horizon. The instant the nose moves past the line of sight, correct immediately."

Because the wheels of the Wildcat's retractable landing gear-unlike most planes-were so close together, this caused an instability that ended up in a ground loop. Many pilots checking out in the Grumman learned the hard way, which resulted in bent wingtips and propellers.

I observed Hansen's takeoff and it was near perfect. Then came the landing. On the approach he was slow and dragging it in. He landed in the sand among the tree stumps, just before the lip of the runway. I cringed at the prospect of court-martial; but the Grumman missed the stumps and bounced up on the runway, and his roll-out was okay. What a sweat!

The Aircobras left the next day for Guadalcanal. Three days later, Lieutenant Hansen was killed.

Those were exciting times on Guadalcanal, yet the remainder of VMO-251 waited, trained and hoped to get a crack at the Japanese. It seemed that destiny was dictating that we sit it out for the duration on Santo.

But the orders came.