



Few WW II carrier aircraft carried personal markings. Air group commanders often had an assigned plane with an extra radio, and it was far easier to “spot” the “CAG bird” for launch than anyone else’s. Some land-based squadrons flying tailhook aircraft tried to match planes with pilots, such as Marion Carl’s two No. 13 Wildcats at Guadalcanal and Ike Kepford’s famous No. 19 Corsair in the Solomons. (Photo by Jim Koepnick/EAA)

MEDAL OF HONOR FIGHTERS

THE HIGHEST AWARD FOR
EXTREME SERVICE

BY BARRETT TILLMAN



Captain Henry T. Elrod did it all. In the 16-day defense of Wake Island in December 1941, the 36-year-old Marine shot down at least one Japanese aircraft, sank an enemy warship, and conducted the ground defense on his part of the 1,400-acre sandspit when the invaders got ashore.

A native Georgian, Elrod had enlisted in the Corps in 1927, received a commission, and won wings of gold in 1935. He was an experienced fighter pilot in Maj. Paul Putnam's VMF-211 when Mitsubishi G3M Nells attacked on December 8, across the International Date Line from Pearl Harbor. Elrod was leading his four-plane division but was out of position to intercept the bombers. They wrecked much of Wake's defense, including all the F4F-3s on the ground.

The pilots took turns flying the remaining fighters, and Elrod was up again on the 10th. Undaunted at the odds, he piled into the 26 Mitsubishi Nells approaching the atoll, claiming two kills. In truth, he got one, a morale boost for the leathernecks.

More drama came the next day when a Japanese invasion force appeared on the horizon: nine warships with two troop transports. Maj.

in on the beach with holes in his oil line. Nevertheless, the Marine defense battalion also sank a destroyer with gunfire and hit three other ships. The Japanese withdrew to rethink the situation.

By the 22nd, the Marines were out of airplanes, allowing the enemy to put troops ashore the next day. Hank Elrod died fighting early on the morning of the 23rd, reportedly sniped by a Japanese naval infantryman hiding amid the corpses on the beach.

When Wake's survivors returned from captivity in 1945, Elrod's valor was rewarded with the Medal of Honor. Chronologically, it was the first earned by fighter pilots in the Second World War.

During WW II, 53 airmen received the Medal of Honor: 36 Army Air Force men, 11 Marines and six Navy pilots.

Half were posthumous, as 26 recipients were killed in the course of their Medal actions and four others died later during the war. Of the 18 fighter pilots, all but two were aces—the first (Elrod) and the last (a P-47 pilot).

The Navy's first ace of the war was an Annapolis alumnus, Lt(jg) Edward H. O'Hare of Fighting Squadron Three. Lt. Cdr. John S. Thach's unit was aboard USS *Lexington* (CV-2) on February 20, 1942, when the American task force was found by Japanese searchers off Rabaul, New Britain. The enemy quickly responded with 17 Betty bombers attacking in two waves. Thach intercepted with most of the available F4Fs, blunting the first wave and downing five. But the second echelon of eight bombers attacked from the opposite side, leaving only "Butch" O'Hare and his wingman to oppose them. But when the wingman's guns failed, O'Hare unhesitatingly attacked alone. In a sizzling four minutes, he made three gunnery passes, shooting five Bettys out of formation. He actually downed four but he had saved an invaluable carrier

from possible destruction. Acclaimed an ace, he received the Medal of Honor, a promotion, and what he most desired—his own command. In November 1943, he perished in one of the first night fighter missions ever launched from American flattops.

The Guadalcanal campaign

Following the stunning victory at Midway in June, the U.S. took the offensive in the Solomon Islands. In the year between August 1942

Lt. Edward "Butch" O'Hare poses next to an F4F-3 at Kaneohe NAS in early April of 1942 when the *Lexington* returned to Pearl Harbor for armament up-fitting. O'Hare would soon be off to the States for a visit to the White House and a welcome parade in his St. Louis hometown. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)



Putnam led Elrod and two other captains against the threat, each packing two puny bombs. But the Marines made do with what they had.

Alternately bombing and strafing, Putnam's pilots made maximum use of their equipment. Selecting a "light cruiser," Elrod scored a near-miraculous hit with his two 100-pounders. They detonated depth charges on the 1,770-ton destroyer *Kisaragi*, which exploded and sank with all hands.

But the Japanese also scored, as Elrod bellied

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Eight Wildcat pilots earned Medals of Honor in 1941-1943, but they flew F4F-3s and -4s because the FM-2 (pictured here) was not deployed yet. (Photo by Paul Bowen)

MEDAL OF HONOR FIGHTER PILOTS

Qm Charles H. Hammann	USN	August 21, 1918 *
1st Lt. Edward Rickenbacker	AEF	September 25, 1918
2nd Lt. Frank Luke, Jr.	AEF	September 29, 1918 +
Capt. Henry T. Elrod	USMC	December 8-23, 1941 +
LtJG Edward H. O'Hare	USN	February 20, 1942 *
Maj. John L. Smith	USMC	August-October 1942
Maj. Robert E. Galer	USMC	September-October 1942
Col. Neel E. Kearby	AAF	October 11, 1943 *
Lt. Col. Joseph Bauer	USMC	October 16, 1942 +
Capt. Joseph J. Foss	USMC	October 1942-January 1943
1st Lt. Jefferson J. Deblanc	USMC	January 31, 1943
1st Lt. James E. Swett	USMC	April 7, 1943
1st Lt. Kenneth A. Walsh	USMC	August 1943
Maj. Gregory Boyington	USMC	August 1943-January 1944 PW
1st Lt. Robert M. Hanson	USMC	November 1943-January 44 +
Maj. James H. Howard	AAF	January 11, 1944
Cdr. David McCampbell	USN	June-October, 1944

Maj. Richard I. Bong	AAF	October-December 1944 *
Maj. Thomas B. McGuire	AAF	December 24-25 1944 +
Capt. William A. Shomo	AAF	January 11, 1945
1st Lt. Raymond L. Knight	AAF	April 24-25, 1945 +
Maj. Louis J. Seville	USAF	August 5, 1950 +
LtJG Thomas J. Hudner	USN	December 4, 1950
Maj. George A. Davis	USAF	October 1951-Feb 1952 +
Maj. Charles J. Loring	USAF	November 22, 1952 +
Maj. Merlyn H. Dethlefsen	USAF	March 10, 1967
Maj. Leo K. Thorsness	USAF	April 19, 1967 PW
Maj. George E. Day	USAF	1967-1973 as POW
Capt. Lance P. Sijan	USAF	1967-1968 as POW

+ Killed in action; * Killed subsequently

Hellcat pilot Cdr. David McCampbell ended the war as the Navy's highest scoring ace (34), the only two-time "ace in a day" and a Medal of Honor recipient. (Photo by John Dibbs/planepicture.com)



In his polished-up-for-pictures Minsi III, Cdr. David McCampbell had just added nine victories to his score during the assault on the Philippines in late October, 1944 with VF-27 assigned to the USS Essex. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)

"I GOT SO GOOD THAT I COULDN'T GET ANY BETTER. ON MY LAST HOP BEFORE WE DEPLOYED, I SHOT THE CABLE OFF THE TOW TARGET."

and August 1943, seven Marine fighter pilots received the Medal of Honor, all of whom flew the new F4F-4 version of Wildcat. The first two were squadron commanders: Majors John L. Smith of VMF-223 and Robert E. Galer of -224. They were very different personalities on the ground—Smith an intense competitor and Galer bordering on shyness—but they got similar results in the air. Leading from the front, they helped keep the "Cactus Air Force" in operation through the crucial early phase of the campaign.

Another senior fighter pilot was Lt. Col. Harold W. Bauer, three years younger than Elrod had been as a captain, such was the pace of operations. Bauer was universally well regarded in the Corps, known as "The Coach" for the way he led VMF-212 and ran Cactus fighter operations. Though not required to enter combat, he scored

often, running his tally to 11 victories when he disappeared in the maelstrom of Japanese flak over a troop convoy in mid-November. His family received his Medal in 1946.

The next recipient was a protégé of Bauer's, cigar-chewing Capt. Joe Foss. As executive officer of VMF-121, Foss led half the squadron on most missions—eight Wildcats sometimes tackling four-to-one odds. Despite the usual disparity of





Maj. Joe Foss CO of VMF-115 stands under the nose of his F4U-1A Corsair "The Sioux Chief" on Emirau Island off the coast of New Ireland during May 1944. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)

numbers, Foss' attitude was "Look at all those targets!" Between October 1942 and January 1943, he shot his way to the top of the American ace ladder with 26 victories. He remains the Corps' top gun.

The previous Medal of Honor pilots were prewar aviators, but 1st Lt. Jefferson Deblanc was still new when he made ace. The 21-year-old Louisianan had fewer than 300 hours total time when he entered combat with VMF-112, yet he compensated with a press-on attitude. His five-victory mission protecting dive bombers in January 1943 earned him an immediate Navy Cross, upgraded to the Medal of Honor after the war.

Another lethal youngster was 1st Lt. Jim Swett, at 22, the last Wildcat pilot awarded the Medal for his record-setting seven-victory sortie in April 1943. Like Deblanc, he finished his Medal mission in the water but continued flying combat and returned for a second tour as a carrier aviator in 1945.

A new shape whistled into Solomons skies in February 1943 as VMF-124 arrived at Guadalcanal with F4U-1 Corsairs. The roster included 1st Lt. Kenneth A. Walsh, a former enlisted pilot who had been flying since 1937. He became the first Corsair ace in May and received the Medal of Honor for two escort missions in August. He finished the war with 21 victories.

Two other F4U aces were Maj. Gregory Boyington of VMF-214 and 1st Lt. Robert M. Hanson of 215. "Pappy" Boyington had flown with the Flying Tigers in China, where he was ejected

AVIATION MEDAL OF HONOR AWARDS

In WW II, fighter pilots got most of the glory but bomber crews got most of the Medals of Honor. That's probably because the Army Air Force was institutionally about bombardment, hence 30 Medals to pilots and crews of heavy and medium bombers. (Another MoH was awarded to the pilot of a Navy PB4Y Liberator.) Conversely, the Navy and Marines decorated three dive bomber pilots and 12 fighter pilots.

WW I FIGHTERS	MoHS
SPAD XIII	2
Macchi M-5	1



WW II FIGHTERS	MoHS
Grumman F4F	8
Vought F4U	3
N American P-51/F-6a	2
Lockheed P-38	2
Republic P-47	2
Grumman F6F	1



WW II BOMBERS	MoHS
B-17	17
B-24/PB4Y	9
B-25	3
B-26	1
B-29	1
SBD	2
SB2U	1



KOREA FIGHTERS	MoHS
Lockheed F-80	1
N American F-51	1
N American F-86	1
Vought F4U	1



VIETNAM FIGHTERS	MoHS
Republic F-105	2



OTHER AIRCRAFT	MoHS
Bell UH-1	9
de Havilland DH-4	4
Consolidated PB5	2 (1 noncombat)
Douglas A-1	2
Fokker Trimotor	2 (noncombat)
Douglas A-26	1
Douglas A-4	1
Curtiss JN-4	1
Douglas AC-47	1
Cessna O-1	1
Fairchild C-123	1
Hughes OH-6	1
Kaman UH-2	1
N American OV-10	1
Ryan NY-P	1 (noncombat)
Sikorsky HO3S	1
Sikorsky HH-3	1
Vought O2U	1



Below: 1st Lt. Ken Walsh stands by his F4U-1 at Munda Point Airfield after flying his last combat mission with VMF-124 on September 7 1943.

Bottom: 1st Lt. Ken Walsh of VMF-124 ready to taxi for takeoff from the forward airstrip on the Russell Island on September 1, 1943. Note the extra gun ports painted on the wing the plane captain and the name "Captain" on the starboard gear door. (Photos courtesy of Jack Cook)



from the AVG and returned to the Marines, who accepted his version of events at face value. But whatever his faults, he proved an effective combat leader and successfully led his Black Sheep over Rabaul and environs. When he went missing on January 3, 1944, he was awarded a "posthumous" Medal of Honor but emerged from captivity at war's end, claiming 22 kills as a Marine.

An extremely aggressive and ambitious pilot, "Butcher Bob" Hanson ran his string to 25 kills by January 1944 when he was killed while strafing.

The top Navy ace emerged later that year under far different circumstances. Cdr. David McCampbell had flown F3Fs and F4Fs before F6Fs, leading Air Group 15 from the fast carrier USS *Essex*. A gunnery enthusiast, he said, "I got so good that I couldn't get any better. On my last hop before we deployed, I shot the cable off the tow target."

McCampbell scored his first two victories in early June and soon hit his stride, splashing seven planes in two missions during the Marianas Turkey Shoot of June 19.

Four months later during the Leyte Gulf battle on October 24, he set the all-time American record with nine confirmed kills and two probables in one mission. Thus, he became America's only two-time ace in a day and ended his tour with 34 victories. Subsequently, he received the Medal of Honor from President Truman.

Army aces over the Pacific

While the Marines slugged it out in the Solomons, the Fifth Army Air Force was committed to the New Guinea campaign. Col. Neel Kearby featured prominently, taking his 348th Fighter Group to combat in mid-1943, the first P-47 unit in the Pacific. A bantam rooster of a pilot, he combined skill and aggressiveness in one compact package. During a four-plane fighter sweep to Wewak on October 11, he claimed six of the 10 kills credited on the mission. Postwar evaluation revealed that the Japanese lost two fighters with their pilots and four damaged. Nonetheless, Kearby received the Medal of Honor in January 1944. Meanwhile, he was posted to V Fighter Command headquarters, continuing to carve notches for Lt. Gen. George Kenney. Engaged in a scor-





ing duel with P-38 pilot Richard Bong, Kearby pushed hard, running his score to 22 before he was killed by a Ki-43 Oscar on March 5. His body was recovered from the New Guinea jungle in 1946.

Kearby had been engaged in a three-way race for top honors in the Southwest Pacific. But the same month he was killed, so was Lt. Col. Thomas Lynch, lost while strafing Japanese ships. That left the field to then-Capt. Dick Bong, who took a clear lead with his 23rd victory in March.

Bong was a pug-nosed Wisconsin farm boy who had come to Gen. Kenney's unwelcome attention by looping the Golden Gate Bridge in a P-38. Upon arriving in the Pacific in late 1942, Bong began scoring steadily, and returned Stateside in early 1944. By the time he resumed combat in the Philippines that fall, he had serious competition.

Maj. Thomas B. McGuire was everything Bong was not: cocky, assertive, and occasionally obnoxious. But he was born to fly P-38s. An intuitive airman, he was compared to Lockheed virtuoso Tony Levier as perhaps the finest Lightning pilot going. Said Joe Forester, a fellow 475th Fighter Group ace, "Some of us practiced, like Cy Homer (8th Fighter Group, 15 victories). But McGuire just got in and flew the airplane. He did things with a '38 that nobody else could that I ever saw."

Friends and rivals, Bong and McGuire each passed 30 victories in the Philippines. Bong was

Top: America's two top aces, Richard Bong (40 victories) and Tommy McGuire (38), both flew the hulking P-38 and both were awarded the MoH. (Photo by Budd Davisson/airbum.com)
Above: Maj. Dick Bong returned to the U.S. during May 1944 after scoring his 27th victory. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)

awarded the Medal of Honor after his 40th, and returned home to fly Lockheed's new P-80 Shooting Star. He died testing the jet in August 1945, a major at 25.

Meanwhile, McGuire began closing the gap, scoring as many as four kills at a time. He pulled within two of Bong's record when he succumbed to a low-altitude stall while turning with a Ki-84 Frank. His Lightning went into the trees, and Tommy McGuire died a victim of his own ambition. His Medal of Honor was approved in 1946.

Gen. Kenney got his wish—at war's end Bong and McGuire were America's two leading aces.

claimed three more. It represented more than half of the victories credited to F-6 Mustangs in the Pacific Theater.

The European MoHs

The Army Air Forces were about heavy bombardment. In case anyone doubted it, throughout WW II, the AAF had 13 Medal of Honor airmen against Japan with four fighter pilot recipients (30%). Against Germany, the ratio was two of 25(8%).

The first Merlin-engined Mustangs in the European Theater belonged to the 354th Fighter Group. They entered combat in November 1943 and immediately made an impression, capable of escorting 8th Air Force bombers on deep penetration missions.

On January 11, 1944, the "Pioneer Mustangs" took the heavies to Oschersleben, 100 miles southwest of Berlin. A confusing radio call resulted in most of the P-51Bs pulling away to engage German fighters, leaving a squadron commander with only three other planes. He was Maj. James H. Howard, a prewar naval aviator and veteran of the Flying Tigers.

Jim Howard was the right fighter pilot in the right place at the right time. With Japanese and German planes already to his credit, he had the experience and confidence to tackle long odds. He cut off a Bf 110 tracking the bombers and shot it down but lost his wingmen in the process. From there on he was solo.

For over 20 minutes Howard rode a wild Mustang across Teutonic skies. Incredulous bomber crews watched as he jousting with perhaps 30 Germans from three Geschwadern. Time and again he spoiled their runs on the B-17s, shooting when the chance arose. Members of the 401st Bomb Group reported that the lone Mustang downed or damaged half a dozen interceptors. Howard was credited with three kills, a probable and a damaged.

Once the mysterious fighter jockey was identified, reporters flocked to Boxted to interview the mild-mannered major. Perhaps playing to his rapt audience, Howard said, "I seen my duty and I done it." In June he received the Medal of Honor, the only 8th Air Force fighter pilot so recognized.

Similarly, the 12th Air Force in the Mediterranean Theater received one Medal of Honor. Decorated posthumously, Italy-based P-47 pilot

The P-47 surprised many who flew it because it was much more agile than it looked and, courtesy of its eight .50s, packed a tremendous punch. Two MoHs were awarded to its pilots, including the war's last. (Photo by Budd Davisson/airbum.com)



“SOME OF US PRACTICED, BUT MCGUIRE JUST GOT IN AND FLEW THE AIRPLANE. HE DID THINGS THAT NOBODY ELSE COULD.”

But the goal had been achieved at heavy cost. In his desire to win the global ace race, Kenney expended three fine leaders: Neel Kearby, Tommy Lynch, and Tommy McGuire, all effective squadron or group commanders.

Another Pacific Theater award also emerged from the Philippines campaign. Capt. William A. Shomo had been flying in the Pacific for 18 months and shot down one airplane. The next time he scored, he set a Fifth Air Force record. It occurred on January 11, just four days after McGuire's death. During a two-plane recon mission over Luzon, Shomo encountered a formation of Ki-61 Tonys apparently following a bomber. In the ensuing combat, Shomo credited with seven victories. His wingman, Lt. Paul Lipscomb,



FIGHTER MEDALS OF HONOR AT A GLANCE

- In August 1918, Quartermaster Charles Hammann became the first fighter pilot awarded the Medal of Honor when he rescued a squadronmate in his Macchi M5 flying boat during combat with Austrian aircraft.

- Eddie Rickenbacker successfully lobbied Congress for his Medal 18 years after the action it represented.

- The saga of Frank Luke is well known: the Arizona Balloon Buster who left a flaming line of German Drachen before dying in combat in 1918.

- Marine Captain Henry Elrod received a posthumous Medal for both air and ground actions on Wake Island in 1941.

- The Navy's first ace of WW II, Edward "Butch" O'Hare made his record in February 1942 but died in a night mission in November 1943.

- Maj. John L. Smith initiated a string of Medals of Honor at Guadalcanal in 1942, leading his F4F squadron, temporarily becoming America's leading ace.

- Maj. Robert E. Galer led the second fighter squadron on Guadalcanal, arriving shortly after Smith.

- Called "The Coach," Lt. Col. Joseph Bauer continued flying combat despite a staff position and died fighting at Guadalcanal.

- Capt. Joe Foss became the Marines' ace of aces in three months at Guadalcanal during 1942-43.

PHOTO COURTESY OF U.S. NAVAL MUSEUM



Charles Hammann

- Cdr. David McCampbell was the Navy's top ace, decorated for his unmatched record during six months of 1944.

- Friends and rivals, Majors Richard Bong and Thomas McGuire flew 5th Air Force P-38s to the top of the U.S. ace list but both were killed in 1945.

- Capt. William A. Shomo set a 5th Air Force record, credited with seven victories in one mission in January 1945.

- Decorated posthumously, Italy-based P-47 pilot Raymond Knight was the only 12th Air Force MoH recipient.

- Maj. Louis Sebillé was killed in his F-51 in the second week of the Korean War.

- Lt.(jg) Thomas Hudner belly-landed his Corsair behind enemy lines in December 1950, attempting to save a squadronmate.



Lt.(jg) Thomas Hudner receives the Medal of Honor from President Harry Truman. (Photo courtesy of Warren Thompson)



Capt. Eddie Rickenbacker CO of the 94th Aero Squadron is pictured with his men by his SPAD VIII on October 18, 1918. (L-R) Lt. Joseph Eastman, Capt. James Meissner, Capt. Eddie Rickenbacker, Lt. Reed Chambers and Lt. Thorne Taylor.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JACK COOK

- Lt. Jefferson Deblanc's five-victory mission in January 1943 earned him an upgrade to the original Navy Cross after the war.

- Lt. Jim Swett was the last Wildcat pilot awarded the MoH for his record-setting seven-victory sortie in April 1943.

- The first Corsair ace from early 1943, Lt. Kenneth A. Walsh finished the war with 21 victories.

- "Pappy" Boyington's reputation is too well known for repetition here.

- A hot F4U pilot, Lt. Robert M. Hanson ran his string to 25 kills by January 1944 when he was killed while strafing.

- Col. Neel Kearby led his P-47 group in New Guinea, credited with six kills in one mission in October 1943 but perished five months later.

- The only 8th Air Force fighter pilot awarded the Medal, Maj. James H. Howard was recognized for escorting bombers in January 1944.

- One of the finest American fighter pilots ever, Maj. George Davis was a two-war ace, killed fighting MiGs in February 1952.

- Maj. Charles Loring flew his F-80 into a communist target in November 1952.

- Maj. Merlyn Dethlefsen was an F-105 Wild Weasel awarded the Medal for conspicuous devotion to duty in suppressing North Vietnamese missile sites in 1967.

- Maj. Leo Thorsness, from the same wing as Dethlefsen, received the MoH for actions a month later and for inspiring leadership as a POW.

- Two other Air Force POWs were awarded the Medal for their examples in Hanoi: Capt. Lance Sijan (posthumously) and Maj. George "Bud" Day.



Maj. George Davis (left) celebrates multiple victories with Col. Ben Preston (center) and Major "Bones" Marshall. All were in the 4th Fighter Wing in Korea. (Photo courtesy of Warren Thompson)

MEDAL OF HONOR FIGHTERS

The P-51 reigned supreme in many areas and its pilots accounted for three MoHS, including Bill Shomo and Jim Howard in WW II and Louis Sibille in Korea. (Photo by Budd Davisson/airbum.com)



Raymond Knight was the only 12th Air Force MoH recipient.

By late April 1945, 1st Lt. Knight was a veteran of 80 missions with the 350th Fighter Group. On the 24th he led two other Jug pilots in an aggressive strafing mission against an Axis airdrome near Lake di Garda. Despite heavy flak, he claimed five planes destroyed on the ground while his friends claimed two more. Almost immediately, he volunteered to lead another mission east of Milan. Ignoring the alerted defenses, the Thunderbolts made more than 10 passes, claiming 13

destroyed, eight by Knight who brought his shot-up Jug home.

The next day Knight returned to the same field, Bergamo, and led his flight in shooting up the place. But it worked both ways: the AA gunners inflicted heavy damage on Knight's Jug, which he had difficulty controlling. With control surfaces vibrating visibly, Knight was justified in jumping but decided to continue for base. However, in turbulence over the Apennines the overstressed airframe failed and Knight was lost with the aircraft.

The European war ended seven days later. ✈



Above left: Capt. William Shomo CO of the 82nd TRS is pictured in his F-6D Mustang #66 s/n 44-14841 "Snooks the 5th" after downing seven Japanese aircraft on January 11, 1945. **Above right:** Maj. Jim Howard CO of the 356th FS 354th FG is shown climbing from a P-51B assigned to the 353rd FS after his first flight in the type in England during November 1943. (Photos courtesy of Jack Cook)