



EDITOR'S NOTE: In this issue you will find stories on both the F4F/FM2 Wildcat and P-39 Airacobra. Both played a vital role during World War II and held the line against the Axis until we shored up our defenses and built up our air forces. The brave men who flew these early fighters have all gone west since I interviewed them almost 20 years ago. But their memories and heroic accomplishments live on and shall never be forgotten. — JB

KILLER

'CATS AND SNAKES



COMBAT MEMORIES OF P-39
AND F4F/FM2 GUNFIGHTERS

BY JIM BUSH

GRUMMAN F4F-3 WILDCAT

PILOT: MEDAL OF HONOR RECIPIENT
1ST LT. JAMES E. "ZEKE" SWETT, USMC
VMF-221
GUADALCANAL
APRIL 7, 1943



"In November 1942, I had been assigned to VMF-221, not as an original member of the squadron but as one of the group of replacement pilots for the men who had gone through holy hell at Midway. They had lost a tremendous number of pilots and planes on the tiny Pacific island as they stood and fought the Japanese. After training in Hawaii, I was sent to Guadalcanal where our squadron was based at an airstrip known as Fighter-2. We were assigned Grumman F4F Wildcats to defend the skies around Guadalcanal.

"The Wildcat was a good old bird — not very maneuverable, but it was rock solid, almost fortress-like. The Wildcat could absorb a tremendous amount of punishment and dish it out at the same time. The F4F was very sluggish in a turn compared to the Zero, which could fly rings around us. Our main goal in survival was to avoid a turning battle with the Zeros. But in war, that was easier said than done.

A U.S. Navy pilot demonstrates the use of an inflatable raft in the event of a ditching. Unfortunately the Wildcat had the buoyancy of a brick.

"I flew my first combat hop on April 1, 1943, protecting the sky over Henderson Field while an air battle raged off in the distance. Needless to say, I didn't get to fire my guns that day, but I made up for it on my next mission. On April 7, I led a flight of eight Wildcats on an early morning sweep over the Russell Islands and saw nothing. As I was leaving the area, I received a call from the fighter director stating that a very large flight of Japanese planes was headed our way, but it would be a few hours until they arrived. I took my flight back to Fighter-2, refueled and rearmed, and then we went back up again and found the same thing — nothing! We flew back to Fighter-2, refueled, and my ordnance man shoehorned an additional 15 rounds of .50-caliber ammunition into my six gun bays. Off we went a third time, and as we were climbing past 15,000 feet, we ran smack dab into a hornet's nest of Japanese fighters and dive bombers.

"THE WILDCAT WAS A GOOD OLD BIRD — NOT VERY MANEUVERABLE, BUT IT WAS ROCK SOLID, ALMOST FORTRESS-LIKE. THE WILDCAT COULD ABSORB A TREMENDOUS AMOUNT OF PUNISHMENT AND DISH IT OUT AT THE SAME TIME."

— 1ST LT. JAMES E. "ZEKE" SWETT

"My God, there were airplanes all over the sky, and we were outnumbered 20 to 1. At least none of us had to fight over which airplane we went after! We dove our Wildcats headlong into them, and everything hit the fan almost immediately! I hit a Val dive bomber right away, and I stayed with the pack of them, looking for my next target. The Vals didn't notice me as they concentrated on some Allied ships in the water below. I began to pick off the Vals one at a time and got a few more before I was hit by some friendly fire from one of the ships below. I took a direct hit in the right side wing, and that knocked out my outboard gun and left a big hole in the center of my wing. I still had five .50-caliber guns left as I went back to splashing some more Vals. I had just shot down my seventh Val for the day by attacking him like all the others — from the rear.

"As I went after my eighth Val, I became overconfident as all get-out and attacked this guy from the side. The Val's rear gunner let me have it square in the nose as my windshield and oil cooler absorbed many of the rounds. Splinters of glass sliced into my face as I closed in on the Val and let him have it from about 50 feet away. I killed the rear gunner and got the Val smoking before I ran out of ammo. I knew I had to get the hell out of there before the Zeros swarmed all over me.

"I tried for Guadalcanal and was only 600 feet off the sea when my prop stopped dead, sticking up like the middle finger in my right hand. I didn't even have time for a quick prayer as I slammed the Wildcat into the water below, sinking 30 feet with her before I was able to free myself from the harness. By the time I got to the surface, the Coast Guard cutter was already steering my way and picked me up. I was in the water for about 15 minutes total, which was longer than it took me to shoot down the eight Vals. On October 10, 1943, I was 22 years old and was presented the Medal of Honor. I was asked if I wanted to go back home and meet President Roosevelt. I declined the offer, stating there was a war on and I would like to stay and finish the job of winning it with my squadron."

LT. SWETT CONTINUED HIS COMBAT FLYING IN F4F WILDCATS AND RETURNED FOR ANOTHER TOUR IN F4U CORSAIRS. HE EVENTUALLY ENDED THE WAR WITH 16 AERIAL VICTORIES.



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BELL P-39-Q6 AIRACOBRA

PILOT: 1ST LT. PETER A. MCDERMOTT, USAAC
82ND TAC-RECON
PORT MORESBY, NEW GUINEA
1943



"I was known as a 'wise guy,' and I'm sure being from Brooklyn, New York, with an Irish accent and name didn't help me much! I enjoyed flying almost every airplane I had been in, but the P-39 was a real lousy airplane; simply put, it was a dog. But this dog could take a beating and still bring me home, minus some important pieces! After months of training, I and the rest of the survivors from my class were given a blessing by the brass, and we became Tac-Recon pilots. In November 1943, I was sent to a far-off place in a country called New Guinea. I thought I'd finally made it to where the action was, and now hopefully I would be given a real fighter plane to help win this war.

"When I saw the P-39s on the flightline at Port Moresby, I could have killed myself. I wanted to be in fighters, not in the 'dopey' P-39. Adding insult to injury, New Guinea was covered by jungle and foliage. This wasn't the barren wasteland of North Africa that we were trained to take pictures of; needless to say, we didn't use our cameras very much. We did use our guns and cannons a lot, however, as we went looking for the Japanese hiding in the jungle. The P-39 carried two .50-caliber machine guns in the nose and four 20 mm machine guns in the wings. It also carried a large

cannon that fired through the propeller spinner. On paper, the cannon appeared to be a good idea, and it sure looked menacing sticking out of the nose, but in operational use, it was a joke.

"Eventually, I got my own P-39, probably because no one else wanted one, so I named it *Brooklyn Bum II*. I did this in honor of my mother and father back home who were faithful Brooklyn Bum Dodgers fans. I never saw any Japanese airplanes in the sky, only crashed ones in the jungles below. Our missions became so routine, shooting up the same targets and using the same tactics, that at times it became boring for me. On one mission, I had a little fun with my wingman. He pulled into a Lufbery circle, and I was right behind him as he set himself up for his gun run. When he made his turn in, I cut right under him and my prop was mere feet away from the belly of his P-39. I waited for him to fire, and when I saw his tracers going off, I fired all my guns at once. My bullets whizzed underneath and out in front of him as he pulled straight up and began screaming over the R/T, 'Ack ack, ack ack.' I couldn't stop laughing at the shrill tone in his voice. When we landed, he damn near punched me out!"

Peter McDermott at the controls of his *Brooklyn Bum II*.



"EVENTUALLY, I GOT MY OWN P-39, PROBABLY BECAUSE NO ONE ELSE WANTED ONE, SO I NAMED IT *BROOKLYN BUM II*. I DID THIS IN HONOR OF MY MOTHER AND FATHER BACK HOME WHO WERE FAITHFUL BROOKLYN BUM DODGERS FANS."

— 1ST LT. PETER A. MCDERMOTT



TOP: Lt. McDermott points to his namesake.

BOTTOM: P-39 pilots and ground crews pose with a side door of a P-39.

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THE WILDER WILDCAT

PILOT: JOE D. "JODY" MCGRAW, USN
THE BATTLE OF LEYTE GULF
OCTOBER 25, 1944



"I was sent on a CAP flight with eight other Wildcats as the Japanese fleet retreated. Orbiting at 12,000 feet, four of us got vectored to a small group of bogies coming in at 10,000 feet and passing through clouds; I counted 15 Val dive bombers and 12 Zeros. If this was a 'small raid,' we were in big trouble!

"We were on a perfect intercept at their 11 o'clock and 800 feet higher. Turning hard left, they didn't see us as we made our run into them. We took out the four lead Vals on the first pass, as each of us got one. Looking up, I saw the Zeros push over and come zooming down after us. My division leader was hit immediately and cannon shells raked his Wildcat. I pulled up and did a little corkscrew through the Zeros. Then I rolled over at the top, pulled through, and was in perfect position above and behind the Zero lead and his wingman. I let loose with a long burst and flamed the wingman, hitting his engine and wing root before he exploded.

"The Zero lead exploded with anger and came after me with a vengeance! He snapped that Zero up on its nose, whipped it around, and came back at me with his thumb down on his cannon button. As I pulled the Wildcat into a knife-edge turn, I thought, 'I don't want to be a statistic on some government report.' Skidding with right rudder, I turned back on him. All of his cannonballs passed right behind my tail. I had to make a

very tight turn on this guy, and I pulled 4g to get it around. The Zero pilot knew he was fighting a Wildcat, but he didn't realize that it was a 'wilder Wildcat.' He underestimated my plane and me and didn't make that world-famous super Zero turn.

"I got around on him and put a quick burst into his engine before he could unload his cannon on me. I had smoked his engine as we scissored back and forth tightly on each other. He jerked his stick back, and I thought he was going to ram me. I pulled back hard on my stick, and he missed me by mere feet. I still have a crick in my neck from that SOB! I whipped the Wildcat into another tight turn in an attempt to put this guy down, as he was dangerous and obviously an old hand. He did a split-S and dived for the cloud. As I dived into him, he cleverly turned back under me. I looked up and back and saw two of his buddies — one on the right, and the other on the left trying to cut me off. I took a long shot at the smoking Zero and split-S'd out of there; I didn't like the odds!

"Suddenly the sky was empty, and I had never felt so alone. One minute there were airplanes everywhere, and the next, nothing. By the time I found my wingman and our leader's wingman and got back to USS Manila Bay, it was getting dark. I had flown 11-1/2 hours of combat, and that's a helluva long day in a Wildcat!"

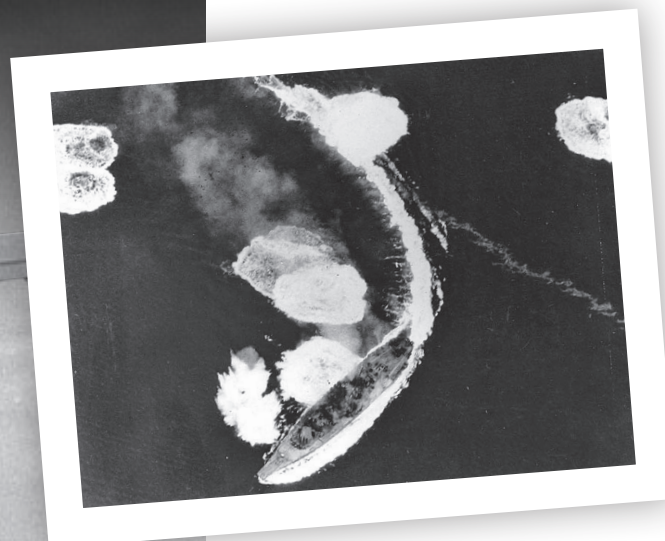


"BY THE TIME I FOUND MY WINGMAN AND OUR LEADER'S WINGMAN AND GOT BACK TO USS MANILA BAY, IT WAS GETTING DARK. I HAD FLOWN 11-1/2 HOURS OF COMBAT, AND THAT'S A HEL-LUVA LONG DAY IN A WILDCAT!"

— JOE D. "JODY" MCGRAW

RIGHT: Wildcats ready to launch from a straight wood plank deck.

LEFT: A Japanese ship under attack during one of the many battles in the Pacific.



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‘SNAKE CHARMER’

PILOT: MAJ. MELBOURNE “MIKE” WILSON, USAF (RET.)
1943

“In May 1943, while I was a cadet at Luke Field, I began a love affair with the most beautiful, curvaceous, shapely girl I had ever laid eyes on. She was small and petite compared to the rest, but in my eyes, she was drop-dead gorgeous. She also had a name that matched her personality. She was called the Bell P-39 Airacobra.

“All through flying school they asked us to put down our top three choices of what planes we wanted to fly after graduation. Each and every time I put ‘fighters’ and next to that ‘P-39s.’ I left the second and third choices blank. I couldn’t get her out of my mind.

“My eyes took a walk all over her as I drooled all over myself, strolling up to the flightline for my first hop in the Airacobra. I found it comfortably snug sitting in the cockpit. My shoulders almost touched the doors on both sides of me, and a big Allison engine was cocooned behind me with a 9-foot shaft running under my feet through the center part of the fuselage out to the propeller. The most radical design on her was the use of tricycle landing gear; S-turns were now a thing of the past!

“There were two kinds of people who flew the P-39 — those who hated it and those, like me, who loved it. When the war broke out, all we had were P-40s, P-39s, and F4Fs to fight with. Although superior class fighters were still being developed, the P-39 had such a streamlined design, it could outrun a P-40 by almost 25 mph.

“After a blindfold checkout, I was released from the bonds of Mother Earth and roared down the runway with unobstructed forward vision. I thought I had died and gone to heaven! My flight was absolutely fabulous. The P-39 was very quick and easy on the controls. All I had to do was breathe on the stick and it would do whatever I wanted it to do.

“During my flight indoctrination in the P-39, I also saw the dark side of my new mount. As a bunch of us were out rat racing, chasing tails across the countryside, right side up and upside down, trying to clobber each other, I got behind a guy and pulled through a 4g turn. The combination of prop wash and high g’s snapped me into the most violent spin I had ever experienced. It almost felt like I was tumbling rather than spinning out of control as I was twisted through the sky. I fought to rein her in and wrestled her back under control: This Cobra had one helluva bite!

“After a whopping 60 hours in P-39s, I was now combat-ready. I was also given some choices: I could pack my bags and join a fighter unit in the South Pacific or Europe, or I could stay and instruct, teaching new students the finer points of Airacobra flying. The lure of combat was tempting, but I was having so much fun in the P-39, I didn’t want the party to end! I stayed.

“On one particular flight, though, I wondered if I had made the right choice. Launching as a three-ship flight out of Portland, Oregon, I had a P-39 student chained on either side of me. Our formation was tight, and we were heading out for a little tow-target shooting over the Pacific. Climbing through 10,000 feet, I looked back to check on my wingmen and found the guy on my left was gone.

“How in the hell could I have lost a guy in only 10,000 feet?! I was busy on the radio calling Portland Tower and trying to find the missing guy as I swung into a big, wide turn. I looked right, left, and right again, and now the other guy was gone, too! None of these guys said a word to me; they just disappeared.

“I brought the nose up and was passing through 15,000 feet in no time. I swung the P-39 up and over the top and dove straight down, looking for my two runaways. As I passed through 10,000 feet, it felt like a sledgehammer had hit me in the tail. The P-39 began to shake and vibrate so violently, I felt like a BB in a tin can. It pitched up so quickly that I blacked out and was now unconscious.

1943 Bell Aircraft ad.



“THE P-39 WAS TOUGH AND AGILE, AND IT WAS ONE OF THE BEST FIGHTERS IN WHICH TO FLY FORMATION. BUT IN BATTLE IT WAS HORRIBLE IN A TURNING FIGHT WITH MOST OF ITS ADVERSARIES. I FOUND THIS OUT FIRSTHAND WHEN I BOUNCED A NAVY WILDCAT OVER CALIFORNIA, AND THAT SUCKER TURNED INSIDE OF ME IN LESS THAN A HALF A TURN.”

— MAJ. MELBOURNE “MIKE” WILSON

“When I came to, I was back at 15,000 feet upside down with the nose up. I rolled it back over and eased the throttle back in, when all of a sudden I got smacked again and pitched up to vertical. Off came the throttle and I plodded along at 10,000 feet, trying to figure out what the hell was wrong with her. Adding to my fun was the oil temperature gauge, which was now in the red. It was time to head for home.

“I didn’t have to worry about anybody else in my flight; they had left me long ago! I quickly learned to keep the airspeed below 200 mph. Any faster and the roller-coaster ride would start again. I could have bailed out, but I wanted to find out what had happened so others could learn from whatever the hell was wrong with this airplane. I called Portland Tower and told them I had a severe emergency and was going to land — or at least attempt to!

“I touched down pretty hot at 130 mph and shut her down as I coasted along the 5,000-foot strip. When I got it stopped, a crew chief jumped up on my wing and said, ‘Hey, lieutenant, whose prop got your tail!?’ My jaw dropped when I looked to the rear. The whole left-side elevator was gone except for the shaft. The horizontal stabilizer and the vertical stabilizer were bent and buckled along with the rudder. What a wild ride that was!

“When my nerves began to settle down, I figured out what had happened. During my headlong dive from 15,000 feet, the entire left elevator began to flutter and departed the P-39. It had warped all the tail surfaces, including the tail cone. I was close to 500 mph during my dive when all of this happened. I also received some ‘tail damage’ of my own; the major, my boss, chewed my ass off! As for the whereabouts of my missing students, they both had lame excuses.

“The P-39 was tough and agile, and it was one of the best fighters in which to fly formation. But in battle it was horrible in a turning fight with most of its adversaries. I found this out firsthand when I bounced a Navy Wildcat over California, and that sucker turned inside of me in less than a half a turn. I leveled my wings and used my speed advantage to get the hell out of there. The only way to survive in combat flying a P-39 was to ‘hit and run,’ and then run as fast as you could! The P-39 had become outdated with the introduction of P-47s, P-51s, P-38s, and F6F Hellcats.

“After 500 hours of instructing in P-39s, including skip-bombing, gunnery runs, and aerobatics, I fell in love all over again. This time I fell for the P-39’s bigger sister, the P-63 Kingcobra. She was one hot number!” ✈



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