



Jacket patch for VMF-451.

# THE DAY THE ACES DIED

OFF OKINAWA, THE RAIN OF KAMIKAZES BEGAN TO TAKE A HORRIBLE TOLL OF AMERICAN SHIPS AND MEN. HOWEVER, THE ATTACK ON THE USS BUNKER HILL WOULD RECORD THE HIGHEST LOSS OF NAVY AND MARINE CORSAIR ACES DURING WORLD WAR TWO

**BY MARTIN IRONS**

THIS STORY IS AN EXCERPT FROM *CORSAIR DOWN!* AND A REVIEW ALONG WITH AN ADVERTISEMENT FOR THE BOOK CAN BE FOUND ELSEWHERE IN THIS ISSUE

PHOTOGRAPHY FROM THE NAVAL HISTORY AND HERITAGE COMMAND AND THE ALPHA ARCHIVE

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By early May 1945, the USS *Bunker Hill* (CV-17) with Fast Carrier Task Force 58 had been patrolling the waters east of Okinawa for seven weeks. Her squadron complement was an unusual mix: 63 Corsairs for the three fighter groups — one Navy (VF-84) and two Marine (VMF-221 and -451). The bombing and torpedo squadrons brought fewer birds to Air Group 84 so that there would be more room for Vought's best. In addition, VF-84 had ten Hellcats for night and photo missions. The Corsairs were carried as *kamikaze* killers, a response to the attacks that commenced in 1944 over the Philippines. Their rate of climb and speed bested the Hellcats. They provided coverage in an assortment of combat air patrol (CAP) roles as well as serving as fighter-bombers during sweep and strike missions up and down the Ryukyu Islands.

Though the Navy wanted the Corsairs on the carriers, there was a gap of combat-ready Navy squadrons in early 1945. As a plug, Marine squadrons began to fly from the

carriers for the first time. They were rushed through carrier qualifications. From attacks on the Japanese Home Islands, the invasion of Okinawa, and suppression of Japanese air attacks from the Ryukyu Islands, the hunting had been good.

Each flight was logged in the pilot's personal Aviators Flight Log Book, a small book issued by the Navy. Records of date, aircraft, hours flown, and comments were logged. At the end of the month, the squadron flight officer would sign off on the accumulated tallies. The little brown books became an extension of the pilots' identities. "Your logbook was everything," recalled 1st Lt. Philip "Pots" Wilmot. "Nobody knows anything. Nobody remembers anything, and you never saw your gun film."

During World War II, 371 Navy pilots became aces — a pilot who had five air-to-air combat kills. The Marines added another 118 members into that fraternity. On his initial combat mission, Wilmot and his section leader were credited with half

