

WILDCAT WARRIORS

FACING HEAVY ODDS AND OPERATING UNDER TERRIBLE CONDITIONS, THE GRUMMAN F4F WILDCATS OF VMF-121 SET OUT TO DESTROY THE JAPANESE

BY STEVE BLAKE

Heavier Than Air Marine Fighter Squadron 121 (VMF-121) is, with 210 confirmed aerial victories, the US Marine Corps' highest-scoring fighter squadron. It rose to fame during the first of its four World War II combat tours, on Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands, during which its pilots were credited with shooting down 110 Japanese planes from 13 October through 15 November 1942. Twenty-three of them were claimed by Capt. Joseph E. Foss, who was awarded the Medal of Honor for his exploits over that embattled island, which American forces had invaded on 7 August and would be fighting on until the following February.

The Marine Corps fighter pilots who were flown into Henderson Field

on *Cactus* — the Allied code name for Guadalcanal — in a Douglas R4D transport on the early morning of 23 December 1942 were notified immediately upon their arrival that they were now the new VMF-121 and would be flying its second combat tour from there. (Its veterans most often referred to the island as "The Canal.") Until very



The Grumman Wildcat was in full production when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. These USMC Wildcat fuselages were photographed at the factory prior to mating with their wings.



Flight jacket insignia for VMF-121.



Famed Grumman test pilot Corkey Meyer demonstrates how the life raft in the Wildcat worked. However, since the plane would sink in literally seconds it would have been doubtful if a pilot would have time to deploy the raft.



The first F4F-4 Wildcats for VMF-121 were delivered from the factory in full squadron markings. Note how each aircraft came with a canvas protective cover for the engine.



An F4F-4 is lifted aboard the USS *Long Island* (ACV-1) from the USS *Kitty Hawk* (APV-1) at Fila Harbor, New Hebrides, on 28 August 1942. The Wildcat was en route to Guadalcanal as part of the second group of Marine aircraft to be based at Henderson Field. Note that the F4F's markings appear to be taped over. The national insignias may have had the red circle so it is possible they were taped over to prevent air attack by friendly aircraft.

Wildcats on patrol over Guadalcanal. Fortunately, the rugged F4F was an ideal aircraft to operate from the primitive Henderson Field. Simple to maintain, the Wildcat could meet and beat the Japanese by using its diving speed and superior armor plating.