

Medal of Honor Series



Valor at Guadalcanal

During WW II, Marine Corps aviators made great contributions in the war against the Japanese forces operating in the Pacific. In August 1942, Marines invaded Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands and quickly established an airfield for the purpose of intercepting the Japanese air forces. There, Major Robert E. Galer led his unit against constant air attacks by the Japanese and distinguished himself in combat. For his actions, he earned our nation's highest award, the Medal of Honor.

Robert E. Galer was born on 23 October 1913 in Seattle, Wash. On 1 June 1935, he graduated from the University of Washington with a degree in commercial engineering, and that afternoon reported to Naval Reserve Aviation Base Seattle for preliminary flight training. He continued training at Naval Air Station Pensacola, Fla., and on 1 July 1936 was commissioned a second lieutenant in the U.S. Marine Corps. In April 1937, Galer was designated a Naval Aviator.

By Tim Frank

One of Galer's early experiences as an aviator was, in some ways, a sign of things to come. On 29 August 1940, he and his squadronmates of Marine Fighting Squadron (VMF) 2 "were trying to carrier qualify off San Diego, Calif., and on the downwind leg I had an engine failure and, bingo, I put my F3F in the drink." This was Galer's first experience with what could be termed an unscheduled water landing. But it would not be his last.

In January 1941 VMF-2 deployed to the fledgling Marine air operating base at Ewa, and was redesignated VMF-211 in July. At one point, the base commanding officer agreed to a deadline imposed by Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet (CINCPAC) for carrier qualifying Galer's squadron. Two weeks before the deadline, the CO visited CINCPAC and asked why no landing signal officer (LSO) had been sent to conduct the qualifications, which he believed to be standard procedure. The admiral

replied that he had not said he was going to send an LSO—and the qualification date would remain the same.

Galer vividly recalled the CO's reaction to the news. "The boss came back with smoke in his ears and when he went by me, he stopped and asked, 'Galer, did I see you on the LSO platform on the way out here?'" Having spent much of the trip to the island with a friend, the transporting carrier's LSO, he answered affirmatively. "The colonel asked, 'Did you know what the LSO was doing?' I said, 'Yes, Sir.' He said, 'Good, you are relieved as officer of the day and you will start field carrier landing practice in two hours.' With that, I became an LSO." The squadron qualified on schedule, under the guidance of the newly anointed LSO.

In November the squadron was ordered to embark, destination unknown. At the last minute the colonel told Galer that he would remain on Oahu. "They had just discovered I was the only spare landing signal officer in the Pacific," he recalled. Consequently, he escaped the fate of his squadronmates, all but one

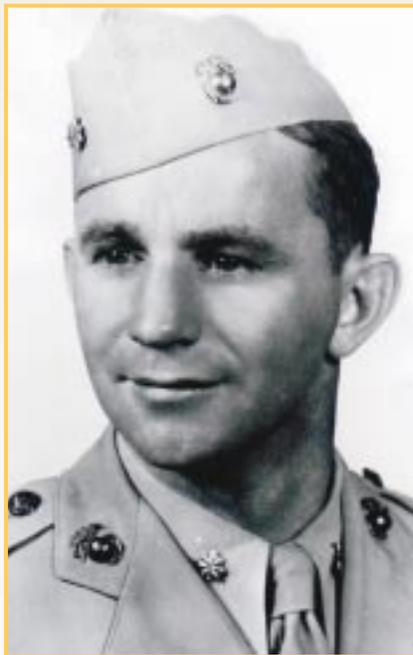
of whom were either captured or killed at Wake Island.

Galer continued serving as the air group's LSO, even after assuming command of a new squadron, Marine Fighter Squadron (VMF) 224, formed in May 1942 in preparation for the Battle of Midway. "They gave me one other pilot, a plane, and some enlisted men and said, 'Form a new squadron quick,'" Galer recalled. After adding more pilots and borrowing a few from other squadrons, "we went to the island of Kauai to act as an early warning for Honolulu in the event the Japanese bypassed Midway and came back."

The next stop for Galer's squadron was Guadalcanal. Traveling on a different ship than the majority of the air forces, VMF-224 arrived on the island two weeks later than its counterparts. "We arrived in Guadalcanal on 30 August. We were short of supplies, all of our mechanics hadn't arrived yet, and the airfield was basically under construction," Galer remembered.

In the early days with only the headlights of trucks and jeeps to light the field, night operations were particularly difficult, especially since the temporary field got muddy every time it rained, a frequent occurrence in the Pacific. "The Seabees did a great job putting down steel planks for an all-weather runway," Galer recalled, but unless a landing was perfect, a pilot could easily end up mired in the mud. In addition to difficult physical conditions, the Cactus Air Force, nicknamed for the island's code name, faced a "warm welcome" from the Japanese in the form of nightly bombardments.

In spite of the conditions on Guadalcanal, Galer's men continually met the Japanese without hesitation. Although outnumbered—the normal flight was 4 or 8 *Wildcat* fighters scrambling to meet the incoming Japanese force of 20 fighters and 20 bombers—the Marines unhesitatingly attacked the formations. During operations, "we struggled as best we could to go for altitude," Galer recalled. "Our primary target was the bombers. If you got the lead bomber, sometimes the rest would panic and drop the bombs on their own people." If any ammunition remained



Above, Major Robert E. Galer, USMC, on 6 March 1946. Right, Galer as the group LSO running a SB2U-3 *Vindicator* through a "bounce drill" at Ewa Field, Hawaii.

following the dog-fights, the Cactus Air Force pilots would seek out enemy ships near the island.

Although short of gas at times, Galer said the aviators would have been in worse shape had it not been for the efforts of the Australian coast watchers. These men were on the same islands as the Japanese and would warn the Americans when the enemy took off, advising them of the number of incoming aircraft and giving them time to prepare. Without the warnings from the coast watchers, Galer said they would have wasted valuable gas circling the field waiting for the enemy. The coast watchers' warnings helped save many American lives, and also had a direct impact on Galer himself when his *Wildcat* was shot down. "'Barbara Jane' couldn't swim, so I had to swim off and leave her. I was fortunate to encounter the coast watchers who assisted me in getting back the next day." This was one of

three planes Galer lost to the enemy during his two and a half months on Guadalcanal—after another shoot-down, two Marines swam out from the island to assist him; a third ended with a dead-stick landing on the island. Each time, Galer went back into action, and in less than a month he accrued 11 individual kills.

In recognition of his actions at Guadalcanal, Galer was presented the Medal of Honor by President Franklin D. Roosevelt at the White House on 24 March 1943. Although the ceremony was "a very pleasant and memorable occasion" for Galer, during which he chatted with the president before receiving the deco-

ration, Roosevelt's presentation of the award held special meaning for Galer's mother. "She had been a Democratic committeewoman in Seattle, and all of the men in the family were Republicans. This was the highlight of her life because she thought Roosevelt was the nearest thing to the Pope going," he said.

Galer's distinguished service continued through the Korean War, concluding with his retirement as a brigadier general in 1957. His status as a Medal of Honor recipient and a fighter ace may be hallmarks of his 20-year career as a Marine pilot, but Galer's son doesn't let him forget an even more distinctive aspect.

"Before WW II started, I lost an airplane while carrier qualifying off San Diego. At Guadalcanal, I got shot down three times. In Korea, I was a group leader and got shot down about 100 miles behind enemy lines, and the Navy came in and got me. My smart-aleck son, who is an Air Force pilot, says, 'That's five airplanes you lost. You're an *enemy ace*.'" ✈

Tim Frank graduated from Catholic University, Washington, D.C., in May with a history degree.

