

Zeros off Tulagi and went in for the attack. Swett recalled, "I caught three of them in the dive and shot them down. I used three or four rounds per gun and they just caught on fire. After that, I went across the Florida Islands to get out of that mess." The citation for the Medal of Honor described the rest of the action: "Although separated from his division while clearing the heavy concentration of antiaircraft fire, he boldly attacked six [more] enemy bombers, engaged the first four in turn and, unaided, shot them down in flames." While Swett closed in on a fifth bomber, the rear gunner disabled the Marine's engine; his windshield shattered and glass shards slashed his face.

Swett brought his *Wildcat* down in the water off Tulagi. After sinking 20 feet, he was able to break free from the plane and float to the surface, where he was picked up by the Coast Guard and returned to Fighter Strip 2. Recalling the battle, Swett said, "I had two divisions of eight planes with me and every one of us was shot down. All survived and only my wingman, Jack Pittman, landed back at Fighter 2. His airplane collapsed right on the



runway but he survived." The fifth bomber that had disabled Swett landed on a nearby beach. Islanders killed the pilot and the Navy was able to recover a code book, which proved to be of strategic value.

When Swett returned to Guadalcanal, he learned that he was a hero and an ace at 23 years of age. "I was kind of overwhelmed at what happened and was not too much aware of the notoriety. They had to go out and confirm that I shot down those airplanes." He spent a short time in the hospital before returning

to fly combat missions. After many more aerial victories and being shot down a second time, Swett learned that "Admiral Marc A. Mitscher recommended me for the Medal of Honor for the

April 7 action and Major General John Condon wrote up my citation. When I heard that, it was just too much."

On 10 October Swett was awarded the Medal of Honor by the Commanding General of Marine Aviation in the South Pacific. "General Ralph Mitchell awarded the medal to me at Espiritu Santo Eternal Bay Fighter Strip. I remember him saying, 'Jim, this is the first time I've ever awarded one of these things.' I replied, 'Sir, this is the first time I've ever been awarded one.'" After receiving the Medal of Honor, Swett returned to the United States and went to Santa Barbara, Calif., to get married. Following a stint on the war bond promotion tours, in January 1945 Swett returned overseas aboard *Bunker Hill* (CV 17) to continue the fight with VMF-221.

At the conclusion of WW II, Swett had flown 103 combat missions and accumulated 16.5 official and 9 probable kills. He left active service as a major in November 1945 and joined the Marine Corps Reserve, from which he retired with the rank of colonel in 1970. To this day he maintains that "the Medal of Honor thoroughly changed my life." ✈

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# Valor in First Combat

By Tim Frank

*On 7 April 1943, 1st Lieutenant James E. Swett of Marine Fighter Squadron (VMF) 221 flew his first combat mission. As part of an attack on 150 enemy planes in the skies over the Solomon Islands, he shot down three bombers, then attacked another force of six bombers and shot down four of them before his airplane was disabled. In his first mission, the 23-year-old lieutenant had become an ace and earned a nomination for the Medal of Honor.*



**B**orn on 15 June 1920 in Seattle, Wash., Swett grew up with a strong aviation influence. With childhood experiences such as observing Charles A. Lindbergh landing during one of his tours across America and personal encouragement from Roscoe Turner, a close friend of his father and a famous stunt pilot, Swett's desire to become a pilot came naturally.

Swett enrolled in the Civilian Pilot Training Program to become a Coast Guard pilot in 1940, but changed his mind and enrolled in the U.S. Naval Reserve on 26 August 1941. To his embarrassment, upon arrival at the Naval Reserve Aviation Base in Oakland, Calif., Swett learned that he had more flight training than his instructors.

On 2 October 1941, Swett was appointed an aviation cadet and was sent to Naval Air Station Corpus Christi, Texas, for training. One morning while waiting in line for breakfast he heard the announcement that Japan had attacked Pearl Harbor, and the young aviator knew his chance to fight was close at

hand. Swett completed flight training in April 1942 and was commissioned a second lieutenant in the United States Marine Corps. He reported to VMF-221 for advanced carrier training—which consisted of 11 pilots, each qualifying with 16 landings aboard the training carrier *Wolverine* (IX 64) on Lake Michigan—before shipping out to the Marine Corps air operating base at Ewa, Hawaii.

Opposite page, flying an F4F *Wildcat* from Guadalcanal on his first combat mission, Lt. Swett became an ace and would later receive the Medal of Honor for his actions. Right, Swett is congratulated by South Pacific Force Commander Adm. William F. Halsey, Jr., as Maj. Gen. R. G. Mitchell, who presented the medal, looks on. Above, Swett left active service as a major in 1945.

In early February 1943 VMF-221 arrived on Guadalcanal and was assigned to Fighter Strip 2, a coral runway that provided better conditions than the island's other landing strips which were muddy much of the time. Swett's first combat mission was not until 7 April, when he led a division of four F4F *Wildcats* on a morning patrol for a reported Japanese raiding force. The Marines located a force of 150 bombers and