**Into Combat with Only 30 Hours Flying Time**

*The Experiences of Sam Folsom*

*Pilot over Guadalcanal and Okinawa*

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**The road to becoming a pilot**

I’m one of the older men still living. I was born July 24, 1920. As a kid I had my first airplane ride, and from then on I always wanted to fly. That was my real motivation to go into the service so early. I simply wanted to fly.

 On the road to becoming a pilot, I went to the sea first. There was a strategy to it. At the end of high school I took the entrance exam to get into the Massachusetts Nautical School [now called the Massachusetts Maritime Academy]. A month before I graduated I was accepted and went aboard the *Nantucket,* a square-rigged school ship operating out of the Boston Navy Yard. Fortunately they let me graduate high school anyway. I served two years aboard the square rigger and crossed the Atlantic a couple times. My time in the Maritime Academy gave me the necessary college credits to apply to be an aviation cadet.

 As a sidelight, I was on one of the Academy’s cruisers, and in port in Belgium, and we went to a party at the embassy there. Two American tourists came through. They had just been traveling in Germany and beat it into my head that a war was coming. They had seen the German Army mobilizing and said everything was pointing to a war. That was in July 1939. That September, of course, Germany invaded Poland, and the war was officially underway.

 When I graduated from the Academy I worked on a yacht in Massachusetts for six weeks. Then I got my call up and reported to the Navy in Rhode Island in August of 1940. As an ensign, [junior commissioned officer] I served on the USS *Patoka*, often referred to as the *Potato*, an old Navy tanker. We serviced the Atlantic fleet, which, at that point, was in the so-called “blackout” war with the Germans. Although America wasn’t officially in the war yet, our fleet was trying to intercept German submarines. I was there for about ten months while trying to get into flight training.

 Finally I was accepted, but at that point, Naval Reserve Officers could not go into flight training. So I had to officially “vacate” my commission, not resign. I went to flight school, and when I was in my first step of flight school in DC, I received word that the policy had changed and reserve officers could now apply. I whizzed over to the headquarters of the Navy and said, “Here I am.” They said, “Sorry, your commission isn’t retroactive.” I said, “But it’s only been a month.” They said, “Too bad.”

 So I was an aviation cadet and went through training in Jacksonville, Florida, then was transferred to Miami for fighter training. I was commissioned there as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Marine Corps.

**The war begins**

 Oh, I was the hero at Pearl Harbor, sure. (laughs) I happened to be in the cadet barracks in Jacksonville, Florida, lying on my back when the news came in. When I heard what had happened, I jumped up as fast as I could, put on my uniform, grabbed my roommate, and ran for the gate. We got as far as the Jacksonville movie theater, and a Marine stopped us and said, “Go back to the base.” So that’s how the war started for me.

 I went from Jacksonville to Miami to fighter training, and I left there. At the end of January 1942 I got my wings and my commission.

 In the first year after America entered the war, I don’t think any of us in the country were ready. I don’t think I’m exaggerating that. They sent me and twenty other second lieutenants to Virginia to the Marine Corps Base Quantico for Aviation Armament Training. Among other things, I learned how to fire a synchronized machine gun. This was way behind the times. I never saw a synchronized machine gun again. Once we actually got into combat, all our guns were in the wings. But we went through this fruitless training for several months.

 After we graduated from Quantico, all my fellow classmates got orders for active duty except me. I sat around for two weeks wondering what was going to happen to me. No word. Finally I gathered my courage and talked to the commanding officer, a captain, which seemed stratospheric at the time.

 “Take it easy,” he said. “They’ll get to you before long.”

 I persisted. I didn’t want to be inactive. I wanted to fly.

 Strangely enough, he picked up the telephone with me still in his office, got the personnel division in Washington, and asked about me.

 “Nah, he’s dead,” they said.

 “No,” said the captain, “I’m afraid he’s standing right here in front of me.”

 It turned out Washington had confused my records with another second lieutenant who had died in an aircraft accident. He was on a dive-bombing run at Quantico and dove into the ground. The other pilot had the same last name as me but that was the only similarity. Washington had erased me. I could have sat the whole war out as a 2nd Lieutenant at Quantico if I wanted.

 So that got clarified. I got sent to the West Coast and put into a fighter squadron. I spent about eight weeks at Miramar, which was called Camp Kearny back then. It had been an Army base, but the Marines had taken it over and put in an airfield. That’s where we trained. The airfield consisted of two runways and concrete revetments to hide the airplanes in case of attack. No buildings at all. We slept in tents.

**Completely unprepared**

 I’d say we were completely unprepared for what he had to do. We had two fighter squadrons at Camp Kearny, and we did very little training. Each squadron had about forty pilots, the majority of whom were 2nd Lieutenants fresh out of flight school like I was. For these eighty pilots, we had maybe twenty-five fighter planes—the Wildcat F4F. So each squadron was at half strength for airplanes. The planes simply hadn’t been built yet.

 When I was finished training and headed into combat overseas, I only had thirty hours of flying under my belt. None of us had ever flown above 10,000 feet. Never worn an oxygen mask. Never fired our guns in the air. On one occasion we were flown out to a nearby desert area where we strafed a ground target. That was it—I repeat—once*,* and no more. A guy who came in after me finished up with only fourteen hours of flight training. We were completely green. That’s how we went overseas into combat.

 To give you a reference point of how unprepared we were in the Pacific, the guys who flew fighter planes later in Europe logged an average of several hundred hours of flight time before they ever saw combat. By then another year or two of the war of the war had passed, so they were able to train significantly better in the United States before going overseas. But we were absolutely greenhorns. We shouldn’t have been there, but there was no other way to do it.

 We went down to San Diego and got onboard the USS *Matsonia*, [formerly the SS *Malola*] a Hawaiian luxury liner which had been taken out of its normal service and used as a troop carrier. The cooks and kitchen and servants were all still in place. We ended up sitting in beautiful dining rooms eating wonderful food. It was a very rare experience for servicemen. Four people were placed in two-person cabins, but that was about it. Later, the ship was reconfigured and all its luxuries were removed. But at the point we went out, we still had refrigerated food. It was a beautiful cruise across the Pacific.

 Eventually we ended up in New Caledonia, where we were off-loaded into a newly built tent camp. About a week later, the USS *Copahee,* one of the original jeep carriers, arrived with our fighter planes on it.

**Comedy of errors**

 Most of us had never seen a carrier before. We didn’t have the slightest idea what we were up to. We were sent out to the ship, put in our planes, and told to launch the planes off the ship. Somebody instructed us. “You sit on the catapult. The man will give you the wind up signal. He’ll point at the bow, which means *you’re off.* When he does that, put your elbow in your belly and hold the stick. Otherwise your arm will go back, the stick will go back, and you’ll take off vertically.”

 In those days they had hydraulic catapults, not steam catapults, which they had later. Steam catapults shoot you off at a higher speed, but it’s an easier go. With those old hydraulic catapults, it was a very rough experience. It’s basically just a big rubber band. The feeling is like being shot out of a gun, or kicked in the tail.

 The first guy off was our commanding officer, a major. He launched okay—he might have had some carrier experience before, but not much.

 I was the second pilot off. Of course I did exactly what they told me not to do. I let my elbow slip, pulled the stick back, and took off vertically. When you’re shot from a catapult, there’s a moment—a few seconds actually—where you black out. When I came to and looked down, the sea wasn’t beneath me, it was in back of me. I was at the point of stalling out when I shoved the stick forward and came out of it all right. But it was all touch and go. I was very close to spinning in.

 From then on, it was a comedy of errors. I’d flown my fighter away from the carrier already, of course, but I heard about it later from the rest of my squadron. With one guy, the guy with only fourteen hours of flight time, the catapult failed. He dribbled into the water. Fortunately he lived. But all of us had all of our gear in the rear of these airplanes, so all he had in the world went down. From then on, they decided to launch the planes without the catapult. So they started at the rear of the deck, gave it full guns, and hoped for the best. The rest of the squadron all flew ashore.

 The second day some of us went back to the carrier to launch the rest of the planes. A limited number of pilots were used, so I ended up going out to the carrier again, which was fine. While standing on deck, I looked out and saw a destroyer heading toward us in the harbor. The destroyer was going fast. I could see the foam at the bow. White flashing signal lights. We found out the destroyer had been dispatched to tell our captain we were launching in a U.S. mine field. Our whole ship was in jeopardy. One wrong move and we could have all been blown up.

 So our carrier went further out in the ocean. A dive bomber needed to be launched, but its brakes were not functional. There were no aircraft maintenance personal whatsoever on the carrier. So they decided to launch the bomber anyway. They took the plane to the stern of the flight deck, tied the plane down, revved it up, then cut the lines that restrained the plane with an ax. It worked. I don’t know how he landed without any brakes, but the pilot did. Everything we did in those days was by the skin of our teeth.

 We stayed in our tent camp for several weeks, then our squadron was divided up in two segments, approximately twenty pilots in each. One segment got in DC-3s [transport plane] and the other flew the fighter planes. I was in a DC-3, and we arrived in Guadalcanal ahead of the fighter planes because the fighter planes needed to stop and refuel en route.

**The battle over Guadalcanal**

I remember coming in to Guadalcanal on the DC-3. We came through the clouds at low altitude. The first thing I saw was a bunch of palm trees. It was raining like hell. We landed.

 I have to get my directions right, but Guadalcanal basically was a long, kidney-shaped island with mountains on the north side. They sloped toward the south side where the Marines were. Guadalcanal was a complete jungle. All you could see when you were flying over it was trees, trees, trees. The only breaks would be a few palm tree plantations and the airfield where we landed.

 The whole time I was there, I wasn’t in one occasion personally where I saw Japanese troops on the ground from the air. The enemy was all in the jungle, although I saw Japanese on some of the ships we strafed. Once, some of our squadron intercepted some Japanese freighters that were offloading some infantry material along the beach. This was a real blood-letting. Our planes were there right when the infantry was climbing down from the ship. Strafed them all.

 Our squadron arrived in Guadalcanal in September 1942. Our tents were already up. We lived in a palm grove at the edge of the water, shrouded by jungle, adjacent to the fighter strip at Henderson Field. (To give you context, the Marines had already landed on the beach in August and taken the field by the time we pilots got there.) The decks underneath our tents weren’t constructed yet, so everything was mud. In the months that followed, the weather on Guadalcanal proved a challenge. You were either in a dust cloud or a mud pie. There was no in between.

 By the way, something that doesn’t get clarified much is that Henderson Field had actually been built by the Japanese. When it was almost finished, the Marines landed on Guadalcanal and took the airstrip over. So we ended up with some Japanese steam rollers and trucks and other equipment still there at the field. The Seabees came in with the first wave and finished building the airfield. In fact, the little building at the side of the strip that we used for the control tower was nicknamed *The Pagoda.*

 There were actually two runways at Henderson. One was constructed mostly by the Japanese and finished with Marsden Matting [steel planking] by the Seabees. The larger, heavier planes that came through used that one. The other runway was called “The Fighter Strip.” It was an adjacent meadow, which was mostly where we operated from.

**Wildcats over Guadalcanal**

 There were two Marine fighter squadrons at the field, and part of another squadron that rotated in and out, as well as a limited number of Air Corps P-39s [mid-engine fighters]. Our executive officer was Captain Joe Foss, one of our few experienced pilots, and the greatest Marine ace of the war. He eventually shot down twenty-six Japanese aircraft on Guadalcanal and later received the Medal of Honor for his actions on the island.

 We flew Wildcats the whole time on Guadalcanal. I didn’t see any Corsairs show up in the Pacific until early 1943.

 The whole air approach to Guadalcanal was down a slot of islands that started up around the Japanese base at Rabaul, several hundred miles away. Planes had to come down over the water between two rows of islands. Many of these islands had Australian-run coconut plantations. When the war broke out, these Australian supervisors stayed on, got radios, and acted as “coast watchers” for us. When the Japanese took off from Rabaul, the Australians radioed down to our airfield that they were coming. Almost without exception we knew in advance the Japanese were coming.

 Even then, a typical flight for us was a mess. My first flight in combat, we got word that the Japanese were coming in. We took off from the Meadow and flew up to 20,000 feet. I’d guess we had 12-20 planes with us. Keep in mind that none of us other than Joe Foss had ever flown higher than 10,000 feet or with oxygen on.

 The Japanese came in as forecast just below us, and we all dove on the Japanese.

 In my case, I rolled over on my back and dove. I hate to tell this about myself, but I spun out and spun all the way down, all the way through the whole Japanese formation. I was so unused to flying at high altitude that when I rolled the plane over it lost airspeed and I lost control of it. It went into a spin. They couldn’t hit me. I was spinning too fast.

 Near the bottom I regained control, turned around, climbed back up, and got into position to fire. I pressed the trigger on the stick and nothing happened. Madly, I recharged all the guns, pressed the trigger again, and still nothing happened.

 Quickly I realized what had happened. A lot of our planes still had oil on the guns, oil that was been there when a plane had just been delivered. If the gun hadn’t been cleaned off and dried of all oil, then the gun froze at 20,000 feet. My guns were frozen! I was nothing but a target!

 Now, I’m certainly not the bravest guy who ever came down the pike. And I certainly have my family of nerves. But you can’t imagine the feeling of being in combat and not having any guns to use.

 Any number of pilots that day had no guns. I doubt if any of us did any good except maybe Joe Foss, but I can’t qualify that statement. Eventually the Japanese got out of there and so did we.

**Get into the clouds!**

 Everything was so fast moving. There wasn’t any time to debrief and talk about what we had learned—or hadn’t. No one ever cleaned the plane’s guns until they got on the field. Even then, there was so much use it was hard to maintain all the planes as they should. You can’t imagine the pressure that was on all those ground-guys. They were overwhelmed with planes that weren’t ready for combat, green pilots, then, soon, damaged planes they had to fix again.

 In November, a major sea battle took place at night on Guadalcanal. Joe Foss called me over in the ready room the next morning. He said the coast watchers had identified a large Japanese naval vessel off Savo Island. No one knew what the vessel was, but since I’d had some experience in the Navy, I was picked to go out and identify it.

 So they sent me and a wingman out. My wingman had engine trouble and needed to abort. I was all alone. They’d given me a silhouette book so I could identify the ship, which I did: Kongo-class battleship. I flew back to the airfield, reported what I’d learned, and an attack was launched on the ship. It was named the *Hiei,* and its rudder had been jammed in the battle the night before. It couldn’t go anyplace. It was sitting there surrounded and protected by six Japanese destroyers.

 An attack was launched. We were told to strafe the circling destroyers while the bombers hit the battleship.

 After one run, I pulled out of my attack. I climbed slowly to about 4,000 feet and got hit by a squadron of Japanese Zeroes. I didn’t have time to count them. But there were more than four. Probably about six enemy planes. I had no airspeed. They were diving down on me, and they shot the hell out of me.

 To my credit, I didn’t freeze up. My first thought was, “Why do they want to shoot at me?!” My second thought was, “Get out of there—get into the clouds!” I knew I couldn’t get back to the airfield. I got into the clouds with the Japanese so close to me that when they flew by me I could see an enemy pilot in his cockpit.

 In the clouds I lost them. After a few minutes I flew out of cloud cover, and, goddam, the Japanese were right there waiting for me. Again I got shot up. Again I flew into the clouds. I stayed in the clouds about fifteen minutes, and when I came out again I was all alone.

 To clarify the grand romance of being a pilot … I managed to limp back to the airfield and land safely. As I got out of my aircraft, it was smoking and all shot up. I can remember this distinctly—my roommate came out of the mess hall, picking his teeth, and said, “Where you been?”

 That was it.

 The next day we were out flying at 20,000 feet. Suddenly we had a radar report that the Japanese were coming in on the water. So we dove down, scattered, and discovered the Japanese had already attacked the U.S. fleet. It was unsuccessful for them. I don’t think they’d hit a single ship.

 Anyway, I got caught up with two of them, bombers, flying right along the water. The first bomber started firing at me. I was furious. It was a very strange feeling—I just couldn’t imagine why this dirty so-and-so would want to shoot me down. I got so mad I shot him down. He slammed into the ocean. I turned on the other one and used up all my ammunition, but it slammed into the ocean, too. We’d been flying maybe only twenty feet above the water.

 I pulled up and got caught again. The zeroes came down and shot me up. Two days in a row.

 My throttle quadrant—the thing that holds the throttle to the side of the fuselage—had been shot away. That day when I got back to the airfield I needed to hold the quadrant in one hand, working the throttle with my other hand, and holding the stick between my knees as I tried to land. I put my flaps down, but only one went down—which is disastrous. But I made it. Landed safely, which is what counts.

**Escorts and other missions**

 Those are my most exciting stories. Plenty of other things happened. Once we escorted a PBY [flying boat] up to pick up a crew that had been shot down in the islands. We went up so far that neither my wingman nor I knew where we were. When the PBY said, “Okay you can leave now.” We said, “The hell we can. We don’t know where we are.” So he flew us back.

 That’s what it was like—flying by the seat of your pants.

 Any success we had—and the few experienced pilots who were with us did well—I give a lot of credit to Lieutenant Colonel Harold Bauer, who led the squadron stationed at Espiritu Santo, the squadron that rotated in and out. Some people knew him by the nicknames “Joe” or “Indian Joe,” but we knew him by the nickname “Butch.” He was married and a father of a young son. He hasn’t got as much publicity as he deserves, but was really the one who led us fighters. Lieutenant Colonel Bauer was a real calming influence. I can’t sing his praises highly enough.

 I’ll give you an example. One day we were all draped on a jeep going out to our planes. When I say all, this one little jeep had ten or twelve pilots on it. The Japanese had an artillery piece that they’d haul out into the woods every so often and fire onto the airfield, so we never did find it. That day we heard one of these shells coming in. Everybody on that jeep was off that jeep, lying in the mud, flat on our faces, in one second. When the shell had passed by, we were all on the ground lying prone. We looked up. Lieutenant colonel Bauer was sitting in the jeep’s seat looking down at us in complete derision. “What are you guys doing?” he said. That’s the type of guy he was. Nothing bothered him.

 On November 14, 1942, Lieutenant Colonel Bauer was on a mission, outnumbered by the Japanese two to one, and shot down. From his fighter, Joe Foss spotted him floating in the water wearing his Mae West. He didn’t look to be seriously hurt, but darkness was approaching. In spite of an extensive search effort, the rescue plane never found him. He never came home. He was just 33.

 How many flights did I make on Guadalcanal? I’ve got a log book. I could count them, but I’m not sure. It was pretty much every day. Sometimes twice a day. Some days you’d miss. I don’t know how many Japanese airplanes I saw. I sure saw a lot of them. Plenty of times I saw them where I couldn’t get in a good position to fire at them. That was frustrating. A more experienced pilot undoubtedly could have done better.

 I was credited with shooting down three airplanes on Guadalcanal—the two bombers close to the water. And one Zero. It happened so fast it was hard to see. I shot at it, it went down, and it was gone. The pilot might have been hit directly, I don’t know.

**The battle over Okinawa**

After Guadalcanal, I was sent back to the west coast to an F4U unit, and immediately received orders to be a flight instructor in Jacksonville, Florida. I screamed and hollered and said, “I don’t want to be a flight instructor.” But I was lined up as a Marine and told, “Do as you’re ordered.” So I went to Jacksonville. I spent a couple months there, then found out they were forming night fighters. More than anything I wanted to be back in a squadron. There’s no explaining my stupidity, but I wanted to go overseas again and get back in combat. It was probably silly and self-serving, but I couldn’t suppress the feeling.

 So I signed up for that, got my transfer and trained as that, then was assigned as a night fighter instructor, then to a night fighter squadron as operations officer at Cherry Point in California, then as executive officer to another squadron that was transferred to Okinawa. This all took about six months. Then I became commanding officer of the night fighter squadron on Okinawa.

 To explain my position as a night fighter, as a day fighter in the Navy you normally operated in what they called a finger four configuration. If you put your hand out and hide your thumb, look at your fingers, that’s the planes’ formation, the leader being the longest finger. If combat, if things are done right, you flew in that formation. Now, as a night fighter, you were a loaner. You flew in combat at night alone and depended on your radar to come in on an enemy plane.

 I was in combat on Okinawa, but it was largely all alone in the darkness of night, and I never got into shooting combat with a Japanese airplane. It was mostly surveillance. Usually in Okinawa, one or two would come over each night all alone, and we had two squadrons operating. So at any time we’d have eight to twelve US planes circling Okinawa. If one Japanese came through, it was hard to find him.

**A mountainous supply**

 Toward the end of the war, I’ve never seen such a stockpile of equipment as I did on Okinawa. Everything was being piled up there in preparation for an invasion of the Japanese mainland, which everybody thought was going to happen next. Acres and acres of everything you could think of, piled up four stories high. Okinawa was the supply center. A mountainous supply.

 Right before the end of war, just before the surrender, the Japanese tried to attack our airfield at night. Three Japanese bombers came in. Two didn’t make it, but one did. I was out on patrol that night, flying. I heard it all happening on the radio.

 The one bomber made it in to the field and landed, wheels up, on the main field. The Japanese troops jumped out, maybe twelve or fifteen (these were fairly small bombers), and sprinted up and down our line of parked airplanes. With bayonets and hand grenades, they tried to destroy these airplanes. Actually they did a pretty good job. They slashed the rudders with bayonets.

 The only pilot that our squadron lost on Okinawa was our duty officer. That night he was standing in the tower when the Japanese bomber landed. He had a handheld signal lamp with him, turned the light on the Japanese bomber, and one of our men shot and killed him. Everybody on the ground was so excited and discombobulated by the landing of this bomber. Everybody thought the war was just about over and we were all perfectly safe. But all of a sudden Japanese soldiers were running around with rifles on our airbase. So this guy shot at the light by mistake.

 Early the next morning I landed on the field. I saw this Japanese bomber sitting on the runway, still fairly intact, I got out of my plane with my pistol drawn. I wasn’t sure what had happened. As I walked around the plane, one of the Japanese soldiers was lying not far from the airplane. I didn’t know what had killed him, but the top of his skull was gone and you could look in and see. It looked like a water fountain in there, all white. Later I learned that whenever the Japanese ran low on ammunition, they shot themselves. This guy had evidently put his gun in his mouth and shot the roof of his skull off. The rest of the soldiers were also killed. They shot themselves too.

 Now, I’ve never seen this in any record books, but I can attest to it. I climbed in the Japanese plane’s bomb bay, which is where the soldiers had been sitting on the flight over. It was full of empty Saki bottles and half grapefruits. This was their last meal.

 Nothing much else happened in the air on Okinawa. We flew every night. There was certainly still a big battle happening on the ground while we were there. But there was hardly any Japanese opposition in the air.

 One evening in May 1945 I was taxiing out. It was still daylight. As I got to the far end of the runway at the edge of the bluff in preparation for takeoff, I could see over the main anchorage where the troops were offloading ships. An air raid alarm came one, which meant to stay where you are. So I stayed there and looked at the fleet down below. All of a sudden, all hell broke loose below. Until you’ve seen this, you haven’t seen anything. The whole U.S. fleet opened up with anti-aircraft fire. More than fifty ships down there, all opened up on a small space. The sky was perfectly black.

 Two Japanese Kamikaze planes had come through, high, and dove on the fleet. As they came down through all this ack-ack, one of the planes was hit and blew up. But the other one kept going. In the midst of the anchorage was the USS *New Mexico,* an old battleship. This single airplane aimed right for it. That airplane went right down the chimney of the *New Mexico*. I saw it diving, I saw it hit. Everything for a few seconds was perfectly clear. The plane had disappeared. Then out of the ship’s deck came a puff of smoke. The plane had blown up in the engine room. The ship caught fire, but fairly soon the crew was able to put it out. The ship was towed back to the west coast. She was pretty torn apart.

 But, for me as a pilot, Okinawa was the opposite of Guadalcanal. Things were in our favor at Okinawa. Our airplanes were in good shape. We lived in prefab huts, ate good food, and didn’t have much opposition from the enemy.

**Lives in freedom**

When the war ended, some were sent home. Squadrons were regrouped, consolidated, and reformed. I was sent to Japan as an executive officer of a night fighter squadron on occupation duty. Then I became commanding officer of the squadron there. I spent about ten months in Japan.

 It was eye opening to see from the air what had happened in Japan. Yokohama and Tokyo were vast empty plains, except for the middle of Tokyo were some granite office buildings still existed. But for miles and miles everything was empty. If you flew over these areas, you saw burned out street cars, just left there.

 At the airfield where I was, the Japanese Navy had done their testing there, and had a factory. Inside, and on the edge of the airfield, were a few advanced Japanese planes in various stages of assembly. Everything had been abandoned. We got into a cave at the side of the airfield, and inside against the wall were big racks filled with wooden spears. Thousands of them. The Japanese were going to issue spears to the populace in case of invasion. Wooden spears!

 After the war, everything changed almost immediately. One day on the street I bumped into some Japanese pilots with their fur-lined helmets. They were very friendly, laughing, clapping each other on the back. We laughed along with them and waved back. These were the guys who’d been slitting our throats a month earlier.

 I didn’t feel any animosity to them. Within a week of the armistice, the Japanese were almost overwhelming accepting of our presence there. At least the ones I met. Very polite and quiet.

 After duty in Japan, I was sent to back to the states to test pilot school. That was the heaven of my life. I got to fly all sorts of planes. It was just wonderful. One of my tasks there was to test the first astronaut’s pressure suit. I was John Glenn’s predecessor. I was given the suit and a specially-designed turbo supercharger F4U and told to fly up to 70,000-80,000 feet. I never did. While approaching 50,000 feet, the plane became highly unstable. It was like flying on top of a bowling ball. We tested the suit later in an airless flight chamber.

 I spent several years with the Marine Corps in various duties nationally and internationally. All the way through the Marine Corps I was blessed with wonderful productive duties. Almost without exception, I enjoyed them all.

 After that I left the Marine Corps and flew commercially for Pan Am.

 My wife Barbara and I were married in 1951. We have a son and a daughter today and two wonderful granddaughters.

 Today, at age 91 ½, I’ve gone from flying airplanes off of aircraft carriers to being the doorman in a museum. Weather permitting I ride my bicycle down to the USS *Intrepid* twice a week where I volunteer as a greeter. It ride 5-6 miles twice a week.

 I’d say we were not ready for World War II. We were not expecting to be in a war. But from then on, we should have always been ready. We should be ready today.

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