**Nine Months over Peleliu as a Corsair Pilot**

*The experiences of Gene W. Morrison*

*Marine Fighter Squadron VMF-122 at Peleliu  
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**The road to being a pilot**

I joined, ah, when the hell was it. Let’s see, in 1941 I was in my first year in junior college and I had an opportunity to join a CPT [Civilian Pilot Training] course, which amounted to learning to fly. That sounded like a real interesting thing, so I grabbed it and proceeded. I was 17, and that was my first experience flying. I’d never flown when I was a child.

World War II came along. I intended to take the secondary course, which would have let me fly bigger, faster airplanes. Unfortunately because I lived in Orange County, California, right next to the coast, we couldn’t fly there. We needed to go 150 miles inland to do the training, so there was a delay. Finally I got the course and finished it. The war had just started.

In March 1941 I enlisted in the Navy Aviation B-5 program, which would take me toward a flight job. When I enlisted, my father agreed to sign the papers even though I was underage. But when I presented the papers to him, he wouldn’t sign. I prevailed on my mother to sign them, and she agreed on one condition. She made me promise that I would fly only multi-engine aircraft, because that was safer, she thought.

There was a long delay until I was called. I graduated from school in June and wasn’t called until September. I went to St. Mary’s College for pre-flight school, and from there I wound up at Los Alamitos for primary training. I went to Corpus Christi, Texas, for secondary and advanced training.

I graduated from flight school and went to San Diego to be a transport pilot, but they didn’t have any planes for us to train in. So after a delay I found out there was a fighter pilot training school in El Toro at Santa Ana, and I managed to get into that. I started out flying SMJs and Grumman Wildcats, and finally got into Corsairs. That wasn’t what my mother wanted. But it was either fly fighter planes or nothing. Okay.

I went down to El Centro California and joined VMF-122, and from there we shipped out to the South Pacific.

**The Battle over Peleliu**

From San Diego we went to Espiritu Santos in New Hebrides, picked up our airplanes, checked them out, and did some flying there, then flew on up through Bougainville and then up to New Guinea and Peleliu.

We weren’t there for the initial invasion of Peleliu, of course. We didn’t get there until almost two weeks afterward. The troops on the ground needed to capture the airfield first and have it usable for us.

I had joined a squadron where the C.O. was an ace. He’d already shot down five planes in the early part of WWII. We were all hot to do the same thing. But when we got to Peleliu, I only saw one Japanese airplane in the air. One evening we were watching a movie, and while they were changing the reel of a movie, a Japanese float plane flew over and threw out a couple of hand grenades. It wasn’t completely dark yet, and we could still see him. Another squadron got him about five miles north of the field. He didn’t get away. So, no, we didn’t get to do any dogfights. That was a huge disappointment for us. Aerial combat was what we had been trained to do. We went to Peleliu intent on killing Japanese. But we did a lot. We were three squadrons on Peleliu, and we kept about 30,000 Japanese pinned up and incapacitated. We dropped bombs and did a lot of strafing, that sort of thing.

I don’t mean to undermine our efforts either. Was the enemy a real threat to us? Damn right. We gave the Japanese anti-aircraft guns a lot of practice. As a result, we lost about a third of our pilots to anti-aircraft fire during the entire time we were there. It was serious stuff.

One day I remember coming back at the end of my flight. There was a tiny island that stuck out across my path. I was down low, maybe 150-200 feet off the water, and just bounced off this island. Boy, as I went over it, a gun just off to my right cut loose at me. I was so close I could hear the bang. Scared the hell out of me.

But my plane wasn’t hit. Look—altogether, I flew airplanes in three different wars—WWII, Korea, and Vietnam, and to the best of my knowledge, my plane was never hit by an enemy bullet. I flew helicopters in Korea and Vietnam and Corsairs in WWII. Luck maybe. I don’t know.

But, sure, I observed pilots getting hit and going down. Cub Callous got hit and went in the water up at Yap Island. There wasn’t too much to it. He just lost power and went down, belly flopped in the water.

On one trip, we were out at a place called Woolley Eye, a little island maybe 400 miles away that was assumed to be a staging place for Japanese planes to fly over from further east. We went over there to look the island over, and I damn near got shot down. It was undercast, which meant there was a cloud layer between me and the water. So, from above the clouds we dove down through the clouds and flew over the islands. And golly, the Japanese opened up. My wingman was a guy named Frank Ash. I told Frank to pull out. It was too hot in there. They managed to hit Frank as he pulled out, but didn’t knock him down. We joined up later and went back to safety. But when he tried to land, he found he didn’t have full control of his stick. A bullet had jammed the elevator on his plane. He managed to get on the ground okay. That was a real hairy one.

**Difficulties of the job**

I was on Peleliu nine months and flew 150-200 flights, something like that. I have my log book, but I’ve never counted. We were flying almost every day. Sometimes two or three times a day. Right after we got there we had a typhoon blow through, and, of course, you’re not flying in the typhoon. Really, in some ways, I’d say much of my time on Peleliu was not really interesting. It was kinda boring. But, as I think back, boring is a good word when you’re in battle. Boring is exactly what you want.

We lived in tents. For a long time we didn’t even have wooden floors in the tents. We just pitched them on the ground. It was quite primitive.

What was an average flight like on Peleliu? An average run was a two-hour flight, flying between two thousand and ten thousand feet. We called our runs “barge sweeps.” We’d take off in a flight of four. Usually we’d split the flight into two flights and two, and we’d fly around the islands in opposite directions. Usually our mission was to look for “targets of opportunity.” We bombed any activity in enemy territory. You’d see individual soldiers, which didn’t happen very often. Boats. Vehicles. Structures of one sort of another. Something that looked like it would be a useful for the enemy. As pilots, we were really watching the ground as much as we were flying—damn right.

On occasion, we’d have designated bombing targets. The Japanese had their installations generally concentrated at the southern end, and we’d give them hell once in a while.

One day we had four strikes scheduled. I went on two of them. The first and the third. On the second, one of our guys got shot down and landed right on the reef, close to the Japanese installations. A PBY [flying boat] was called in to make a rescue, and it was successful. But it was a pretty hairy operation.

**Never a one-man show**

The Corsair was a great airplane. It didn’t have any particular idiosyncrasies. It had lots of power and was a lot of fun. Top speed was a little over 400 mph; I think it set a world record at one time. What did I see from the cockpit? The pilot sat up pretty high, so he had good visibility above the instrument panel and an unobstructed view of what was around him. In the South Pacific, there wasn’t a hell of a lot of instrument weather, so we never flew by instrument.

The Corsair was armed with six 50-caliber machine guns. We also carried 250, 500, and 1,000 pounds bombs, in various combinations. There’s no gunner on a Corsair—it’s all just the pilot. But it’s not a one-man show either. We flew in the flights of four (four planes at a time), and absolutely always, you had a wingman. You were either a wingman or a leader. Most of the time I flew as a leader and had a wingman with me. The wingman’s job was to keep anybody off his leader. The leader’s job is to find the target and kill it.

If you dropped a bomb, you really couldn’t tell what you hit. As you pulled out, you pulled a considerable amount of Gs (centrifugal force). By the time you got to where you could look back and see where the bomb hit, it was difficult to see what you did.

Strafing was entirely different. You could see what you were hitting right off the bat.

Well, I’m not proud of it, but one day my wingman and I caught two Japanese soldiers out on a reef, apparently trying to catch fish or something to eat. We made runs on them. Each time we ran, they ducked behind some coral. So we split the two of us and came in on them at two different directions at the same time, and got them that way.

Why wouldn’t I be proud of that? Well, if you kill a man like that, he’s not able to do anything to try and avoid you. It didn’t strike me as being very sporting. As a pilot, it was sometimes difficult to do your job if you saw the enemy. Sometimes, but not always. We were there to kill Japanese. That was our purpose. And I think we tried to do it the best we could.

Peleliu was the last of my fighting in WWII. That was it. After Peleliu, I went to Cherry Point, North Carolina, and got out of the Marine Corps. At the time, there was a system of releasing people who had so many points. I had ample points. I didn’t know what to do, so I got out. About six months later I got back in, and stayed in from there on until I retired.

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