



WHEN 23 CORSAIR PILOTS OF VMF-422 TOOK OFF ON A ROUTINE FERRY FLIGHT OVER THE PACIFIC, NONE OF THEM DREAMED THAT ONLY ONE MAN WOULD REACH THEIR DESTINATION

# THE LOST SQUADRON

BY MARK CARLSON

On January 25, 1944, 23 young men faced the most perilous fight of their lives. They were from towns and cities all over the United States. A few were combat veterans; most were fresh out of training. Before the war they had little in common, but in 1944 they were all naval aviators eager to take on the Japanese in the Pacific. Near the Ellice Islands, six of those pilots and 22 airplanes were lost in one of the worst air disasters in Marine Corps history. Although the incident took place during the most furious phase of the Pacific War, not a single plane was downed by enemy action. They were all victims of bad weather, technical difficulties, poor planning and, most of all, careless command and control.

The Gilbert Islands fell to the Allies in November 1943 with the capture of Tarawa, adding another ribbon to the Marines' list of victories. The next step in the island-hopping campaign was the invasion of the Marshall Islands. Among the Marine squadrons slated to support the invasion was VMF-422, a new unit flying Vought F4U-1D Corsairs. Its baptism of fire would not be against

the Japanese, but against a fierce storm and an implacable sea.

The pilots of VMF-422, dubbed the "Flying Buccaneers," had begun training together at Santa Barbara, Calif., in July 1943. They learned to work as a team and became proficient in gunnery, navigation and bombing, first in Grumman F4F-4 Wildcats, then transitioning to Corsairs. They had heard a lot about the hot new fighter.

"It had speed, climb, stability and was also a fantastic gun platform," said Lieutenant Mark Syrkin. "When we fired the six .50-cal. guns, she held as steady as a rifle in a vise. This was the first 2,000-hp fighter we had ever handled."

Their squadron CO, Major John S. McLaughlin, was an Annapolis graduate in his first command. In late September they received orders to ship out to Pearl Harbor on the carrier *Bunker Hill*. After arriving in Hawaii they were assigned to Marine Air Group 22 on Midway, where they continued to hone their piloting skills. They learned to work with ground control radar and gained experience in over-water flying.



Three F4U-4 Corsairs fly in close formation off the coast of Florida. Opposite: The original complement of VMF-422 poses with an F4U-1D.



**Above: VMF-422 was Major John S. McLaughlin's first command. Below: Lieutenant Mark Syrkin in his Corsair.**



**The Marine fliers were ordered to leave Hawkins Field (shown here) in Tarawa Atoll prior to Operation Flintlock.**

**AFTER THREE MONTHS AT MIDWAY**, the Buccaneers returned to Oahu, where they received brand-new F4U-1Ds. Then it was off to Tarawa Atoll aboard the escort carrier *Kalinin Bay*. VMF-422's pilots were launched and flew the last 60 miles to Tarawa, landing at Hawkins Field on Betio on January 24, 1944. The island, only recently taken from the Japanese, still bore the scars of intense bombardment and combat. Not a single palm tree was intact, and the beaches and fields were a sea of craters and foxholes.

They were met by Colonel Lawrence Burke, the 4th Marine Air Wing operations officer. Wing commander Brig. Gen. Lewie Merritt ordered the newly arrived pilots to fly to Funafuti, about 800 nautical miles to the south-southeast. From there they would help support the Marshall Islands campaign, code-named "Operation Flintlock." Although the Marshalls were to the north, Merritt wanted the Marine squadrons off Tarawa, where Japanese bombers could still strike. Known for being ambitious and irascible, he hoped to make his mark in this operation.

McLaughlin asked Burke if a PV-1 Ventura could escort the squadron to Nanumea, the Marine pilots' first stop, more than 450 nautical miles distant over open water. But Burke said Merritt wanted to keep the Venturas for reconnaissance. Captains Cloyd Rex Jeans and Charley Hughes, both veterans of Guadalcanal, prevailed on McLaughlin to again request an air escort. Burke went to Merritt, who flatly refused.

The wing's aerological officer provided McLaughlin with navigational information and weather data. From Tarawa to north of Nanumea the skies were expected to be clear. Beyond Nanumea to Funafuti were scattered showers and rainsqualls.

The Marines boarded a yacht moored offshore, where they spent the night and were briefed on their flight and the upcoming campaign. They returned to Hawkins by 0800 on January 25. "We wrote down our course on our plotting boards and were told that the weather data was the same as it had been the night before," said Syrkin. That report, posted at 0830, was 18 hours old.

They were to take off at 0930 and proceed to Nanumea at 1,000 to 2,000 feet and 200 knots. There they would refuel and continue to Funafuti. The fighters were serviced, armed and fueled with 349 gallons, which gave them three hours' reserve. The first leg was estimated to take 2½ hours.

The pilots were told they would communicate on 6970 kilocycles. Call signs for the radio stations in the Gilbert Islands and range beacon frequencies for Nanumea and Funafuti were not given to all the men, but as Syrkin related, "Since the flight to Nanumea was only 463 miles, we weren't too concerned." The southern Gilbert Islands to Nanumea and down the Ellice Islands was a long, ragged chain that roughly paralleled their course, so as long as the weather was clear they would almost never be out of sight of land.

**MCLAUGHLIN LED HIS MEN** off the island at 0930 hours. One pilot had starter trouble and was unable to take off. But the other 23 Corsairs formed up and headed south-southeast.

"The weather was perfect," recalled Syrkin, "with visibility unlimited. We left Tarawa behind at 1000 hours." They were in three flights, one of seven, two of eight, divided into four-plane divisions.

For the first two hours all went well. They passed dozens of small lush islands ringed by pure white beaches, garlanded with turquoise

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and pearl necklaces of coral reefs. The Corsairs’ Double Wasp engines pounded out the cadence as the miles passed below.

Then, at 1215 hours, their luck changed. Rising swiftly over the horizon, a wall of dark clouds extended northeast to southwest directly astride their course. The heavy gray storm front reached well over 30,000 feet. The storm played havoc with their radios and instruments, and compasses spun erratically. Realizing they could not climb over the storm, McLaughlin ordered the pilots to fly under it. He had to make the call several times before the others responded. With the ceiling at no more than 200 feet, rain battered the Corsairs. “It was as though a fire hose was aimed at the front of the aircraft,” said Syrkin. “There was really no forward visibility and we were only able to keep some semblance of formation by looking out the sides of the canopy.”

The sea was a maelstrom of dark-green 50-foot swells peaked with white foam and driving spray. They managed to keep one another in sight, but always kept a wary eye on the clutching waves passing under their wings.

McLaughlin made several radical turns to try to locate the Nanumea beacon. But VMF-422 was lost in a major tropical storm.

The Buccaneers didn’t know they were actually on the Nanumea radar screens just 19 nautical miles away. Their IFF (identify friend or foe) transponders were picked up on Nanumea, but the base had not been informed of the flight and wasn’t even monitoring the squadron’s frequency.

McLaughlin led the entire formation into a sharp turn to port and then to starboard. As in a schoolyard game of “crack the whip,” some planes could not follow the line. “My division leader

John Rogers was unable to keep formation,” Syrkin recalled. “John Hansen and Jake Wilson went off with him.” Rogers was never heard from again.

Hansen, fearing a midair collision, had decided to go it alone. He radioed that he had lost contact. Lieutenant Don Walker gave him the Funafuti range frequency. “I tuned it in and it worked,” Hansen said. “I followed it in. My engine started to pop, but about 20 minutes later I saw the island.”

He landed safely on Funafuti. “They were surprised to see me. I learned that I was the only one to come in. They weren’t even expecting us.” Hansen immediately informed the station of the squadron’s trouble. It was the first official notice that VMF-422 was lost in the storm.

As for Wilson, he soon found himself alone, and spotted the island of Niutao ahead. Almost out of fuel, he decided to ditch and headed for the surf line far below. His Corsair came to a shuddering stop in the waves. Wilson looked to see natives rushing out to him in dugout canoes.

**BACK IN THE MAIN GROUP**, Lieutenant Chris Lausen reported engine trouble and announced that he had to ditch. Lieutenants Ken Gunderson and Robert “Curly” Lehnert stayed with him as his Corsair slid toward the heaving green swells while the rest of the squadron orbited them. “Chris’ Corsair came down and smacked into a wave and sank,” recalled Lehnert. “Then he came up, but didn’t have his raft. He had only his Mae West life preserver to keep him afloat. Even though I was ordered to rejoin the squadron, I couldn’t just leave him.” Lehnert continued to orbit the struggling



Marine, who had released a yellow dye marker, while Gunderson caught up with the squadron.

The 18 pilots fought to keep each other in sight and stay above the turbulent sea. Rain continued to hammer their windshields until they finally broke out into an area of good weather over the tiny island of Nui. The towering storm clouds behind them receded, but the skies ahead held more dark squalls. As they rebuilt the formation, McLaughlin radioed that he had caught the Funafuti beacon and would lead them to the island.

Unknown to the men of VMF-422, they were less than 20 miles from Funafuti, but fortune still did not smile on them. Another storm front rose ahead, and they were quickly swallowed into its dark maw.

McLaughlin lost the Funafuti beacon and grew desperate. He gave the lead to Jeans, who began a formation turn back to the northeast toward Nui. Then McLaughlin stopped communicating, and his squadron mates were unable to contact him.

Lieutenant John “Abe” Lincoln saw his CO veering away. “I flew very close to him and tried to get him to look at me,” he said. “I called him several times. I went so far as to bump his wing with mine, and...nothing.” Finally Lincoln rejoined the squadron, and McLaughlin disappeared into the storm. “I think he knew he had lost his command, a whole set of brand-new airplanes,” said Lincoln. “He couldn’t take it.” Around this time Lieutenant Tom Thompson also disappeared. The remaining Marines continued flying, lost and dangerously low on fuel.

Meanwhile Lehnert was still circling over Lausen. “Chris was all alone with no raft,” he said. “I decided to bail out.” After opening his canopy, Lehnert lowered his flaps. “I was at 2,000 feet as slow as possible. I jumped clear right over Chris’ dye marker. After I hit the water, I inflated the raft. I had to get rid of my chute, which was pulling me away. Then I said to myself, ‘Okay Bob, get into the goddamn raft now!’” The massive swells hampered his efforts to reach Lausen. “I used the hand paddles. But every time I reached a crest he was nowhere to be seen. I never saw Chris again. He perished at sea.”

At about 1500, Lieutenant “Tiger” Moran radioed Jeans that he

was approaching Nui and was in communication with Nanumea. Jeans ordered Moran to hold his position until they could join him. The station at Nanumea had assumed the mystery planes were heavy bombers on their way to the Solomons and saw no reason for concern, but Moran’s calls quickly dispelled that notion.

Moran told Jeans he was low on fuel and was going to bail out over the island. He jumped from his Corsair and landed in the heavy surf, but drowned while trying to escape from his parachute harness. “Tiger wasn’t a strong swimmer,” recalled Lehnert.

**THE REMAINING PLANES FINALLY BROKE OUT** of the second storm around 1530. Lieutenants Ted Thurneau and Bill Aycrigg both reported they were almost out of fuel. Jeans knew there were high storm fronts between them and Funafuti, and their odds of making the island were slim. He decided to order the pilots to ditch as close together as possible so they would have a better chance of being rescued. Aycrigg ditched first, followed by Thurneau, but he overshot Aycrigg by five miles. The other 13 pilots managed to ditch close together in between the first two, but were unable to link up with them.

“I climbed out of my plane and into the raft,” recalled Gunderson. “I swallowed a lot of seawater and was pretty sick, heaving for a long time.” Lieutenant Royce “Tex” Watson nearly drowned when his Corsair sank, but he struggled to the turbulent surface.

Syrkin, who was nicknamed “Breeze” after a B-movie actor, was the next to last to ditch. By then the area was dotted with yellow rafts and swimming men. “Not being a good swimmer, I took my shoes off and hung them by the laces around my neck,” he said. Then he circled the ditching site and fired off all his ammunition, trying to lighten the plane as much as possible. “With that big engine it would sink fast enough, and I wanted those few more seconds,” he explained.

“We were sure ol’ Breeze had gone berserk when he started firing at nothing,” said Watson.

Syrkin continued: “I jettisoned my hood and used full flaps and came in tail low, holding off as long as possible. I felt the fuselage skipping the water until the prop and engine dug into a heavy swell



**Left: Lieutenants Ken Gunderson and Chris Lausen before the flight. Right: Lieutenant John Lincoln was the last to see their CO.**



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“I HAD READ A *LIFE* MAGAZINE ARTICLE ABOUT CAPTAIN EDDIE RICKENBACKER CRASHING AT SEA. HE AND HIS BUDDIES SURVIVED 24 DAYS ON A RAFT. IT WAS IN ALMOST THE SAME AREA OF OCEAN. I FIGURED IF EDDIE CAN DO IT, SO CAN I.” – LIEUTENANT ROBERT “CURLY” LEHNERT

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Eddie Rickenbacker is lifted from a PBY after his 24-day ordeal at sea in 1942.



A downed pilot waits to be plucked from the Pacific.

and it stopped dead. I lost my shoes, but my only thoughts were of leaving the plane and getting into my raft. The raft doubled as a seat cushion and was rigged through the leg straps of the parachute harness between the parachute and the pilot. I slipped out of the harness and jumped onto the wing, then reached back and flipped out the parachute and raft and followed them in.”

With swells cresting over 20 feet, the pilots frequently lost sight of one another. Using whistles and calls, small knots of men assembled. Syrkin finally saw a group of rafts tied together, and as he approached, paddling with his hands, Watson greeted him with “Hey Breeze, how about an autograph?”

Thirteen men were in 12 rafts. Rex Jeans, Charley Hughes, Bill Reardon, Tex Watson, John Lincoln, Jules Flood, R.K. Wilson, Ken Gunderson, Sterling “Shou” Price, Caleb Smith, “Chick” Whalen, Don Walker and Syrkin began the long wait for rescue. Whalen, who had not been able to recover his raft after ditching, had to double up with each of the pilots in turn.

Ted Thurneau was unable to link up with the rest. Bill Aycrigg, the first to ditch, had disappeared. Nine pilots were either dead, lost or missing. To make matters worse, the stranded Marines weren’t alone. Three large sharks began to prowl around the rafts.

Lehnert continued his lonely sojourn. “I had read a *Life Magazine*

article about Captain Eddie Rickenbacker crashing at sea. He and his buddies survived 24 days on a raft. It was in almost the same area of ocean. I figured if Eddie can do it, so can I. I used the sea anchor as a bucket to bail out the raft. It was always shipping water. I ate my malted milk tablets and pemmican. I used the canvas sea anchor to collect rainwater. I had plenty to drink.” He tried to catch a seagull, as Rickenbacker had, when it hovered close to him. “I grabbed him but he flapped and pecked at my face so much I said, ‘Hell, I’m not hungry enough to eat you,’ and let him go.”

**NIGHT FELL AND ANOTHER RAINSQLALL HIT** the small band of Marine aviators. They eagerly collected water with their rubberized tarps. Jeans ordered them to tie the rafts into a circle so they would have more than one connection with each other. The hours passed slowly. At dawn on the 26th they spotted the sharks still swimming nearby.

The wind, blowing out of the north, brought what they all feared. The same storm they’d flown through the day before caught up with them and struck with a cold, merciless vengeance. The desperate pilots held onto each other’s rafts, bailing with one hand.

The storm passed within a few hours, the weather cleared and the sea became glassy calm. Reardon spotted an airplane in the distance,



**Left: A Catalina comes to the rescue. Right: The surviving "Flying Buccaneers" of VMF-422 pose with a Corsair early in 1944.**

but it never came close to them.

As darkness fell, another storm lashed the 13 Marines. They tied the rafts into a single line when conditions were calm and in a circle during the squalls. Hour after hour rainsqualls hit and passed, adding to their fatigue. But the men never lost their sense of humor. During one rainstorm on the second night, Walker sang "It Ain't Gonna Rain No More" at the top of his lungs.

By the morning of the 27th, they had named their shark companions Leroy, Oscar and Herbert. At one point Lieutenant Smith, trying to get comfortable in his raft, overbalanced and fell in the water. When he saw the sharks moving in, he kicked and swam so vigorously he seemed to "walk" on the water and fell back into his raft. Once he was safe, the pilots all started laughing uproariously.

The strain was beginning to tell, however. Muscles were sore and skin rubbed raw. Nearly constant rain soaked their thin flight suits, while the heat of the day burned their skin. The saltwater caused red sores and open blisters. Late that morning Jeans announced he

had figured their position and they should use the wind and currents to move toward Funafuti.

Leroy and his cronies were becoming more aggressive by then, so the Marines decided Charley Hughes should shoot them with his .38-caliber revolver. "Our .45 Colt automatics had rusted shut," said Gunderson. "Charley was in the raft next to mine, and when he fired at the shark it was right in front of my face." The wounded shark swam off, pursued by the others.

A seagull landed on Hughes' raft, and he was able to catch and kill it. The hungry pilots, who had been living on malt tablets and concentrated chocolate, eagerly ate the fishy-tasting raw meat.

Miles away, Curly Lehnert saw a PBV on the horizon. "He was flying a square search. I watched him like a hawk. He came right toward me. I had my Very pistol in my right leg pocket and yanked it out. When I fired, it exploded into two big red balls. He saw me and rocked his wings." The PBV crew picked up Lehnert and flew him to Funafuti—"The same place where Rickenbacker had been

## WHO WAS TO BLAME?



**Brigadier General Lewie Merritt**

On January 30, 1944, a Navy Douglas R4D carried the surviving pilots of VMF-422 back to Hawkins Field for an official inquiry into the tragic January 25 mission. It had to be a very disheartening flight for the Marines, knowing that they were possibly flying over the drifting bodies of their comrades.

Aboard Rear Adm. John Hoover's flagship, the seaplane tender *Curtiss*, testimony and an examination of the available evidence revealed several facts and conclusions, but other aspects of the incident were never made clear:

1. The official report stated that McLaughlin never insisted on a patrol plane escort. Captains Jeans and Hughes both testified that McLaughlin made the request and Burke told him Merritt refused. The report split hairs by saying McLaughlin "asked" for an escort, but never "insisted" on one, which presumably might have been granted. Merritt's decision not to provide a PV-1 escort was, to say the least, ill-advised. The general was criticized for this and also for not properly informing Nanumea or Funafuti that VMF-422 was on its way.
2. During the storm, Nanumea did

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## “CHARLEY WAS IN THE RAFT NEXT TO MINE, AND WHEN HE FIRED AT THE SHARK IT WAS RIGHT IN FRONT OF MY FACE.” THE WOUNDED SHARK SWAM OFF, PURSUED BY THE OTHERS. – LIEUTENANT KEN GUNDERSON

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brought,” he noted. “But there was no *Life* photographer for me.” There Lehnert learned that the rest of VMF-422 was still missing.

**IT WAS LATE THAT AFTERNOON WHEN** fortune at last smiled on the stranded Buccaneers. Lincoln spotted a plane in the distance, a PBY Catalina. At first it appeared to be flying away, but then it turned, making a 360-degree circle. Some of the Marines fired flares, others their .38s and still others released their yellow dye markers. The PBY’s crew saw them and wagged the flying boat’s wings as it passed over.

Captain George Davidson of Navy patrol squadron VP-53 had been out looking for Japanese submarines when he and his crew spotted the tiny group of yellow rafts about 100 miles west-southwest of Funafuti. After making several passes, Davidson finally managed to set down on the rough water, an incredible feat considering the waves were about 15-20 feet high. A heavy wave tore the right engine off the wing. The wind then pushed the flying boat away from the rafts, and only on the third pass was a crewman able to throw a line to the men in the water. Eight men climbed aboard, then five rafts broke away and were suddenly lost in the turbulent seas. With visibility waning and rain, waves and wind hampering the search, Davidson taxied the big Catalina around time and again, looking for the lost rafts.

To make matters worse, the PBY’s hull had been breached during the rough landing and was taking on water. After more than two hours, Davidson’s crew located the five other men and hauled them aboard the Catalina.

Knowing there was no hope of lifting the damaged, heavily loaded PBY into the air, Davidson kept its nose into the wind. He managed

to make contact with rescue forces, and ships began to converge on the area.

The destroyer *Hobby* arrived a few hours later and took on not only the Buccaneers, but also the crew of the sinking PBY. When the exhausted Marines finally settled into *Hobby*’s sickbay, they found Jake Wilson, who had ditched in the surf off Niutao, already on board.

The friendly natives who had rescued Wilson fed him while they contacted Nanumea. Wilson had apparently come close to having to marry one of the tribal chief’s daughters before a boat from *Hobby* picked him up on the 26th. His squadron mates later needled Wilson about his “close call.”

The Navy conducted an extensive search, but Major McLaughlin, Captain Rogers and Lieutenants Aycrigg, Lausen and Thompson were never found. Ted Thurneau was picked up by the destroyer *Welles* on the 28th, the last survivor of VMF-422 to be rescued.

The final toll was six Marines and 22 Corsairs lost. After the survivors were flown back to Tarawa, an inquiry was held on the incident (see sidebar below).

The Flying Buccaneers received new Corsairs and replacement pilots. They did their duty in Operation Flintlock. After the Marshalls were taken, the VMF-422 disaster was largely forgotten. But for the rest of their lives, the survivors of the lost squadron never forgot those three terrible days. †

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not monitor VMF-422’s frequency or have its beacon on because there was no reason to believe any planes would be flying in the storm. Until Hansen landed at Funafuti late on the afternoon of the 25th, no one had any idea they were on the way.

**3.** There were low-frequency “A” and “N” radio ranges on Nanumea and Funafuti, but VMF-422’s pilots had not been informed which quadrants of the Nanumea range were A or N. With the help of these signals, a pilot could navigate between the two ranges until both signals were constant. But when only one was followed, it could result

in a 90-degree error.

**4.** The weather report given to McLaughlin prior to takeoff was at least 18 hours old.

**5.** The inquiry criticized McLaughlin’s decision to enter the storm, and to later turn command over to Jeans. The inquiry leaned toward blaming McLaughlin’s orders and actions instead of a lack of proper preparation for the mission by his commander.

The survivors of VMF-422 didn’t learn the inquiry’s findings until many months later. To this day, none of them have agreed with the official report.

General Merritt never took responsibility for the loss of six Marine aviators, instead shifting the blame to McLaughlin. Of course the major was not alive to speak in his own defense. Merritt received a letter of reprimand in his official file, which he took great pains to have expunged.

One result of the inquiry’s findings was a change in policy regarding long-distance over-water flights. Escorts became mandatory, and the pilots were given better training in radio navigation. But it took the loss of six good Marines to make that happen.

**M.C.**