

Remembering a Hero

Marine Corps Captain Edward Oliver Shaw – WWII Corsair Double Ace



Marine Captain Edward Oliver Shaw photos from Acepilots.com



Vought F4U-1 Corsair January 1943

This story is about a man, machine and moment and goes into detail about Captain Shaw, the Corsair aircraft at MCAS Mojave and the outcome when they came together. This story also goes further by exploring Captain Shaw's Corsair crash site in the Mojave Desert. This story was composed from press clippings that were collected by Captain Shaw's family, book "Hell Hawk Poems" by John Livingood, information from the official Navy accident report, and historical research.

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The Man- Edward Oliver Shaw and his exploits in the Pacific:

Edward Oliver Shaw was from Spokane Washington and he joined the Marine Corps in 1941. Edward Shaw is listed as having the 15th highest score of the Marine Aces of WWII. He had to his credit 13 enemy planes shot down in aerial combat in the South Pacific. Edward Shaw was a member of the Marine Corps famed "Hell Hawks", Fighter Squadron 213 (VMF-213). VMF-213 was formed July 1, 1942 at Marine Corps Air Station Ewa, Hawaii where they trained on the Grumman built F4F-4 Wildcat.



VMF-213 at MCAS Ewa, Hawaii, on February 13, 1943. A Grumman Wildcat is in the background. Edward Shaw is in the front row, 5th from right

The squadron departed MCAS Ewa on February 21, 1943 and arrived at Espiritu Santo on March 1, 1943. They received their first F4U Vought Corsairs while at Espiritu on March 11, 1943. After briefly training on the Corsairs, they then moved to Guadalcanal in April 1943. While in the Solomons, VMF-213 participated in actions against New Georgia and Kahali and flew throughout the Solomon Islands until December 1943.

Video Link: 10 minute film of VMF-213 at Henderson Field, April 1943.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DxJRV9Ae6LQ>



Major Gregory Weissenberger, Commanding Officer of VMF-213 getting into his F4U-1 Corsair with the engine running, Guadalcanal, Solomons, 1943. Photo from ww2dbase USMC via the Bobby Rocker Collection



Five days before the end of the VMF-213's first combat tour on May 3, 1943. A Chance-Vought F4U Corsair is in the background. Edward Shaw is standing in the second row 2nd from left.

The second combat tour for VMF 213 resulted in 62 Japanese planes shot down. Seven Marine aces were also made including Shaw. However, the second tour also took a severe toll, because six pilots lost their lives.



Lt Garrison with his VMF-213 F4U-1 #20 on Guadalcanal shortly before he was killed. Photo from usmilitariaforum.com via Jack Cook

Many of Shaw's missions were made during the Bougainville campaign and in covering the advance on New Georgia and Rendova Islands. Shaw said about one of his combat actions, "We were protecting our dive bombers in their runs on the target when the Zeros attacked." "One Jap made a pass at me and as he pulled off I got in a full deflection shot. My fire raked his plane's belly and must have punctured the fuel tanks. He fell off with the whole bottom in flames and went down burning. "There were individual dogfights all over the sky, and before the action ended, I managed to single out a couple of Jap float planes and send them down in flames."

By the end of VMF-213s third combat tour, another 35 Japanese plane were shot down, bringing the total of Japanese planes shot down to 104 for the Hell Hawks' three combat tours. Japanese aircraft were shot down at a rate of over 12 to 1. The squadron had seven aces during the three combat tours. Shaw added to his tally and was made a double ace with a total of 13 enemy planes shot down. Eight more pilots were also lost from his squadron during this time.



2Lt Harry S Huidekoper of VMF-213 poses aboard F4U-1 Corsair at Munda Airstrip, New Georgia, Solomon Islands, Sept 1943. Colorized photo courtesy of wwii-warbirds.tumblr.com

For his Guadalcanal based exploits Shaw received the Distinguished Flying Cross. His citation states, "On June 30 1943, Lieutenant Shaw was a member of a flight of fighter planes which attacked a formation of nine enemy float planes. In the action which followed, he personally sent two of them crashing into the sea. On July 15 his flight intercepted a force of eight enemy twin-engine bombers and in determined attacks he sent two of them down in flames. He then teamed up with another fighter to make a simultaneous attack on a third bomber to send it crashing into the sea. On July 17 he accounted for two more enemy fighter planes and again on the next day another Zero went down in flames before his guns. Thus in four separate engagements he destroyed eight enemy aircraft."



Marine F4U-1 Corsair on the Torokina Airstrip, Bougainville, Solomon Islands, early 1943. Source ww2dbaseUSMC via the Bobby Rocker Collection

A newspaper story about Lt. Shaw stated: "The number "13" held little fear for Lieutenant Edward O. Shaw. Lieutenant Shaw of VMF-213, returned from 13 thrill-packed months of overseas service and with a "bag" of 13 Japanese planes. Moreover, his was the 13th plane to contact the enemy over Bougainville's Japanese held Kahili harbor on July 16th, 1943 and in the ensuing encounter he sent three fighters spinning into the sea."

In all of his 300 hours of combat flying, Shaw only once got "a couple of holes in the wing tanks." This he modestly attributed them not so much to his flying ability, but more for the healthy regard in which Japanese pilots held the deadly Corsair fighter.



VMF-213 August/September 1943 at Espiritu Santos, shortly before the squadron deployed to Munda and Guadalcanal for their third combat tour from 9-6-43 to 10-14-43. The plane in the background is a Chance Vought F4U Corsair. The squadron received 17 replacement pilots for the third combat tour. Edward Shaw is in the back row, 8th from the left.

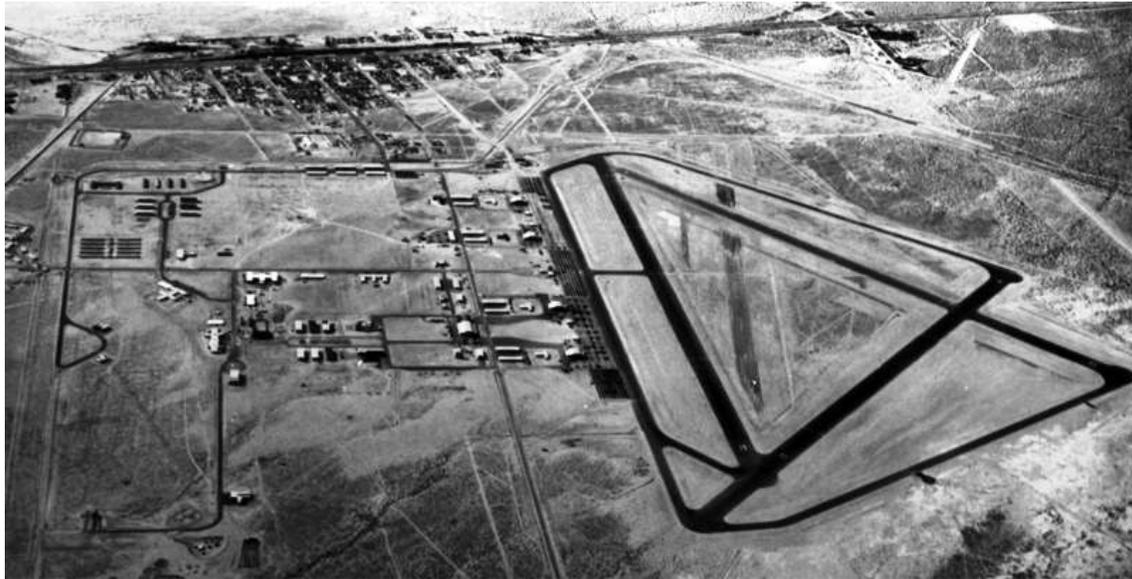


This picture of the "Survivors," was taken between Oct 14, 1943, and Nov 15, 1943, on Espiritu Santos. Front Row (left to right): George Defabio, John Luther Morgan, **Ed Shaw**, Leonard W. McCleary, Milton Vedder. Back row (left to right): Stirling Harrison, Ray Boag, Wilbur Thomas, and Dr. William Livingood.

Of the original officers and pilots of the VMF-213, only seven pilots, the intelligence officer, and flight surgeon, were the survivors – those that were with the squadron at the beginning of the first combat tour and continued through the completion of the third combat tour.

After three combat tours overseas, VMF-213 along with Shaw returned to the United States in December 1943 for reorganization and training at Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Mojave, California. Shaw was assigned as an instructor and test pilot at MCAS Mojave during that time. Hardly a year earlier, the officers of VMF-213 had been 2nd Lieutenants and the enlisted men had been PFCs and Corporals. Now, they were Captains and Senior NCOs.

The Machine - F4U-1 Corsair #17936 at MCAS Mojave:



MCAS Mojave overview November 1943

MCAS Mojave became one of the main training centers for Marine squadrons slated for assignment aboard aircraft carriers. The squadrons at MCAS Mojave flew all the Corsair variants including the F4U, FG, and F3A versions. Mojave was an excellent training facility. The desert location provided VFR flying conditions most of the time, non-congested airspace, and nearby bombing and gunnery ranges. VMF-213's stateside training at MCAS Mojave was rigorous. Squadron training included division tactics, navigation, bombing, gunnery and field carrier landing practice. Pilot training consisted of test hops, night flying, cross country, navigational hops, and a lot of ground support missions with the 5th Marines at Camp Pendleton. During June 1944, they set a new daily record for Marine West Coast fighter squadrons by flying 272.2 hours with the squadron's 21 Corsair aircraft, which averaged 13 hours each.



VMF 124 Corsair and mechanic at MCAS Mojave



Corsair coming into MCAS Mojave December 1944

Training at MCAS Mojave was not without costs. There were at least 144 Corsair training accidents related to MCAS Mojave during WWII. The Corsair accidents are broken down as follows: 65 FG-1 accidents, 63 F4U-1 accidents, and 16 F3A accidents all from Corsair aircraft assigned to MCAS Mojave.



F4U-1 #02721 from VMF-121, training accident at MCAS Mojave, Dec 26 1943

The Corsair fighters' complex design gave them superior performance, but it also gave the aircraft mechanics difficulties. Additionally, the fighters' long noses hampered visibility during landings, caused many crashes. The US Navy initially deemed the Corsair unsuitable for carrier operations and assigned them to the U.S. Marines. However, The Corsair was the first single seater fighter to reach 400 mph in level flight and it was also highly maneuverable. The high performances of the Corsair keep them in service.

F4U-1 Corsair #17936 was received at MCAS Mojave from MCAS El Centro California Feb 1st, 1944. On Feb 7th, 1944, F4U-1 Corsair #17936 was turned over on its back in a landing accident and was sent to SS-44 MCAS Mojave for extensive repairs including replacement of right and left wings, left aileron, right and left elevators, vertical stabilizer, cockpit enclosure and rudder. Furthermore, a new engine and propeller were installed on March 21st, 1944.

Accident report reference:

440321	F4U-1	17936	VMF-213	MCAS Mojave	ACC C	Thomas, Wilbur J.	USA	CA	MCAS Mojave	Test Flight after Overhaul
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After repairs and replacements, Corsair # 17936 was then “test hopped” by Captain Wilbur Thomas. During the test flight, in an unintentional high speed dive, the right and left horizontal stabilizers wrinkled and the outboard tab controls were carried away.

The aircraft was then returned to SS-44 at MCAS Mojave on March 27th 1944 for more repairs and replacements. Elevators, wings and stabilizer were replaced for the second time along with flap assemblies and the radio antenna mast. Repairs and replacements were completed April 22nd 1944 and the aircraft was again tested. During this test the engine ran rough, so it too was replaced for the second time along with adjustments to the controls that were made “for proper degree of throw”.

The aircraft was transferred from SS-44 back to the training squadron May 5th 1944. From May 6th thru July 28th the aircraft had no further major problems except for minor routine matters. The aircraft was returned to service, but it still exhibited a nasty surprise for pilots. It was noted that when the aircraft was in a pull out, and indicating over 320 knots, it would flip over to the right onto its back. This trouble was experienced previously on two other aircraft and was corrected by straightening the aileron wipers on those aircraft. The same correction was made on this aircraft to try and correct this problem. The Corsair aircraft in general was known for exhibiting “flip on the back behavior”.

The Moment - Captain Shaw and Corsair #17936

The inherent dangers of aviation can strike the most experienced and competent pilot. This was demonstrated by Captain Shaw on July 31, 1944 when he took F4U-1 Corsair number 17936 on a routine test hop to see if the straightening of the aileron wipers had

corrected the trouble with the aircraft flipping over onto its back. Captain Shaw had 164 hours in Corsairs during the last three months with a total of 1146 hours in the type. The total time on Corsair #17936 was 551 hours.



F4U Corsair over MCAS Mojave painting by Douglas Castleman

According to eyewitnesses and the official Navy accident report, Captain Shaw taxied onto the runway at 1200, was airborne at 1204, and crashed at 1218. The aircraft was last seen in a 45 degree dive towards the desert floor, at about 5000 feet with its nose up slightly rolled to the right, (same as the other two previously noted aircraft). The Corsair crashed in an inverted position about 1.5 miles from MCAS Mojave killing Captain Shaw, only 23 years old at the time of his death, and totally demolishing the Corsair aircraft.

Accident Report Reference:

440731	F4U-1	17936	VMF-813	MBDAG-44	MCAS Mojave	KC A	Shaw, Edward Oliver	USA	CA	MCAS Mojave, vic	Test Flight
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The accident investigation board determined that during the test hop Capt. Shaw put his airplane into a dive to get his speed up over 300 knots to see if the plane would roll over in the pull out, he then lost control and failed to recover from the dive. The failure to bail out was probably due to his continued efforts to regain control of the airplane until it was at too low an altitude. The board believed that by the time Shaw decided to bail out he had misjudged his altitude and the crash occurred before he could do so. The cause of the accident was blamed 100% on the flight control system. The accident investigation board recommended that further action be taken by Vought, the contractor, as this flight characteristic has been noticed on several occasions on other aircraft of this type.

Edward Oliver Shaw was deprived of the privilege of living out his years in peace and happiness. Shaw chose his own course in life and had gone out to meet destiny unafraid. He must be counted among those who made a difference. He joined the ranks of many other famous aces of WWII who survived combat only to die tragically in stateside aircraft accidents. Other famous aces that died in stateside accidents:

Richard Bong, 40 kills, died while testing P-80, Aug 6th, 1945

John Herbst, 18 kills, died because of a crash in a P-80, July 4th, 1946

Donald Aldritch, 20 kills, died in F4U crash, May 3rd, 1947

Raymond Littge, 23 kills, died in F-84 crash, May 20th, 1949

Don Gentile, 26 kills, died in T-33A crash, Jan 28th 1951

Raymond Wetmore, 22 kills, died in F-86A crash, Feb 14th 1951

George Welch, 16 kills, died while testing F-100, Oct 12th, 1954

Patrick D. Fleming, 19 kills, died in B-52 crash Feb 16th, 1956

In March 2017, I went in search of Captain Shaw's F4U Corsair crash site in the Mojave Desert more than 70 years after the event. I knew that there were hundreds of aircraft crash sites scattered across the Mojave Desert and finding a particular one was going to be difficult. I learned from newspaper accounts that Capt. Shaw crashed 1.5 miles from MCAS Mojave, but in which direction? Lucky for me, other wreck chasers had already located the crash site with help from the Navy. They gave me directions, so I headed out into the wide open desert on a cool windy day. Even with its estimated location, searching was required to discover the exact spot. The desert was unusually green from the past winters' rain as I began my search.



As I hiked across the desert I noticed a small indentation in the desert floor of about a foot in depth. The indentation was the impact crater from the crash that has filled in over the decades. Surrounding the “crater” were small pieces of aircraft wreckage.



I was able to identify and verify the wreckage as coming from a Vought Corsair by finding part numbers starting with “VS”.



Also discovered were parts with faded blue paint color. The paint color was consistent with the Corsair paint color at MCAS Mojave.



A surprising amount of small parts were located at the crash site. Parts found included, engine valve spring, instrument bezel, tire, Radio Dynamotor data tag, and miscellaneous airframe parts.



Before leaving the site, I paid my respects by leaving a small American flag. Edward Oliver Shaw is not forgotten!

This story is dedicated to the Marines of VMF-213. We also must remember not only those who lost their lives in service to our country, and the families and communities who lost these sons and daughters, but also those who lived through wars and have since carried the burdens of war for all the intervening decades.

Semper Fi