

# MARINE WINGS

by

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# CONTENTS

Preface .....	10
The Minnesota Marine Air Reserve.....	13
Introduction: There Was A Time .....	16
World War II.....	23
Korea.....	161
Between Wars .....	219
Training.....	275
Vietnam.....	299
Civilian Life .....	307
Author Backgrounds .....	325
Appendix A: Minnesota Marine Air Reserve Members .....	351
Appendix B: A Toast.....	354
Appendix C: Corsair Flight Checklists .....	355
Appendix D: Aeronautical Engineer’s View of Corsair.....	356
Glossary.....	365
Index.....	369

## **South Pacific Duck Rescue**

By Goodwin Luck

I arrived at Henderson Field, Guadalcanal, at dawn the first part of February 1943 via a SCAT C-47 with a marine crew. “Pistol Pete,” a Japanese firing a canon, started to shell the field so the SCAT crew quickly unloaded. They then loaded the wounded and took off without being hit.

I reported to General Francis Mulcahy who was ComAirSols (having just relieved General Geiger), and I was assigned as an operations officer on his staff. Our main mission was to control all air activity (American marines, navy and air corps, Australian and New Zealand). We scrambled fighters as required, organized bombing raids and fighter sweeps, set condition red and green as required, and acted on messages from coast watchers and from higher commands. A message from “Pearl” enabled our fighter command using P-38s to shoot down Admiral Yamamoto at Kahili, Bougainville. We also provided rescue missions, anti-sub patrol for the fleet, and night spotting for our cruisers and destroyers shelling enemy positions at Munda and Kolombangara using “black cat” PBVs. Although I was fortunate not to get hit by snipers, artillery fire, bombs, or antiaircraft, I did contract malaria and had to take Atabrine. Malaria, plus eating a regular diet of K-rations, caused my weight to drop to 121 pounds.

The next big mission was to take Munda airfield on New Georgia Island some 170 nautical miles northwest of Guadalcanal.

General Mulcahy was designated ComAir New Georgia and on June 30, 1943, with his ComAirSols staff, landed on the island of Rendova about 10 miles across the channel from Munda. A large

number of infantry troops landed at several beaches on New Georgia. They would surround Munda and force the enemy out. The command that planned this operation estimated it would be completed in about ten days and that ComAir New Georgia would then control all allied air operations.

Major V. A. Peterson, also an air operations officer, and I convinced the general that until Munda was taken and made operational, our fighters from Guadalcanal (170 miles away) would need to be rescued if downed in the Munda/Rendova area. I volunteered to fly a J2F Duck in the Munda/Rendova area because I had more J2F experience (obtained at NRAB Minneapolis) than other flight officers on the staff. We also obtained a high-speed boat to aid in rescues. The Duck was flown to Rendova on July 3 with about 30 F4U3s as cover. A marine sergeant and I took over the Duck and the navy pilot who flew it from Guadalcanal departed in a PBY. Unfortunately the J2F did not have an electric starter so we had to use the hand-cranked inertia starter. The rear cockpit machine gun was also missing; in fact, the aircraft had no weapons.

One of the biggest problems was to hide the Duck from the daily air attacks by the Japanese. A camouflage net, overhanging jungle trees, and frequent relocation of the J2F solved the problem. When needed, 100-octane fuel was obtained from PT boats in the area. On one occasion gasoline was pumped from a PT boat commanded by John Kennedy. This occurred shortly before his PT boat was demolished at night by a Japanese destroyer.

Instead of 10 days it took about 44 days to capture Munda Airfield. General Mulcahy wanted to fly the first American aircraft to land on Munda. However, on August 14, when the field was declared secure, he requested that I fly him to Munda from Rendova Harbor in the Duck after I first checked the condition of the field. It was in poor condition, being narrow, short, and peppered with bomb craters;

## *World War II*



The J2F Duck

however, I was able to land on it. When I reported the condition of the field to the General he said, “Luck, you fly me in.” And that’s what I did.

The Japanese also had an airfield at Vila on the island of Kolombangara some 16 miles northwest of Munda. Vila was kept neutralized by marine and navy aircraft from Guadalcanal and the Russell Islands. On the morning of August 16, Major Turner landed his TBF on Munda, which was open for emergency landings only. He reported to me and Major Peterson that on the pullout of his bombing run on Vila he noticed someone waving from the shore of Arundel Island. He thought the person might be a downed marine or navy airman. Several were missing from previous bombing runs on Vila.

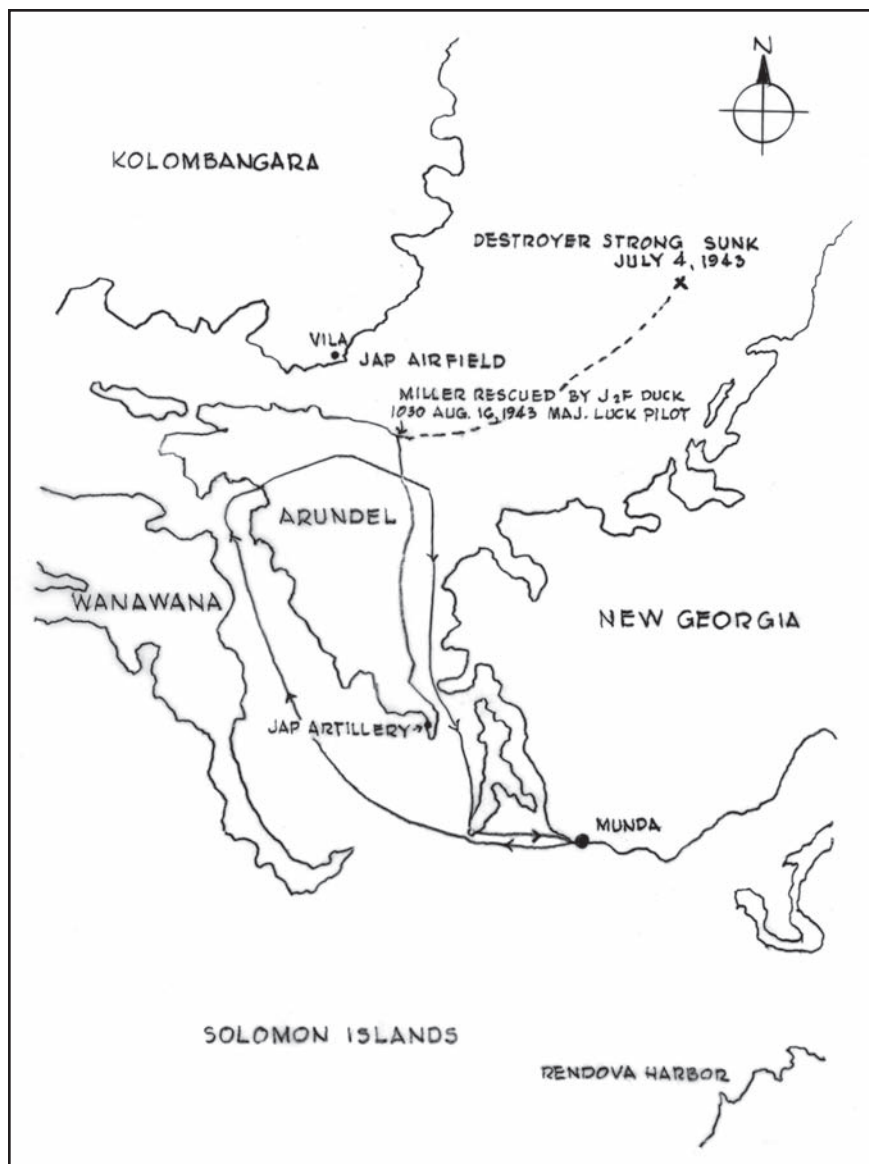
We decided that the person waving should be rescued as soon as possible. Major Peterson and Sergeant Happer volunteered to fly with me in the Duck on this extremely risky mission. We had an inflatable rubber raft in the Duck but the CO<sub>2</sub> cartridges had been used when I rowed the general to the plane at Rendova. A bicycle-type tire pump was located which would do the job. The plan was to fly low over the water around the west side of Arundel Island, turn

east across Arundel and fly very close to the tops of the trees of the jungle. The Japanese floatplanes that operated frequently from the channel between Arundel and Kolombangara sounded like the Duck when the propeller was set in low pitch. To make the enemy think the airplane they heard was one of their floatplanes, I put the Duck's propeller in low pitch.

Major Turner's instructions were accurate because when we cleared the jungle there was a man on a coral reef near shore waving. I made a short landing, made a turn towards shore, got as close to shore as the coral permitted, cut the engine and dropped anchor. The man on shore then disappeared into the jungle. We thought this was a trap; however, Major Peterson said he didn't think so because the man had red hair and a red beard, so the major continued to pump up the raft.

The man returned to the shore carrying some assorted Japanese items. Major Peterson hurriedly paddled him out to the Duck. Sergeant Happer and I cranked the starter by hand, being extra careful not to drop the crank in the ocean. When I started taxiing, the anchor caught in the coral. I had a six-inch hunting knife, which most pilots carried in case the seat life raft inflated accidentally and pushed the control forward, thereby nosing the aircraft down. Sergeant Happer cut the anchor rope with my knife, permitting me to takeoff and return to Munda. Fortunately I parked in a Japanese built revetment because the Japanese started to shell the field and surrounding area with artillery. One or more shells hit near the Duck, putting many holes in it from shrapnel and pieces of coral. The artillery projectiles were coming from the southwest tip of Arundel Island as a complete surprise to us. We had marine SBDs from Guadalcanal bomb the Japanese guns and the shooting stopped. Apparently they became angry to see a small U.S. aircraft land and takeoff in their front yard and they foolishly revealed the position of their big guns.

## World War II

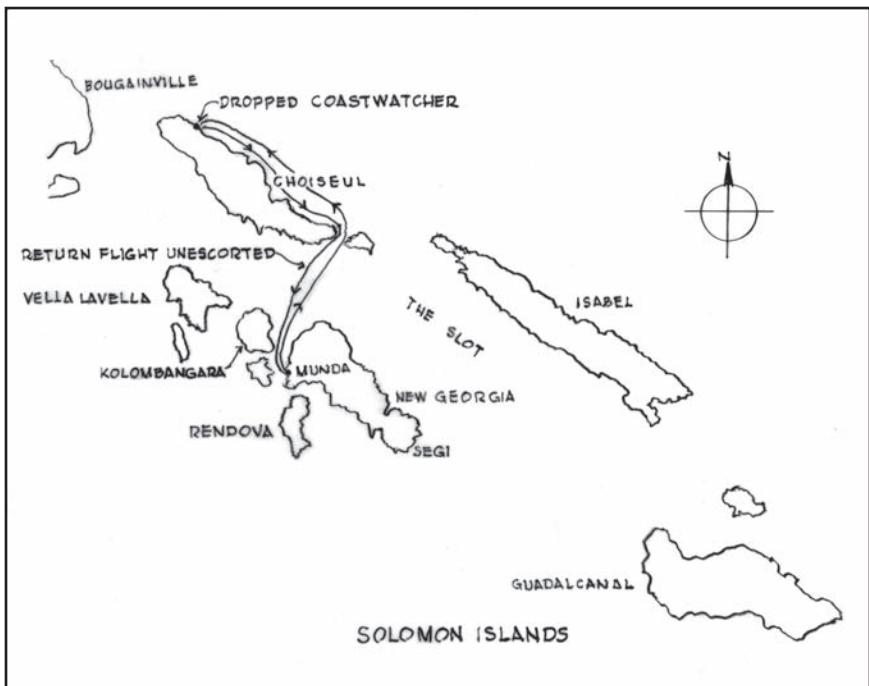


The person we rescued turned out to be Lieutenant Hugh B. Miller. He was on the destroyer USS *Strong* when it was sunk by Japanese torpedoes on July 4, 1943. He drifted ashore on Arundel Island and survived until rescued. His story is covered in the November 8, 1943,

## MARINE WINGS

issue of *Life* magazine and is also included in *The Best 100 True Stories of World War II*. Several other publications cover Miller's story but are not accurate. In January 1957, Miller, Luck, Peterson, Happer and others appeared on the television program "This Is Your Life, Lieutenant Hugh B. Miller." Ronald Reagan was the host.

On September 27, 1943, with allied landings scheduled for the island of Bougainville, I flew coast watcher Evans and three of his native scouts to the northeast shore of the island of Choiseul. Evans was to observe Japanese air and ship operations around the Shortland Islands and Bougainville. The natives on Choiseul were known to have been headhunters and possible cannibals; however, they apparently were on our side since they had a smoky fire on the beach as a signal that a landing was okay.



## *World War II*

I anchored off shore and some natives in large canoes paddled out to the Duck to pick up Evans, his helpers, and supplies. The native leader wanted to shake hands with me. I did not hesitate when I noted several shrunken heads around his neck. Sergeant Happer and I hand-cranked the starter to get out of there but the engine failed to start. Our escort of some 18 F4Us got low on fuel and had to wave goodbye. Sinking the Duck was an option, but one more try and the R1820 Wright engine came to life. We took off flying low to stay out of radar. I observed many large crocodiles sunning themselves on the mangrove/coral shore of Choiseul. We were glad to get back to Munda.

The following letter was sent a few months after the rescue.

September 2, 1943

Dear Mrs. Luck:

I am a Lieutenant in the Naval Reserve and I was an officer on a destroyer which was sunk in Jap waters on the night of July 4, 1943, the U.S.S. Strong. I had the misfortune to drift ashore behind the Jap lines on Arundel Island between the north end of New Georgia Island and Kolombangara Island and I managed to live there until the 16th of August.

On that morning I attracted the attention of a low flying torpedo plane piloted by a marine first lieutenant—he flew over to Munda Airfield, which we had occupied only a few days before, and reported it to marine fighter headquarters.

Major Vernon A. Peterson, Master Sgt. John J. Happer, and your Major Goodwin R. Luck, all in headquarters, volunteered to get me. I was several miles behind the Jap lines and there were Jap planes in the air at the time—despite this and despite the fact that they did not know whether I

## MARINE WINGS

was an apprentice seaman or an officer, or what, this small expedition set out without fighter plane coverage to get me—all they knew was that I was an American in a dangerous spot and in trouble. They flew a small, slow, amphibious plane we call a “Duck”; in order to land on the water in front of me, they were forced to circle within gun range of the very powerful position the Japanese have at Villa Plantation on Kolombangara Island—which they did—and then lit in front of me and calmly inflated a boat, came ashore and got me. Because they could see that I was weak, they would not allow me to cover the last 30 yards of water, which would have been dangerous for me, but made me wait until they could come and get me—at all times considering only my safety while they risked their own skins—and they flew me out to Munda.

The appreciation which I feel toward them for saving my life cannot be put into words, but more important than that is the purely impersonal courage and daring which they displayed and which, surely, is the reason why a fighting marine is superior to any other fighting man alive. Though one can never tell, I sincerely hope that they will be decorated for this act of bravery.

Your Major Luck piloted the plane. When I last saw him on August 18, I promised to wire a message to you when I reached the States—it appears that I will be a month or so getting back and that is the reason I am writing. He was in the best of health and spirits when I left Munda.

You may be perfectly sure that the Luck family may feel free to call on me at any time for anything. I can always be reached through my home address of 1925 8th St., Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

Sincerely,  
Hugh Barr Miller, Jr.