

NIGHTFIGHTER

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RADAR INTERCEPT KILLER

BY MARK A. MAGRUDER,
SON OF WWII COL. MARION MILTON
"BLACK MAC" MAGRUDER, USMC



PELICAN PUBLISHING COMPANY

GRETNA 2012

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Magruder, Mark A.

Nightfighter : radar intercept killer / by Mark A. Magruder.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-4556-1531-5 (hbk. : alk. paper) -- ISBN 978-1-4556-1532-2 (e-book)

1. Macgruder, Marion M. 2. United States. Marine Night Fighter Squadron 533--Biography. 3. United States. Marine Corps.--Officers--Biography. 4. World War, 1939-1945--Aerial operations, American. 5. World War, 1939-1945--Campaigns--Japan--Okinawa Island. 6. Night fighter planes--History--20th century. 7. Night flying--History--20th century. 8. Fighter pilots--United States--Biography. 9. World War, 1939-1945--Regimental histories--United States. I. Title.

D790.473533rd .D65 2012

940.54'2528--dc23

2011039723

Nightfighter (nīt'fī't-ər) *n. Military.* **1.** Fighter pilot specializing in radar intercept night warfare: a combatant. **2.** A pugnacious, unyielding, determined aviator: highly skilled with extraordinary physical, mental and emotional aptitudes suited for this unique combat environment.

night fighter (nīt'fī't-ər) *n. Military.* A fast, maneuverable combat aircraft, purpose built or specifically modified to engage enemy aircraft for the period between sunset and sunrise; especially, the hours of darkness—also well suited for night interdiction.



Printed in the United States of America
Published by Pelican Publishing Company, Inc.
1000 Burmaster Street, Gretna, Louisiana 70053



*Colonel Marion M. "Black Mac" Magruder, USMC
Commanding Officer, VMF(N) 533, Black Mac's Killers
Eniwetok Atoll 1944*

Nightfighter: Radar Intercept Killer was written to preserve and honor the legacy of my father and those brave men who served with him. Like countless American Patriots before, and so many after, they conquered their fear risking everything to protect this great country from the daemons of anarchy. This work is dedicated to my children Lisa and Michael—I want them to know how special their grandfather was—far beyond being “granddad.” Most significantly, without the consummate love and unwavering support of Jodi, none of this would have been possible.

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Note to the Reader about *Nightfighter: Radar Intercept Killer*

Under the guise of political correctness addressing the dynamics of an ever changing world order, social revisionists have conspired to denude the context and ferocity of historical events associated with World War II in order to diminish the stark reality of the deeds, consequences, and horror of what transpired. This dishonors the memory of all involved.

War by definition is the most profane and reprehensible act any person can inflict upon another person.

Nightfighter: Radar Intercept Killer is distinctive among non-fiction narratives in that it contains characteristics generally associated with the novel format. Most factual war accounts are written in third party context; the visceral savagery of the unfolding events having disappeared along with the participants with very little remaining of the life and death bestiality of those actions. Over a time frame of many years, I had the unique opportunity of being “a fly on the wall” listening unobtrusively in the background when these warriors would get together and recount their shared experiences in the privacy of my father’s home, with the brutal honesty of how it was for them. Recounting memories never revealed to the outside world, they exposed their fears, frustration, anger, reactions, and interactions—just as they had encountered them.

The dialogues and expressed thoughts are their accounts—in a number of instances toned down to facilitate as wide a range of sensitivity as prudently possible in conveying the audacity of the moment. *Nightfighter: Radar Intercept Killer* portrays the unfolding drama in a way that includes the reader in the virulence, intensity, desperation, and determination of mortal men performing heroic actions against horrific odds.

If we do not study the past and heed its lessons . . . we are destined to repeat them.

Mark A. Magruder

Introduction

In the black foreboding abyss of eternal night, Japanese Imperial Air Forces dominated the night skies throughout WWII sneaking in under cover of darkness to ply their clandestine tirade of death. Against this onslaught was the solitary Nightfighter. In the most difficult of circumstances this warrior, rising in an aircraft to defend his comrades, constantly teetered on the verge of disaster. Cold and all alone, most often unable to distinguish anything with his sight, he was locked within the confines of a cramped cockpit for endless hours having to totally trust the instruments, in spite of what his mind and body screamed at him.

His life literally depended upon the invisible link the radio provided. Once he left the vicinity of the base, he lost all sense of the location from whence he had come. Without a “Crystal Gazer” on the other end of the microphone guiding him with radar, it was impracticable to find the enemy. In the vast nothingness of the dark, endless ocean, only his partner manning the radarscope could guide him safely back to the airfield.

Electrical failures were often catastrophic. If the electronic signal the IFF (Identification, Friend or Foe) generated was to malfunction, other patrolling night fighters hunted him down as a “bogey.” He had to remain vigilant to dodge incessant attacks from “friendly” fire erupting in the night skies around him.

The rage of Mother Nature constantly pummeled the aircraft as he struggled to stay on course. Inevitable aircraft defugalties had to be quickly identified and adjusted, for despite the fact the pilot was all but blind, only a few precious moments separated the pilot from destruction. Engine trouble usually proved to be fatal when patrolling in a single engine fighter. He constantly withstood the machinations of fear: “Does the radio still work . . . it seems like it’s been too long since my last contact . . . did the engine just begin to miss . . . Oh no . . . is it my imagination . . . is there someone out there closing in to attack?”

Even in the best of circumstances it was nearly impossible to arrive on a

convergent course with two invisible maneuvering bullets. Generally, there was just a single opportunity to make this tenuous intercept. In the end the Nightfighter had to be vectored near enough for the on-board radar, with just a few miles range, to pick up the fleeting bandit. He had to somehow manage to fly along in close proximity of the unidentified aircraft until he could declare the contact an enemy target. If he had the misfortune of being recognized before he could unleash his weapons, the Nightfighter was immediately exposed to the withering firepower of the enemy gunners. Once the attack commenced, it was a gunfight to the end.

A Nightfighter in the Second World War required special skills physically, mentally, and emotionally. Very few fighter pilots had the necessary aptitude for the task. This made the achievements of Col. Marion M. "Black Mac" Magruder, USMC, and his Squadron VMF(N)533, Black Mac's Killers, so extraordinary. During a critical time for America, he not only accomplished what the "experts" believed could not be done, but Magruder and his squadron also broke the records in the Pacific Theatre for night kills. Under the most extreme of circumstances, this Marine aviator, with a skeleton complement of men, set the standard for excellence. *Nightfighter: Radar Intercept Killer* is the true account of Marion Milton Magruder: husband, father, Marine . . . Nightfighter.

Prologue

OPERATION ICEBERG: The Battle for Okinawa

Largest Campaign of the Pacific War.

Strategically critical for the Japanese Military, Okinawa was only 350 miles from Kyushu, southernmost home Island of Japan. Japanese Imperial Order 82: Garrison will fight to the death.

Invasion Date: 1 April 1945—Easter Sunday—Code name: Love Day. Lt. Col. Marion M. “Black Mac” Magruder, USMC, the senior night fighting expert in the Pacific Theatre, was in command of VMF(N)533, Black Mac’s Killers, when the Okinawa Campaign commenced. Deployed on Engebi in the Marshall Islands chain, the squadron had been providing night defense protection for the past year. With their combat tour winding down, they prepared to return to the United States for a well-earned rest and refit.

Several weeks into “Operation Iceberg,” field commanders bitterly complained that the night fighter squadrons attached to the Okinawa Campaign were not up to the job. Japanese Imperial Air Forces for all intents and purposes controlled the night skies, wreaking havoc on U.S. combat actions.

Exasperated, Vice Adm. R. Kelly Turner, invasion force commander, summoned Magruder to Pearl Harbor for a crisis briefing on the situation.

“Nightfighters are no damn good,” the admiral declared.

“You give me ten days and I’ll show you,” Magruder snapped back.

Black Mac received emergency orders to deploy to Okinawa. On three days notice and with a skeleton crew, Magruder led his fifteen Hellcats on the longest over-water flight of single engine fighters in the war, just to get into the fight. They arrived in Theatre the afternoon of 10 May 1945. Within thirty-six hours, 533 was set up and prepared for combat operations, commencing Night Combat Air Patrols (NCAP). True to his word, Black Mac’s Killers rapidly altered the complexion of night fighting defenses.

16 May 1945, 01:30 hours: The battle for Okinawa has raged for forty-five

days and nights. Location: Yontan Field, Okinawa Gunto. Okinawa, the largest of the Ryuku Islands chain, is in a sub-tropical climate with heavy rainfall, monsoon tidal surges, and ferocious typhoons between May and November. That spring's weather pattern generated the most severe storm conditions in several hundred years. Heavy cloud cover, intermittent squalls, and biting wind gusts portended another arduous mission. The cramped confines of 533's command shack exuded the anxious odors of combat.

Black Mac proceeded through the preflight briefing with his pilots going up on the late night shift when all hell summarily erupted.

"Hit the trenches, men!" Magruder exclaimed.

Without warning, bombs detonated with ear-shattering concussions pummeling throughout the area. The pilots scrambled out of the Ops Hut, lunging head first into the split trenches nearby. The raid subsided after several minutes of deadly destruction. None of the pilots were injured.

The "Skipper" reconvened the briefing: "This crap has got to stop and we damn well will fix this problem. Now, pay attention and don't let me down."

VMF(N)533 filled, either the first and third, or second and fourth patrol periods covering the night on a rotating basis with the other night fighter squadron at Yontan. Six Scrapppers (call sign of 533) had already performed the second shift that evening. In the dimly lit Ops Hut, Magruder, Scrapper 1, imparted the latest combat information, weather forecast, emergency frequencies, and special communication codes designated for this mission. The "Skipper" would lead five Scrapppers into the air on this patrol. The Air Combat Arena was sectioned off into an imaginary pie shape with six slices, one night fighter to cover each segment. The men listened intently to every word the CO had to say. Without further comments or questions, Black Mac concluded the brief with his ever-familiar "good hunting."

The Scrapppers quietly made mental preparations for what lay ahead while they suited up for the mission. The "Skipper" put on the squadron's custom survival vest with shoulder holster and emergency gear. He strapped on his .38 Smith & Wesson revolver wrapped in a watertight cover in case he ditched at sea and then donned the yellow May West life vest. The CO's parachute harness was already placed in his trusty Hellcat, "Little Mac" (named after his first son). Black Mac carried a chart holder to strap on top of his right thigh once situated in the Grumman. The lieutenant colonel compromised on attire because of the warm temperatures at lower elevations. Night intercepts could start anywhere and lead everywhere during a chase. Magruder slipped on his flight headdress with OX mask. Because using full time oxygen dried his mouth, the CO applied lip balm. A pair of leather gloves clasped loosely in his left hand would mitigate the bitter cold

at high altitude. When everyone was ready, the “Skipper” led the way from the Operations Hut to the flight line.

Tech. Sgt. “Big Joe” Rosenberger, Black Mac’s plane captain, was waiting by the F6F-5(N) for any last minute instructions and to assist the “Skipper” getting ready for take-off. After carefully pre-flighting the night fighter, Lieutenant Colonel Magruder climbed aboard and wriggled into the parachute harness, creating a tolerable position on the lumpy parachute, which was his seat cushion for the next number of hours in the cramped confines of the cockpit. The black of night was little more than a nuisance as he got situated; he had long ago memorized by touch the locations of everything in the Hellcat. He deftly continued preparations for takeoff. Black Mac plugged in the radio com cord and the OX line and activated the oxygen system. The CO fastened the clipboard containing notes for this mission on top of his right leg. He slipped into those well worn leather gloves, scanned the cockpit to make sure everything was in order, and then nodded to his plane captain: he was ready. Rosenberger hopped off the back of the wing onto the tarmac. Magruder called out “Clear” and got a return “Clear” from the tech sergeant.

Setting the throttle and mixture control to rich, he called out “Contact” and proceeded to activate the starter cartridge. With a loud “wham,” the massive three-bladed Hamilton Standard propeller immediately cranked over. After several stuttered revolutions, the powerful R2800 Radial engine responded with a sudden explosion of ignited fuel, belching forth a cloud of blue-grey smoke. The hushed solemnity of the moment was shattered. The other Scrapers fired up their engines, creating a raucous cacophony of whirling pandemonium. After several deep breaths to settle into his game face, Black Mac snugly strapped the OX mask to his face and was ready to challenge the night.

Magruder waited several minutes for the oil temp needle to respond. He could feel the engine warm and slightly leaned the fuel mixture. In the dim glow the instruments provided, he adroitly activated switches and checked the circuit breakers to make sure they were properly set. He cycled the Magnetos and brought the radio on line, switched on the IFF, and calibrated the altimeter. The stick was exercised while his feet moved the rudders to make sure they functioned properly. He set the flaps. The cowling vents were opened to keep the engine temperature in check while the powerful fighter prepared for take-off. Black Mac was satisfied that “Little Mac” was “good to go” for the mission. Scrapper 1 communicated with the other Scrapers to confirm they were ready.

Black Mac radioed the tower, “Yontan Tower, Scrapper 1 with five Scrapers . . . request permission to taxi and take-off.”

Yontan Tower responded, “Roger, Scrapper 1. You are clear to taxi on runway ‘One Seven’ . . . then advise.”

Scrapper 1, "Roger that."

Magruder looked to his left where his plane captain was standing and exchanged salutes. "Big Joe" immediately ordered the ground crew to remove the chocks from the wheels. Rosenberger motioned his arm forward with a red flashlight, signaling it was OK to depart the flight line. Scrapper 1 quickly responded with the throttle, at the same time releasing the brakes. The boisterous Hellcat lurched forward. Magruder wheeled sharply away down the taxiway. The other five Scrapers followed closely behind.

Scrapper 1 reached the end of the taxiway and paused as instructed. He radioed Yontan Tower to inform them six Scrapers were holding at the end of the runway. Awaiting a response, he ran up the engine, checked the Magnetos once again, closed the cowl vents, double checked the flaps were set, and mentally confirmed he was running on the main internal fuel tank.

Yontan Tower replied, "Scrapper 1, 'Condition Yellow' (enemy aircraft in region) . . . Wind, Northwest at 18 . . . Climb to 'Angels 7' on course 'Two Six Five' . . . contact Delegate . . . you are cleared for take-off."

Black Mac answered, "Roger, wind Northwest 'One Eight,' 'Angels 7' on course 'Two Six Five' . . . Delegate . . . Out."

The lieutenant colonel released the brakes and wheeled the menacing "Cat" onto the end of the runway, whereupon he locked the rear wheel in place. Before he applied full power, there was a final deep breath and his combat ritual. Extending his right hand to the top of the instrument panel, he gently touched the St. Christopher's medal mounted long ago and softly requested God to bless him.

He followed in a low voice, "Please help me find the enemy . . . and do my job."

Scrapper 1 firmly grasped the stick in his right hand while advancing to full throttle with his left, unleashing a raging stampede of power. The craft vibrated profusely from the massive energy unsheathed. The Hellcat transformed into a snarling beast racing along the tarmac. Magruder sensed the adrenaline pulsating through his body. What a rush, he thought. In short order, the night fighter popped the rear wheel from the ground as it continued to aggressively multiply speed. The roaring feline suddenly sprang headlong into the night. Black Mac quickly retracted the wheels and flaps and then closed the canopy. The fighter raced rapidly away from Yontan Field into the thick, dark, rain-choked clouds.

The faint glow of the gauges revealed Scrapper 1 was on course "Two Six Five" approaching "Angels 7." The potent Grumman continued to plow through the black abyss. Glancing at his clipboard, Magruder changed to tonight's frequency for "Delegate."

He cued the mic, "'Delegate' . . . this is Scrapper 1 . . . 'Angels 7' . . . on course 'Two Six Five' . . . over."

Momentarily, “Delegate” responded, “Scrapper 1, this is ‘Delegate.’ I have you identified. Change course to ‘Two Niner Zero’ . . . climb to ‘Angels 16’ . . . contact Ringtail.”

“‘Delegate’ . . . this is Scrapper 1 . . . course ‘Two Niner Zero’ . . . ‘Angels One Six’ . . . Ringtail . . . Roger . . . Out,” he methodically replied.

Meanwhile at Yontan Field, one at a time the remaining five Scrapers radioed the tower for clearance and flight instructions. Departing the aerodrome, each Nightfighter switched frequency to “Delegate” and was assigned to one of the remaining Ground Control Intercept (GCI) stations: Poison, Arsenic, Timothy, Bolo, or Raccoon.

While climbing to his prescribed coordinates, Black Mac reflected briefly on the reason behind the elaborate radio frequency changes he worked out with the communications network prior to each night’s missions. Even with all the daily frequency changes and GCI handoffs, the Japs were able to successfully eavesdrop way too often. However, he reasoned the enemy listening posts had to be challenged with all the switching. Scrapper 1 knew it was difficult for the Nips to keep up and at the same time decipher actionable Intel for their attacking raiders to effectively utilize. With six Nightfighters simultaneously switching frequencies all over the dial, he noted, matching a particular GCI operator and Nightfighter to a specific quadrant had to be tricky. With all this chatter, the real time benefit from this information would be limited since their aircrafts were already well into their mission and very restricted on what they would be able to do to quickly alter course. Only an unarmed, specially equipped “heckler” aircraft crammed full of radios and operators orbiting near the battle zone had any real chance of causing trouble. Besides intelligence gathering duties by zeroing in on the GCI team in close proximity and counter-maneuvering that Scrapper’s radio instructions, the Nip would attempt to lure the Nightfighter out of his sector so that other attacking “bogeys” could possibly slip past. Black Mac was well aware this was a “hide and seek” game—with deadly ramifications for anyone getting caught. Nodding in approval, the lieutenant colonel concluded that this unwieldy exercise was definitely worth the hassle.

Scrapper 1 observed the compass and altimeter maneuvering toward the assigned coordinates, climbing onward through the ooze. At “Angels 15,” the F6F-5(N) managed to momentarily break free of the morass. Massive thunderheads surrounded him, towering many thousands of feet into the infinite. The lieutenant colonel reluctantly accepted the fact he would be punching holes through these violent storm fronts all night.

Scrapper 1 reached altitude, changed frequency to Ringtail as instructed, and radioed, “Ringtail . . . this is Scrapper 1 . . . Over.”

Ringtail swiftly came on line, "Scrapper 1 . . . this is Ringtail . . . I have you on my scope . . . Change course to 'Two Three Five' and climb to 'Angels 18' . . . over."

"Ringtail . . . Roger . . . 'Two Three Five,' 'Angels One Eight' . . . Bring me some business," he responded.

Black Mac settled in "On Station," test-firing his machine guns to make sure they did not freeze up while climbing into the cold rarified air of higher altitudes. A quick burst proved they were ready for action. He continued to track onward through the foreboding night sky in a long oval pattern, operating within the imaginary boundaries of his patrol sector. Every half hour or so, Ringtail GCI called for a radio check or vector updates. The "Skipper" required no superfluous contact. It crossed his mind how many pilots cling to their radio "life line" in the desolate isolation of the dark unknown.

Rank had its privilege. As CO, Magruder exercised the prerogative of selecting the quadrant he wanted. While he had been thwarted thus far, this warrior realized it was only a matter of time; the squadron had only been flying missions for three nights. Scrapper 1 was well prepared for the call that there was a "customer" for him, but the shift disappointingly droned on.

A little past 03:00 hours, 1st Lt. R.W. Wilhide, orbiting near Kume Shima under control of Poison, received the news of a "customer" 8 miles and closing at 12,500 feet. Maintaining 200 knots, Scrapper 4 climbed steadily from 11,000 feet, establishing radar contact at 2½ miles. The target made three turns to starboard, altering course from 030 degrees to 260 degrees. Wilhide was able to close on the contact and follow these turns on his scope. He made visual from 100 feet below the "bogey," identifying the Jap by its silhouette against the stars as a "Betty" bomber. He immediately chopped the throttle, pulling astern and level with the intruder on the enemy's five o'clock position. He fought the excitement, carefully squeezing off a two-second burst from the six .50 cal machine guns mounted in the wings of the Hellcat. The moment was surreal for him. It seemed as though the action was unfolding in slow motion. "Zero Four" witnessed the sparkles dancing along the engine and wing root of the "Betty." Flames instantly erupted. Wilhide quickly crossed to port and pounded the left engine with an additional burst. "This S-O-B isn't going to get away," he declared.

Enemy gunners wildly sprayed the night with belligerent defensive fire. Scrapper 4 was amazed how quickly the bomber deflagrated into a profuse mass of pyrotechnics, rolling into a 60 degree dive. Wilhide tucked in closely behind, so close he was able to witness men struggling within the stricken bomber. Descending through Angels 7, "Zero Four" was about to make a

third run on the Jap when a violent explosion startled him. First Lieutenant Wilhide cranked hard to starboard to avoid what he could of the massive debris field pelting the Hellcat.

Scrapper 4 excitedly radioed Poison, "Splash one 'Betty!'"

"Black Mac's Killers has scored their first kill," Poison eagerly answered.

Elsewhere, 1st Lt. A.F. Branham, Scrapper 22, damaged and probably destroyed a "Francis," but it could not be verified. The flaming enemy aircraft was able to escape into dense clouds. "Two Two" was unable to reestablish contact. It was listed as a "probable," but everyone knew it went down. It was just a case of bad luck for the lieutenant.

At the conclusion of Black Mac's patrol in the predawn early morning haze, the lieutenant colonel was vectored to attack a Japanese column on the march. The 6th Division Marines detected enemy units reinforcing positions in the vicinity of Sugar Loaf Hill. Magruder was cognizant that the Japanese Army compelled fleeing civilians to move along within their ranks in order to shield their forces and possibly camouflage their activities all together. The coordinates were duly scribed on his map.

Scrapper 1 oriented the fighter for a head on attack and dropped down on the deck to mask his approach. Racing along at tree top level, he crested the ridge indicated on the map. Without warning, Magruder was suddenly upon the column. Even in the dim haze of dawn he could identify the mix of civilians and military. There was no choice; the lieutenant colonel immediately unleashed the six .50's in a sustained burst along the length of the column. The "Wicked Cat" shuddered from the high rate of fire. The targets were frozen in place. The attack was devastating. Black Mac was flying so fast and low that the impacting rounds disintegrated the victims, spewing limbs and body parts above the wings as he decimated their ranks.

Just past the rear of the formation, Magruder jerked the stick hard back, kicking firm left rudder to abruptly perform a climbing turn reversing direction. Quickly accelerating back down on the deck to press a follow on attack from back to front, he grimly determined it would not be necessary. There was no movement and nothing left to destroy. The mix of armor piercing and ball and incendiary rounds left a mass of indistinguishable goo in its wake. Glancing at the wings, Scrapper 1 could see entrails of sinuous tissue and blood streaming across the surface. He could not vacate the area quickly enough.

Climbing away into the brightening dawn, Lieutenant Colonel Magruder determined to fill his mind with anything but that grizzly sight. Black Mac rapidly succumbed to the magical warmth of the sunrise. Somehow the majesty of Mother Nature mesmerized his awareness. Scrapper 1 was

willingly drawn into the cleansing power of the infinite—the Hellcat cruising peacefully along. This warrior mused about how he came to be in this place in the deadly skies above Okinawa. His “being” transcended into the renewing expectations of daybreak, a relaxed “state” where time and distance merged. Mac’s persona disintegrated into a dream-like consciousness back to May 22, 1936: the University of Kentucky ROTC Field Day Graduation Exercises.