

# VF-11/111 'Sundowners'

1942–95



Barrett Tillman with Henk van der Lugt

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Series editor Tony Holmes

# CONTENTS

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CHAPTER ONE  
**GUADALCANAL 6**

---

CHAPTER TWO  
**WITH THE FAST CARRIERS 26**

---

CHAPTER THREE  
**THE JET AGE 59**

---

CHAPTER FOUR  
**VIETNAM 80**

---

CHAPTER FIVE  
**POST-VIETNAM ERA 111**

---

**APPENDICES 121**  
COLOUR PLATES COMMENTARY 123  
BIBLIOGRAPHY 127

---

**INDEX 128**

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# GUADALCANAL

August 1942 was a noteworthy month in the history of World War 2. In the Mediterranean, U-boats ravaged a British convoy bound for Malta, and the *Afrika Korps* was repulsed at Alam Halfa, ending the First Battle of El Alamein. In Europe, the fledgling Eighth Air Force flew its first missions over Occupied France, while an Anglo-Canadian force launched a large-scale raid against Dieppe. In Moscow, Soviet dictator Josef Stalin and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill – philosophical enemies to the bone – met to plot strategy against Adolf Hitler. Of lasting importance in the Pacific was the 7 August amphibious landing at Guadalcanal, a previously obscure island in the Solomons chain. The 1st Marine Division's tenuous beachhead represented the first US offensive of the war, initiating a six-month bloodletting that would prove crucial in the defeat of Imperial Japan.

That same week a new fighter squadron was being formed at San Diego's North Island Naval Air Station (NAS). Establishing a new unit was nothing unusual at the time, as it was a hectic expansion period for the US Navy. Since the Battle of the Coral Sea in May, America had lost the aircraft carriers USS *Lexington* (CV-2) and USS *Yorktown* (CV-5), putting most of their aviators ashore for reassignment.

North Island's new fighter squadron was designated VF-11, the fourth 'FitRon' established in 1942. However, the unit's date of origin has been erroneously reported for over half a century. For obscure reasons the US Navy still officially lists VF-11's establishment date as 10 October 1942. The latter likely reflects the date that the original replacement air group became a fleet unit – Carrier Air Group (CAG) 11. In any case, the squadron that became the 'Sundowners' definitely existed prior to October. The July report for location of naval aircraft shows CAG-11 'organising at San Diego'. By 27 August the roster was full with 76 aircraft, including 27 fighters, 30 dive-bombers and 19 torpedo-bombers. The earliest known logbook for the original VF-11 cadre shows the squadron generating flights in early August.

'Fighting 11' was the recipient of several displaced pilots, including its commanding officer, Lt Cdr Charles R Fenton. A 35-year-old native of Annapolis, Maryland, Fenton had graduated from the US Naval Academy (USNA) in 1929, ranking 185th of 240. Previously, he was commanding officer of VF-42 aboard *Yorktown*. His flight officer, Lt William N Leonard (USNA 1937), was one of the top-scoring carrier pilots in the first phase of the Pacific War with four confirmed victories and a probable to his credit while flying with VF-42 and VF-3 at the Battles of Coral Sea and Midway.

Two other combat-experienced pilots posted to VF-11 were Lt Frank B Quady (one shared victory) and Lt(jg) Walter J Hiebert, both formerly of VF-6 aboard USS *Enterprise* (CV-6). Quady became VF-11's engineering officer while Hiebert took charge of

communications. The remaining three senior pilots had seen no combat, but were experienced fliers. Lt Clarence M White Jr was designated executive officer and Lt Raymond W Vogel (40th of 261 in the USNA Class of 1936) became operations officer. Lt Gordon D Cady ran the gunnery department, and VF-11 was fortunate to have him, as he was developing the boresight gun pattern for the Grumman F4F-4 Wildcat. In addition to being experienced aviators, four of VF-11's six senior pilots were graduates of the USNA. That depth of leadership was unusual.

'Fighting 11' was operating F4F-4s by 11 August, and it slowly began adding new, younger pilots to its ranks. When CAG-11 was established on 10 October under Cdr Paul H Ramsey, Fenton's squadron had about 27 pilots. They included one 'white hat', Chief Aviation Pilot Chester A Parker, who was later commissioned. Future standouts in the squadron were Ens James S Swope, a tall, blond Texan who had earned a private pilot's license before joining the Navy, and Ens Vernon E Graham, a rugged, good-looking Colorado pilot. Ens Charles R Stimpson's nickname was 'Skull' after his thin appearance, but it would prove appropriate for another reason. Lanky and personable, the 23-year-old Utah native joined the squadron with 525 hours in his logbook, and he would become the deadliest of all VF-11 aviators.

After barely two months at North Island, the air group deployed to Hawaii, departing the West Coast on 23 October. Most personnel went by transport ship, but the more experienced fighter pilots, and 13 Wildcats (half the authorised strength), embarked in the escort carrier USS *Chenango* (ACV-28). Upon arrival in Hawaii, the bomber, scout and torpedo squadrons were based at NAS Barbers Point, on Oahu, but VF-11 went to NAS Maui, which was decidedly less crowded.

Fenton began accumulating more aircraft as VF-11 embarked upon a comprehensive training programme that emphasised aerial gunnery and strafing – a number of 'group gropes' with other squadrons in CAG-11

**Ens Charles R Stimpson and AMM2c Kermit H Enander pose upon Stimpson's Wildcat on Maui, circa October 1942. Stimpson's aircraft originally received the side number F16, but this was changed to F4 when he joined Lt Cdr White's division upon arriving on Guadalcanal. Enander was the driving force behind the CAG-11 reunion association that ran after the war (via Tim Enander)**





**The von Tempsky estate on Maui became the ‘Sundowners’ second home between both combat deployments. The ranching family adopted VF-11 and other squadrons, flying a special flag to indicate that ‘buzz jobs’ were authorised when dignitaries were absent! (via Rich Leonard)**

also took place. But it was not all work, for ‘Fighting 11’ had been adopted by a prosperous Maui couple, Boyd and Maria von Tempsky, who operated a large cattle ranch. The von Tempskys had two sons in Europe with the USAAF, and along with Boyd’s sister Alexa, they had become fond of US Navy fighter squadrons. Fenton’s pilots quickly came to appreciate ‘the civilised chow, sports, music and other reminders of home’ that the estate on the upper slopes of Haleakala Mountain afforded.

While on Maui some of the pilots took steps that defined the squadron’s heraldry and terminology. Bill Leonard, Charlie Stimpson and one or two others decided that VF-11 should have an insignia, so they devised the concept of two stubby Grummans shooting a ‘rising sun’ into the ocean as representative of their mission. With the help of Alexa and Maria, the insignia was rendered in colour, and squadron mechanics devised a multiple stencil system so that each Wildcat could have identical emblems. Lt Cdr Fenton approved the idea, and thus was born one of the most enduring insignia in US naval aviation.

Numerals were not allowed on unit emblems but along the bottom was printed *SUN DOWNERS*, though subsequently the name was usually rendered as one word. It referred mainly to the squadron’s job of shooting down Japanese ‘suns’, but that was only part of the story. As Leonard explained, “‘Sundowner’ was an old nautical appellation that referred to a diligent worker – a sailor who toiled till day was done. It originated in the days of sail when grog was customarily served on ships, but a strict captain might withhold the ration until dark while others relented when the sun sank below the main yardarm’.



**'Sundowner' shooters examine a target sleeve after a gunnery flight at Maui. They are, from left to right, Leonard, Vogel, Swope and Gaston (via Rich Leonard)**

Much later another squadron bore the 'Sundowner' title owing to confusion in the Navy Bureau of Aeronautics (BuAer). 'Fighting 86' formed at Atlantic City, New Jersey, in June 1944 and gained approval for the name that November. The error was not discovered within BuAer until June 1945 when the squadron was deployed in WestPac. At that point VF-86 became the 'Wild Hares' until disestablished five months later.

In Hawaii the pilots averaged 35 or more hours per month – mostly 'red-meat fighter flights' emphasising gunnery and tactics. However, a few like Bill Leonard took the opportunity to log 'familiarisation' flights in P-40s.

'Fighting 11's' training ended in February 1943 when the squadron, filled out with about 35 aircraft and 40 pilots, boarded the escort carriers USS *Long Island* (ACV-1) and USS *Altamaha* (ACV-18) and headed southwest. On 6 March the F4Fs were catapulted off the CVEs' short decks for Nandi, in the Fijian islands. The 'Sundowners' were put on short notice for deployment to Guadalcanal, but at virtually the same time the unit lost its skipper, Charlie Fenton. Recalled for duty in Washington, D.C. after six months as CO, Fenton turned over to his

**The 'Sundowners' at Maui on 29 January 1943. These pilots are, front row, from left to right, Wesley, Quady, Cady, C M White, Fenton, Vogel, Leonard and Heibert. In the middle row, from left to right, are Parker, Cooke, H S White, Maxwell, Graham, Swope, Slagle, Graber, Johnson and Gilbert. In the third row, from left to right, are Dayhoff, Ricker, Stimpson, Holberton, Cary, Ogilvie, Ramsey and Flath (via Tim Enander)**





'Fighting 11's' distinctive insignia was devised in Hawaii prior to the 1943 Guadalcanal deployment. Lt William N Leonard, Ens Charles Stimpson and a few others suggested the 'Sun Downer' name as a pun on their mission of downing Japanese 'suns' and the old nautical term denoting a hard worker. The emblem remained to the end of the squadron's existence in 1995 with little modification (via *Tailhook Association*)

Above right  
A 1943 *SUN DOWNERS* patch that was never used. The originals were stencilled on naugahyde, then cut out for sewing onto flight jackets and other garments (via *Rich Leonard*)

A close-up view of one of the panels from Lt W N Leonard's Wildcat, showing the original rendering of the 'Sun Downers' emblem (via *Rich Leonard*)



executive officer, Charles White, while Raymond 'Sully' Vogel took the 'exec' position. Bill Leonard assumed the combined duties of flight and operations officer.

White and Vogel took different approaches to leadership. White was regarded as 'a stickler for obeying the rules', being especially insistent on radio discipline – 'If not in use, turn off the juice'. Vogel, according to wingman Bob Flath, was 'more laid back in dealing with us red-assed ensigns'.

Training continued at Nandi, covering such esoteric missions as night strafing, both individually and by divisions. Then in late April the squadron obtained drop tanks for the long over-water flight to Espiritu Santo and on to Guadalcanal. The 'drops' worked reasonably well, although Bill Leonard's starboard tank fell off during his initial test hop.

CAG-11 was combat-ready under Lt Cdr Weldon L Hamilton, a veteran of the Coral Sea battle and an inspirational leader. The pilots were qualified for carrier operations, but during the period VF-11 spent at North Island the US Navy had lost three more carriers. Whilst the 'Sundowners' had been getting organised in August and September the early battles around Guadalcanal had seen USS *Saratoga* (CV-3) sent to the dockyard with torpedo damage and USS *Wasp* (CV-7) sunk by a Japanese submarine. Then, just days after the air group left San Diego, USS *Hornet* (CV-8) was lost in the Battle of Santa Cruz. By the time





Boys will be boys during squadron high jinks at the von Tempsky estate in early 1943 before Lt Cdr C R Fenton was relieved by C M White. These men are, from left to right, Gaston, Charles Fenton and Hiebert (via Rich Leonard)

CAG-11 arrived in the combat zone only *Enterprise* remained in action. Therefore, Hamilton's squadrons would go ashore on Guadalcanal to operate with the US Marine Corps.

It was disappointing to the fighter pilots, who were aware that their F4Fs were outclassed by the faster, more versatile Vought F4U-1 – the Marine fighter squadrons at Guadalcanal would be flying Corsairs by the time VF-11 arrived because the 'U-Bird' was considered unsuitable for carrier operations. The Wildcat was a well-proven aircraft, but now that the 'Sundowners' were to operate from land they would have preferred F4Us. The F4F lacked not only the Corsair's speed, but its range, rate of climb and ammunition capacity.

One advantage was that there would be no shortage of Wildcats. 'Fighting 11' and VF-21 were the last F4F squadrons engaged in prolonged combat, and the Fleet Aircraft Replacement Pool was well stocked with Grummans from other units. As Ens Vern Graham said, 'We were concerned about being selected to "use up" the remaining F4Fs. However, we were confident in the fighter'. Bill Leonard probably summed up the pilots' feelings when he commented, 'Committed to the F4F, we would not let our minds dwell too much on its deficiencies. VF-11 felt sensitive about flying an obviously outdated machine, but we were loyal to the F4F'.

One aviator was completely delighted to fly Wildcats – in fact, Vern Graham was reunited with *his* Wildcat. He wrote, 'I was aching for a fight because I had an aeroplane which I knew from prop to rudder. We had gotten together again after a 12,000-mile journey'. Incredibly, Graham's 'Fox 23' in VF-11 was the same F4F-4 that he

VF-11 flew from the Fijian islands before proceeding to Guadalcanal. During March 1943 the Nandi 'control tower' was operated by Lt C C Flynn, squadron personnel officer, who is being observed here by Frank Quady and Jim Swope. Flynn holds a signal light, providing rudimentary air traffic control (via Tim Enander)



had flown in operational training. He had done especially well in BuNo 03430 on gunnery flights, stating, 'Its guns were sweet and I seemed to do better with them than with the guns on any other ship I flew'. But when he left to join his fleet squadron, Graham had never expected to see his 'pet' Grumman again. Nevertheless, half a world away, against all odds, he was reunited with BuNo 03430 and confidently took it into combat.

The pilots' experience level was, if anything, somewhat greater than a mid-war fighting squadron. Bill Leonard landed at Guadalcanal's Cactus Field with 935 hours total time and four confirmed kills. Even some of VF-11's 'young studs' had considerable experience. Charlie Stimpson, for instance, entered combat with more than 800 hours flight time, including 250 in F4Fs.

## GUADALCANAL

On 25 April 1943, after six weeks in the Fijian islands, CAG-11 departed for Guadalcanal. White, Cady and Vogel each led one of VF-11's three elements to their destination, with TBFs providing navigation lead on the 600-mile flight. The Wildcats made the 4.5-hour flight to Espiritu Santo that day and logged another 4.3 the next, arriving at 'The Canal' on Monday the 26th with 34 aircraft. Two had been delayed en route with mechanical problems, but both shortly rejoined the squadron. 'Fighting 11' settled down at the Lunga Point strip better known as 'Fighter One', while Cdr Hamilton's other three squadrons were based at nearby Henderson Field.

The ground echelon had previously arrived by ship or transport aeroplane and established a tent camp in what intelligence officer Lt Donald Meyer called 'a delightful oasis of mud and mosquitoes in a coconut grove'. The next day VF-11 was briefed by Col Sam Moore, the colourful, swashbuckling Marine fighter commander. The 'Sundowners' were to fly under the tactical control of the US Marine Corps, as the leathernecks had been operating from the island for the past eight months. Later that morning (the 27th), VF-11's first patrol

from 'Cactus' was flown by Lt Cdr Vogel and Lt(jg)s Robert N Flath, William R Maxwell, and Cyrus G Cary. It was a local flight with nothing to report, but two days later Lt Cdr White led two divisions on an escort to Munda. The only enemy opposition was anti-aircraft (AA) fire.

Throughout the combat tour VF-11 was blessed with exceptional maintenance. Prior to any losses, the unit maintained an average 37 of 41 available aircraft fully operational for an initial complement of 38 pilots. The 90 percent readiness rate was partly due to the Wildcat's relative

**'Sundowners' executive officer and skipper pose for a photograph with the squadron 'scoreboards' on Guadalcanal. Lt Raymond W Vogel and Lt Cdr Charles M White are both wearing AN-H pattern cloth helmets and B-7 goggles. Vogel commanded CAG-11 in Korea, where he was killed in action flying an F4U Corsair in August 1950. White died in retirement in 1963 (via Steve Wells)**



simplicity, but it was also a tribute to Frank Quady's maintenance crew. The 'Sundowners' mechanics certainly deserved their reputation, as they literally built an extra fighter from the ground up. Using portions of three or four Marine wrecks, the sailors assembled another F4F-4 which they assigned the BuAer number 11!

At the end of the first week (Sunday, 2 May) VF-11 suffered its first loss. Sixteen 'Sundowners' were escorting a strike to Munda when, south of Vangunu, at 14,000 ft the 'exec', Sully Vogel, ran one of his fuel tanks dry and lost altitude while switching tanks. His element leader, Bob Maxwell, moved to port to regain sight of Vogel and the two Wildcats collided. Vogel's propeller sliced off the last six feet of Maxwell's fuselage (BuNo 11757), the F4F nosing up in a half loop and then falling away in a flat spin. Maxwell managed to bail out and opened his parachute, but the other Wildcats had to continue the mission. At 1700 hrs the returning pilots spotted Maxwell in his life raft and reported his position, although it was too late to summon help. Vogel had aborted the mission, returning with a smashed canopy and rubber marks on one wing from Maxwell's tyres.

'Maxie' was nowhere to be seen the next morning, and he remained missing for a full two weeks until a PBY Catalina brought him back to Guadalcanal on 18 May after a harrowing, but safe, 16 days in enemy-occupied territory. The intrepid South Carolinian had sailed his raft to Tetipari, arriving on the 5th. He walked the length of the island in seven days, encountering a crocodile that claimed dominion over a channel on a coral beach, but otherwise Maxwell met no opposition. On the 13th he launched his raft for Rendova, where he knew he might contact an Australian coast watcher. He was met by friendly natives who took him to safety near Segi Lagoon on the 17th.

Maxwell's fifth mission had been his last with VF-11, for he was flown to New Zealand, where he spent the next two months in hospital, recuperating from his adventure. Subsequently he joined VF-51, becoming the squadron's only ace aboard USS *San Jacinto* (CVL-30) in 1944.

**Lt(jg) Bob Maxwell poses in his assigned Wildcat, coded F20, at Guadalcanal. He was involved in a midair collision on 2 May, bailing out over Tetipari Island and spending two weeks with friendly natives and coastwatchers before being returned to the squadron. Evacuated with injuries, he was reassigned and became an ace flying with VF-51 in 1944 (via Henk van der Lugt)**



Meanwhile, operations continued, and despite the lack of aerial opposition the losses mounted. On 6 May, during another Munda strike, Ens LeRoy Childs' aircraft (BuNo 11922) dropped behind the formation, its engine smoking badly. The F4F splashed down north of Rendova hook, and although Maxwell talked to natives who saw a parachute that day, only Childs' seat cushion was found.

Two days later three 'Sundowners' led by Lt Lester Wall found enemy shipping in Blackett Strait between Vella Gulf and Kula Gulf. They shot a landing barge to pieces, then found a Japanese ship dead in the water. It was *Oyashio*, a 2400-ton destroyer that had struck a mine the previous night. The Wildcats raked the crippled ship repeatedly, facilitating its eventual sinking five miles southwest of Rendova.

On 26 May the skipper achieved the dubious distinction of being the first VF-11 pilot to qualify for the Purple Heart. A 20 mm shell went through White's cockpit while he strafed Suavanau Point at Rekata Bay, causing a gash on his left hand. He returned to flight status one week later.

Although things were slow in the air, the squadron's living area was improved considerably by the industrious Sea Bees, who built Quonset huts and new shower stalls. Two pilots had been evacuated to New Zealand during the first weeks of the deployment suffering from jaundice, but otherwise the squadron largely enjoyed good health. Dysentery was the most troublesome ailment, but it grounded few pilots, and none for long.

On 6 June the entire air group suffered a heartfelt loss when CAG Weldon Hamilton died in a C-47 crash along with several VT-11 personnel. Hamilton's death was keenly felt, as a bomber pilot in CAG-11 said he 'led every attack and could smell out enemy ships in bad weather. A great man, swell guy – the kind of man that will win this war'. His successor was Lt Cdr Frederick Ashworth of 'Torpedo 11', who would in fact have a hand in winning the war. Three years later he was the weaponeer on the atom bomb that destroyed Nagasaki.

By the first week of June VF-11 had been on Guadalcanal a month-and-a-half without a single claim for an enemy aircraft. The 'Sundowner' appellation was beginning to seem unduly boastful, particularly in comparison to the record of most Marine squadrons in-theatre. Gordon Cady's division finally broke the ice on 7 June when a 32-aeroplane escort to Vila was abandoned due to weather. Cady had led his four fighters up to 10,000 ft and, seeing the route was clear farther west, received permission to continue.

The Wildcats were ten miles south of Segi when an estimated 24 Zero-sens were sighted approaching overhead at 15,000 ft. At the same time Lt(jg) Daniel Hubler – the No 4 man – reported at least eight more directly above. Climbing at 130 knots, outnumbered eight-to-one and at a serious tactical disadvantage, Cady wisely decided to evade into clouds over Vangunu while he could. But it was already too late for the other three. Hubler's aeroplane (BuNo 11871) was so badly shot up that he had to bail out, and typically the Japanese strafed him in the water. Fortunately, all of them missed. Other enemy fighters concentrated on Lt(jg)s Terry Holberton and Ed 'Smiley' Johnson.

Holberton recalled the encounter;

Lt(jg)s Bob 'Cactus' Flath and Terry Holberton receive their Purple Hearts for wounds sustained at Guadalcanal. The F4F behind them has had roughly painted horizontal bars added to its fuselage star, dating this photograph as having been taken in late 1943. Flath was one of the 'Sundowners' two-tour pilots, also deploying aboard USS *Hornet* (CV-12) in 1944. He scored a confirmed victory and a probable while F6Fs flying from the vessel (Flath via Enander)



'Speculation had been that the Japanese used their machine guns with tracers to boresight the target, then opened up with their 20 mm cannon. Some small shot came through the side of my aircraft, wiping out the circuit breakers and the instrument panel. All electricity went out, including the gunsight. I believe the shots were all from bullets. A larger round hit me in the starboard wing root and took out the oil cooler. One of the smaller rounds ran down my arm from elbow to wrist, burning the skin.

'About that time I hit the cloud cover over Vangunu. I set the gyro compass to zero and made a sharp 90-degree turn to the left, counting slowly to 30 while on instruments. I reset the compass to zero again and turned 180 degrees, counting slowly for 30 seconds, then turned left and came out of the clouds on the original course. There was "Smiley" just ahead of me, chased by a Zero so intent on the kill that he never saw me.

'My windscreen was filled with the Zero so I didn't need sights. He was slightly above me and I pulled up and squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened because the electrical system was out. Then the engine quit due to the strain. I had no oil pressure and the prop was running wild. I pushed over to keep from stalling and headed for the vast lagoon between New Georgia and Vangunu. Dead-sticking the aeroplane (BuNo 11751) into the water, I hit my head on the gunsight, and was knocked unconscious. The next thing I knew I was sitting in the cockpit with water up to my chin.'

Flying as Cady's section leader was Lt(jg) Edward H Johnson, who saw the skipper abruptly break into a right-hand dive. 'Smiley' figured that Cady's initial move was to seek cover in the clouds over Vangunu, but the 'Sundowners' were boxed in as the estimated eight Zero-sens rolled in from overhead. Johnson caught fleeting glimpses of the disaster – Hubler's aeroplane staggering in a stream of tracers, Holberton's under attack by three bandits and Cady taking fire from above. Johnson had his own concern as tracers slashed past him,

accompanied by metallic impacts somewhere behind him. There ensued an interminable period stretching past two minutes before he plunged into the cloud.

But it was too late. Johnson's engine cut in and out before he emerged from the thin cloud. On the opposite side two or three more Japanese fighters set upon him, shooting his F4F to shreds. He recalled;

'The cockpit began to get exceedingly hot, and I was almost sure the aeroplane was afire. My left oil cooler had definitely been hit, and I could see oil streaming out of the wing. I'm sure that my engine had been badly hit. At