

Ken Reusser A Very Determined Man

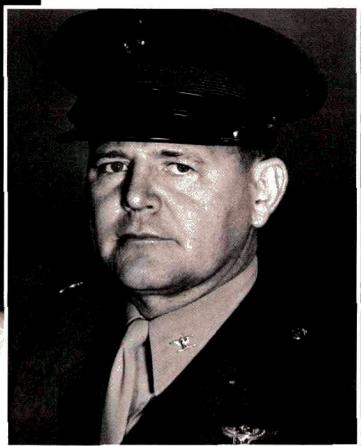
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A three-war veteran who retired as a colonel, Ken Reusser proved his mettle, time after time, but in WW II he gained unique notoriety when, in VMF-312, he and wingman 1stLt Bob Klingman were each credited with downing half a Japanese aircraft by chewing the enemy aircraft up with a Corsair propeller.

Ken Reusser

A Very Determined Man

By Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)

"Marines who flew with Ken Reusser regarded him as the bravest man they ever knew. He was an incredible hero."

—MajGen Bob Butcher, USMC (Ret)

It is unlikely that anyone in Cloverdale, Ore., in January 1920 realized that Kenneth L. Reusser, the newborn son of a Christian minister, eventually would become a hard-nosed combat Marine in three wars.

Still, someone with an eye for such things wouldn't have needed very much time to discern a singular determination about young Ken Reusser. Determination: that was the one quality above all others that his boyhood contemporaries noted about him. When Reusser tackled a challenge, he never stopped until he had mastered it, even if it meant putting his neck

on the line. That certainly was the case on the day that he jumped from a barn roof to test a hand-me-down parachute.

As he grew, the minister's son with the built-in determination blossomed into an exceptional student and athlete. On a daily basis he challenged himself to his limits and surpassed them. In the classroom and on the athletic field he was a standout. His goal was college, but in the Great Depression of the 1930s the meager pay of a small-town minister didn't offer much hope for that.

Reusser met that obstacle as he did all others—head on. To earn money for college he raced motorcycles, acting as both rider and mechanic, pulling in enough prize money to foot the bill for room, board, tuition and books. With what time there was left from academics, football and wrestling, he earned his private and commercial pilot licenses. Flying airplanes was something else that Reusser was determined to do.

The war that had been a threat in the summer of 1941 exploded into reality by the spring of 1942. Fresh out of flight school, 22-year-old Reusser became a member of newly formed Marine Fighting Squadron (VMF) 122 at California's Camp Kearny (today, Marine Corps Air Station Miramar) just north of San Diego. After a summer of learning to fly the Grumman F4F Wildcat, VMF-122 loaded out for the South Pacific to bolster the beleaguered Cactus Air Force flying out of Guadalcanal's Henderson Field.

Two months earlier, in August, the First Marine Division had launched America's first major ground offensive of the war, storming ashore to wrest the vital island from the Japanese. Unhindered use of Guadalcanal by the Japanese would be a knife at the throat of Australia's lifeline. The Japanese were determined to maintain their grip on the island and were throwing everything they had at Major General Alexander A. Vandegrift's Marines on Guadalcanal, including daily bombing raids launched out of the Japanese stronghold at Rabaul. Within days of landing at Guadalcanal, Reusser had his first aerial combat experience. It was almost his last.

That morning, the Japanese raiders were flying Mitsubishi G4M2 medium bombers code-named "Betty." As he closed in on one of the aircraft, Reusser put a stream of .50-caliber rounds into the Betty's starboard wing and engine. Trailing black smoke, the Betty headed down. So, too, did Reusser. The Betty's top gunner had

SCOT ROBERT J. LINDBLACH

gotten in a few licks of his own.

The Wildcat's engine spewed oil and stopped. Bits of glass—the result of several rounds through the windscreen—peppered Reusser's face. Ditching a crippled airplane in the ocean at better than 200 miles per hour is something akin to driving a pickup truck headlong into a loading dock. The force of the impact slammed Reusser's face against his gun sight. The Wildcat sank like an anvil dropped into a washtub. Barely conscious, Reusser struggled free of his shoulder harness and fought his way to the surface. His inflatable life raft went down with the aircraft. He was alone in the shark-filled waters with nothing but his leaky "Mac West" life vest to keep him afloat.

Dame Fortune, who hadn't been all that kind, smiled then. Friendly natives found him, fished him out of the water and, for several weeks, hid him, fed him, bathed him and kept moist compresses on his chopped-up face. After his rescuers had contacted an Australian coastwatcher, he was picked up by a Consolidated PBY Catalina seaplane and flown back to Guadalcanal.

Later, when the doctors removed the gauze bandages from his face, they were astounded to find his left eye resting on his cheek. When it was put back where it belonged, the eye worked just fine. After several more months of flying combat missions, Reusser was evacuated Stateside for further medical treatment. Eventually, he found himself in another new squadron, VMF-312, the "Checkerboarders," that was being formed at Parris Island, S.C.'s Page Field. There was a new aircraft as well, one that was destined to become a Marine Corps legend, the inverted gull-wing Chance Vought F4U Corsair.

On 10 May 1945, flying out of recently captured Kadena Airfield on Okinawa, Capt Reusser put a Corsair through a stress test its designers more than likely had never imagined. Japanese kamikaze pilots flying out of the southernmost of Japan's home islands, Kyushu, were inflicting horrific damage on Navy ships offshore, offering up their own lives to crash their explosive-laden aircraft into American ships. Guiding them to their targets, acting as a "bird dog," was an ever-present high-flying, twin-engine Kawasaki Ki-45 "Nick" heavy fighter.

It was a Nick that Reusser and his wingman, First Lieutenant Robert R. "Bob" Klingman, were after that day. Already

high above them at an altitude of 35,000 feet and climbing, the Japanese pilot had seen Reusser's formation and was high-tailing it for home. Reusser and Klingman pulled their noses up and firewalled their throttles. Reusser described it: "We were turning inside him to try and join up, but we were so far below him we had



By the time he was a captain, the youthful-looking Reusser had been wounded, shot down in both a Grumman F4F Wildcat and a Chance Vought F4U Corsair and forced to land at night by Marine air defense artillerymen who, when his IFF transponder failed, thought he might be a Japanese pilot.

With Reusser holding the Nick firmly in place, Klingman used the Corsair's massive 13-foot propeller to shred the Nick's vertical stabilizer.

little chance of catching him. I just pulled the nose up and held the trigger down, no aim, no accuracy, just trying to loop it up there. I saw a couple of glints, but I remember I didn't think anything of it at the time. He leveled off and headed back toward Japan."

The two Corsairs slowly were gaining on their target. A glance at his altimeter told Reusser that he was well above 38,000 feet now, an altitude far above the Corsair's design service ceiling. He may have been flying the Corsair at an altitude it had never been designed to reach, but now he

was close enough for an aimed shot. Nothing happened. The sub-zero outside temperature had frozen his guns.

He couldn't reposition the Corsair for another approach. In the thin air at that height, straight and level flying and long gentle turns were all that could be managed. Any attempt at normal combat tactics would have sent him tumbling out of control. Reusser did the next best thing. Easing alongside the Nick, he positioned his port wing almost in the Nick's windscreen, preventing the pilot from taking any evasive action. Maybe Klingman could do something.

The Japanese gunner was frantically attempting to clear his own frozen gun, *pounding on it with his fist*, slamming the charging handle back and forth, swinging the weapon first at Ken Reusser, then at Bob Klingman, trying to get off a shot. Reusser could see the face of the Nick's pilot clearly. It seemed he could almost touch the man.

Klingman's firing run on the Nick was no more successful than Ken Reusser's attempt. His guns, too, had frozen. Then Klingman did what only could be described as astounding. With Reusser holding the Nick firmly in place, Klingman used the Corsair's massive 13-foot propeller to shred the Nick's vertical stabilizer, chew up the aft end of the fuselage and mince the gunner. The Nick fell off, corkscrewing uncontrollably and falling apart. Amazingly, Klingman's Corsair stayed in the air.

When Ken Reusser and Bob Klingman returned to Kadena, both Corsairs "landed on fumes." Neither aircraft had enough fuel to taxi off the runway; they had to be towed. Reusser and Klingman both were awarded the Navy Cross for their work.

That day should have provided all the hair-raising, heart-pumping excitement any man could ask for, but there was still fighting left on Okinawa.

For the next two months, Reusser flew combat missions almost daily, sometimes two and three a day. He would be wounded, shot down and forced to ditch at sea on a treetop-level bombing run over Naha. On a night-intercept mission his Identification Friend or Foe (IFF) transponder failed, forcing him to land amid volleys of anti-aircraft fire from gunners who weren't taking any chances; a favorite Japanese night tactic was to join up with friendly aircraft in their approach pattern. Twice he participated in ground attack missions against Japanese airfields on Kyushu, raids that



Left: Capt Reusser readies his Corsair for an air defense mission over Okinawa in 1945.

Below left: During the early days of the Korean War, Reusser was again flying combat missions—this time as a member of VMF-214, the “Black Sheep” squadron, off USS *Sicily* (CVE-118)—flying mostly close air support and missions targeting enemy supplies.

The Corsairs shot up anything that moved and much that didn’t. But a large warehouse-type building had Reusser curious. North Korean antiaircraft crews reacted like hornets around a nest to anything that came near the building. Reusser decided to have a look.

In the thin air above Okinawa five years earlier, Reusser had flown a Corsair to an altitude higher than anything its designers had planned. At Inchon, he flew another Corsair as low as it was possible to get without flying it into the ground. How low was that? He was so low he actually could see in the ground-floor windows, barely clearing the ground, as he roared past, not once but twice. Determined? Yes, you could safely say that about him.

One look was enough. The building was a tank-repair facility, full of Soviet-made T-34 tanks. He headed back to *Sicily* to refuel and rearm and then returned to Inchon to plaster the building with bombs and napalm. Leaving a smoking ruin behind him, he next shot up a fuel farm with rockets.

Spotting a heavily camouflaged ship tied up alongside a pier, he took it on with the only ammunition he had left, his 20-mm wing guns.

The ship was a tanker. It exploded in a stupendous red-and-black fireball, blowing Reusser’s Corsair upside down and riddling it with flying fragments. When the Corsair limped back aboard *Sicily*, it was judged to be damaged too badly to be repaired and was pushed over the side. Ken Reusser fared a bit better than his airplane. The suspension ribbon of his Navy Cross would wear a gold star, denoting a second award.

Before Reusser saw the last of Korea, he would add to his collection of Purple Hearts, raising the total to three. On one occasion, forced to bail out of his shot-up Corsair, he barely escaped capture. In a second incident of having an aircraft nearly shot out from under him, he coaxed the mortally wounded Corsair just far enough to reach the ocean, where he splashed it down into the frigid winter water. A destroyer acting as plane guard later picked him up. When Reusser attacked a target, he didn’t do it from 10,000 feet. Like most Marine pilots, he went in almost close



stretched the Corsair to its range limits.

At the end of World War II, hundreds of thousands of men from all branches of the U.S. Armed Forces returned to civilian life. Reusser, though, decided that he wanted to make his life’s work in Marine Corps aviation. So in August 1950 Major Ken Reusser once again was piloting a Corsair in another war, this time in Korea.

Slightly more than two months earlier, North Korea’s communist dictator, Kim Il Sung, had sent his Soviet-equipped army crashing into South Korea, squeezing

American and South Korean defenders into a tiny toehold around the port city of Pusan. The tide was about to turn. While the 1stMarDiv conducted an amphibious assault to seize the North Korean-held port of Inchon, the defenders of the Pusan perimeter would break out and drive northward.

On 5 Aug., Reusser was leading a division of Corsairs from VMF-214 flying from the aircraft carrier USS *Sicily* (CVE-118). The mission was to engage and destroy targets of opportunity in the Inchon area.

enough to manicure trees. Marines on the ground appreciated that kind of support.

It might seem that Ken Reusser's Marine Corps career was spent preparing for wars or fighting them. In 1966, he was in the midst of yet another war in another Asian country, Vietnam, and a colonel in command of an air group, Marine Aircraft Group (MAG) 16. But no one found him behind a desk; Reusser didn't fight wars from a swivel chair.

In 1966, the largest Marine Corps installation in Vietnam was Da Nang. Home to the headquarters of III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) and the nerve center of Marine Corps operations in the Republic of Vietnam's five northern provinces, Da Nang was crammed with the

55. Contact was immediate and sharp.

On 14 Nov., Marines from Companies C and D, 1st Battalion, 26th Marine Regiment encountered heavy resistance from well-dug-in VC elements near the hamlets of La Huan and Thuy Bo. A medevac helicopter was hit and forced to crash-land. A second medevac helicopter was hit, but

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wick. The Huey's controls were shot out of action by the same burst of fire that killed Chadwick. In a shallow dive, the Huey slammed into a rice paddy and burst into flames.

Killed immediately in the flames that engulfed the wreckage were the crewmembers, Sergeant Daniel M. Bennett and Corporal Rodolfo M. Gonzalez. Trapped in the crumpled mass of metal by his shoulder harness that would not release, facing death by incineration, was Reusser.

In the midst of a vortex of swirling flames, struggling against the grip of a device that was designed to save him, Reusser fought to free himself from the fire engulfing him. His flight suit was smoldering. The skin on his hands was blackening. The lining of his flight helmet was melting, along with much of the left side of his scalp and face. The fact that the fire finally burned through his shoulder harness allowed Ken Reusser to break free and stumble from the wreckage. A nearby VC immediately shot him.

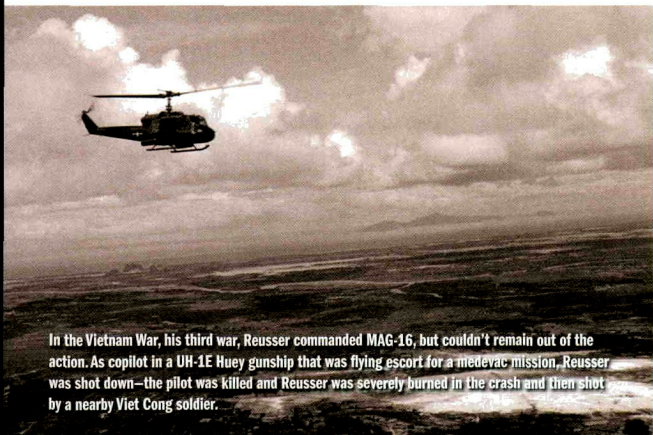
Under friendly covering fire, a brave corpsman sprinted to Reusser's aid, throwing him into the muck of the rice paddy to extinguish his burning flight suit. He was evacuated to Hill 55 by an amphibian tractor and then by helicopter to the naval hospital at China Beach. As he drifted in and out of consciousness, Ken Reusser overheard corpsmen speculating on how long it would take "that colonel in there" to die.

Ken Reusser, ever determined, refused to die. He willed himself to live, and live he did. He would spend more than a year in hospitals, undergoing painful skin grafts over 35 percent of his body. In 1968, he would be transferred to the Permanent Disability Retired List and go on to a civilian career in the aerospace industry, finally settling down in his native Oregon.

Col Kenneth L. Reusser, USMC (Ret) died 20 June 2009. Five days later fellow Marines buried him in Oregon's Willamette National Cemetery. He was a veteran of 253 combat missions in three wars, holder of two Navy Crosses and four Purple Hearts.

Well done, good and faithful servant; a fitting farewell for a determined minister's son.

Editor's note: Maj Bevilacqua, a Leatherneck contributing editor, is a former enlisted Marine who served in the Korean and Vietnam wars. Later in his career, he was an instructor at Amphibious Warfare School and Command and Staff College, Quantico, Va.



In the Vietnam War, his third war, Reusser commanded MAG-16, but couldn't remain out of the action. As copilot in a UH-1E Huey gunship that was flying escort for a medevac mission, Reusser was shot down—the pilot was killed and Reusser was severely burned in the crash and then shot by a nearby Viet Cong soldier.

weapons of war. To look at Da Nang was to see a picture of military power.

Yet only 10 miles below Da Nang in the country south of the critical terrain feature of Hill 55 was one of the most inhospitable regions in all of Vietnam. Marines called it with good reason "Dodge City." Located on the edge of the An Hoa Basin and Go Noi Island, the equally notorious "Arizona Territory," there were no quiet days in Dodge City. Rockets, mortars, mines, booby traps, snipers, ambushes, raids and pitched battles were round-the-clock fare in the flat, featureless landscape of Dodge City with its seemingly endless rice paddies and tiny hamlets.

In mid-November 1966, alerted by intelligence confirming the movement of a Viet Cong (VC) Main Force unit into the Dodge City area, Marines launched a multi-company sweep to clean out the entire area between Go Noi Island and Hill

succeeded in extracting the wounded and the crewmembers from the first incident.

Later, another medevac was called for by "Delta," 1/26. Covering the medevac was a UH-1E Huey gunship from Marine Observation Squadron (VMO) 6. Flying as copilot was the MAG-16 commander, Col Ken Reusser. He was 46, a colonel, a group commander. He didn't have to fly medevac missions, but Reusser didn't ask his pilots and aircrews to do anything he wouldn't do himself.

The Soviet-made DShK 14.5 mm heavy machine gun was well camouflaged in a firing position dug into the railroad embankment that hadn't carried rail traffic in more than a decade. It sent a well-aimed stream of green tracers that skewered the Huey as it made its initial firing run on the nearby VC infantry that was heavily engaged against C/1/26. Killed immediately was the Huey's pilot, Capt Leon G. Chad-