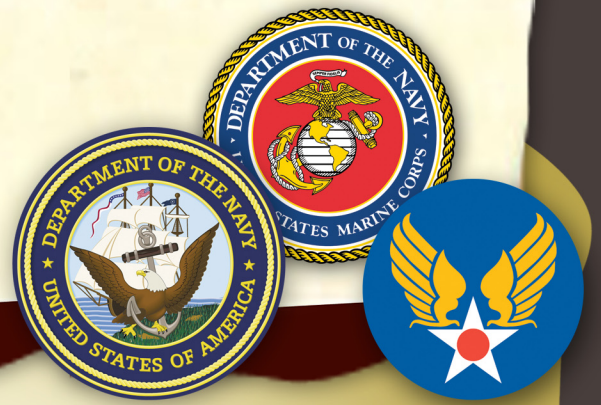


MAJ. WILLIAM JR. CLAY - NOVEMBER 21, 1944

US MARINES, VFM-121

FG-1 CORSAIR FROM PELELIU, PALAU



The Man: The wreckage you see today is what remains of an FG-1 Corsair flown by Maj. William Clay, Jr. of Texas after his final mission. On the morning of November 21, 1944, William and fellow pilots from the Marine fighter squadron VFM-121 took off from the island of Peleliu to bomb and strafe targets on Yap. The purpose of the mission was to insure the continued inoperative status of the Yap airstrip and to strafe barge traffic in surrounding waters. The island had been hit hard during the previous six months by high-flying, long-range B-24 bombers of the US Army Air Force as well as raids from US carrier aircraft. Both airstrips were out of commission and few buildings remained standing on the island. After bombing the main airfield and revetment area the pilots circled the island to look for boats and barges. William observed a small craft just off Maap Island and led his wingman on a strafing pass. As they passed over the boats, William's wingman, Lt. Fisher, looked back to observe a large splash. William's plane had been hit by anti-aircraft fire and exploded, crashing close to shore. Yapese from the village of Wuluu' recovered his remains, buried them, and cared for the grave until the Americans returned to look for him. After the war Maj. William Clay Jr.'s remains were returned to Arlington National Cemetery for burial. The villagers still refer to the wreckage as "William's" plane.

The Plane: The F4U Corsair was a carrier-capable fighter aircraft that saw service primarily in World War II and the Korean War. Goodyear-built Corsairs were designated FG and Brewster-built aircraft F3A. The Corsair served in smaller air forces until the 1960s, following the longest production run of any piston-engineered fighter in US history (1942-1952). Some Japanese pilots regarded it as the most formidable American fighter of World War II. The US Navy counted an 11:1 kill ratio with the F4U Corsair. The F4U incorporated the largest engine available at the time, the 2,000 hp 18-cylinder Pratt & Whitney R-2800 Double Wasp radial. To accommodate a folding wing, the designers considered retracting the main landing gear rearward, but for the chord of wing selected, it was difficult to fit undercarriage struts long enough to provide sufficient clearance for the large propeller. Their solution was an inverted gull wing. Statistics compiled at the end of the war indicate that the F4U and FG flew 64,051 operational sorties for the US Marines and US Navy through the conflict (44% of total fighter sorties), with only 9,581 sorties (15%) flown from carrier decks. F4U and FG pilots claimed 2,140 air combat victories against 189 losses to enemy aircraft, for an overall kill ratio of over 11:1. The aircraft performed well against the best Japanese opponents with a 12:1 kill ratio against Mitsubishi A6M and 6:1 against the Nakajima Ki-84, Kawanishi N1K-J and Mitsubishi J2M combined during the last year of the war. The Corsair bore the brunt of fighter-bomber missions, delivering 15,621 tons of bombs during the war (70% of total bombs dropped by fighters during the war).

The Base: The Battle of Peleliu, codenamed Operation Stalemate II took place between September and November 1944. The invasion of Yap was originally planned as part of Operation Stalemate II until the decision was made to bypass it and proceed to Peleliu since Yap was in ruins. The US Forces, originally consisting of only the 1st Marine Division, later relieved by the Army's 81st Infantry Division, fought to capture an airstrip on the small coral island. US Major General William Rupertus, commander of 1st Marine Division, predicted that the island would be secured within four days, but due to Japan's well-crafted fortifications and stiff resistance, the battle lasted for over two months. The battle remains one of the war's most controversial, due to its questionable strategic value and high death toll. When considering the number of men involved, Peleliu had the highest casualty rate of any battle in the Pacific War. The fighting was winding down but still taking place on Peleliu when Maj. William Clay, Jr. took off to bomb Yap on his fateful mission.



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