

**The American Fighter Aces Association**  
**Oral Interviews**  
The Museum of Flight  
Seattle, Washington

**James E. Swett (Part 1 of 2)**

**Interview Date:** circa 1980s-1990s

Abstract:

In this two-part oral history, fighter ace James E. Swett discusses his military service with the United States Marine Corps during World War II. In part one, he describes his wartime experiences as a fighter pilot, including his time stationed in the Solomon Islands with Marine Fighting Squadron 221 (VMF-221). Special focus on two combat missions in 1943 in which Swett scored aerial victories and was later shot down. On one of these missions, Swett's actions earned him the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Biography:

James E. Swett was born on June 15, 1920 in Seattle, Washington and grew up in California. He entered Navy flight training in 1941 and received his commission with the U.S. Marine Corps the following year. A member of Marine Fighting Squadron 221 (VMF-221), Swett served two combat tours in the Pacific Theater: one in the Solomon Islands and one stationed aboard the USS *Bunker Hill* (CV-17). On April 7, 1943, he scored seven aerial victories against a flight of Japanese dive bombers before being shot down himself. For his actions, he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. Swett left active duty after the end of World War II but remained in the Marine Corps Reserve, retiring as a colonel in 1970. As a civilian, he worked in the family business as a manufacturer representative. Swett passed away in 2009.

*Biographical information courtesy of: Boyce, Ward J., ed., American fighter aces album. Mesa, Ariz: American Fighter Aces Association, 1996.*

Restrictions:

Permission to publish material from the American Fighter Aces Association Oral Interviews must be obtained from The Museum of Flight Archives.

Transcript:

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**James E. Swett (Part 1 of 2)**

[START OF INTERVIEW]

00:00:00

**[Introduction]**

JAMES E. SWETT: ...regret that I haven't been able to get to you earlier, but my neck has really been giving me fits. I sure hope this tape is working out okay. But I would like to give you a couple of high spots in my aerial career, which—of course, one of the biggest thrills that I had was getting a pilot's license and soloing for the first time after six hours of flight time. However, I went from college into Navy aviation and later on switched to Marine Corps aviation and then promptly went overseas in February of 1943.

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**[Intercept mission in Guadalcanal (April 7, 1943)]**

JES: In April 7th of '43, they—we were notified that a large flight of Japanese aircraft, consisting of dive bombers and fighters, was on its way down towards the—Guadalcanal, where we were based. And I had had two flights prior to the big day. And then about noon, we were ordered to go over Tulagi area and orbit. Well, just about the time we got to Tulagi, a flight of Japanese dive bombers arrived, and we just tailed right in with them. The first three airplanes that I shot down were in midair in the dive, and as we were going—the fighters, the F4F Wildcats—fighters were going a heck of a lot faster than the dive bombers, it was easy to catch them.

Well, as I pulled out to—after flaming the three, I pulled out and headed over towards Florida Island and crossed Florida and out into the ocean area. And here's a whole flock more of dive bombers out there trying to get together, and they were just spread out all over the sky. And I just took them one by one and two or three rounds per gun and flamed each and every one of them. I definitely got four more, and the fifth one that I attacked—I only had about three rounds per gun, and I killed the rear gunner but not before he nailed me. I was just really too doggone close to him, and he shot out my oil cooler and messed up my engine and my windshield and everything else and—just before I killed him. Well, he—the last I saw of him, he was smoking and went on his merry way. And I understand later that he made a landing on the beach on one of the outlying islands there near Florida, and the natives killed the pilot, who happened to be a lieutenant colonel in the Japanese Army. And the rear gunner was dead. There was 50-caliber holes in the thing, but I never got credit for number eight.

Well, I went back towards Florida Island—towards Tulagi, I should say—and made a water landing there, and the Coast Guard picket boat picked me up. And the first thing they said to me, “Are you an American?” And I said, “You goddamn well right I am.” Says—the Coast Guard guy says, “Well, yeah, he’s one of those [unintelligible]. Let’s pick him up.” Well, after all that excitement, I went back and rejoined my squadron after a week’s stint in the hospital to repair a broken nose and cuts on my face and whatnot. And it was there I learned that I’d been recommended for the Congressional Medal of Honor by Admiral Mitscher [Marc A. Mitscher]. [unintelligible] the Admiral—he was the ComAir—Commander Aircraft Solomons at the time. ComAirSols. And a wonderful person he was.

00:04:27

***[Encounter during an air patrol (July 11, 1943)]***

JES: We then went to Sydney and spent ten hilarious days in Sydney, Australia, and then came back and checked out in the Corsairs. Now, talk about a thrill. That was an airplane that just flew us all over the sky until we got used to it and just literally had to manhandle that sucker and keep it straight. Well, on the 11th of July, flying out of the Russell Islands just northwest of Guadalcanal, my Tail End Charlie—four-plane flight—Tail End Charlie experienced some engine problems, so he and the wingman turned and went back. And that left Manny Segal [Harold E. “Manny” Segal] and I as the forward air patrol, as it were.

Well, Manny was having a problem keeping up, so I thought for a while that we both better go home. So—but we kept right on going. And Manny says, “I can’t keep up, can’t keep up.” And I was throttled way back. And we spotted a flock of Betty bombers, twin-engine medium bombers, along with their Zero escort between Kolombangara and New Georgia. And we decided that we would make one pass, just dive through them, and then go on home. Well, we did, and I kept going on down and apparently Manny went up—back up a little bit, and a Zero nailed him. So I went back up and tried to find Manny, and suddenly I spotted him with a Zero behind him. And I tailed in behind the Zero and managed to cut the wing right off—one of his wings right off, and so he was lost.

And in the meantime, Manny got away from me. There were so doggone many clouds around, and we just couldn’t find each other. And none—neither of our radios worked properly. So I decided, to heck with it. We’ll maybe head for home, and maybe Manny would make it also. So we headed—I headed back towards the Russells, and suddenly, down below me at about 50 feet off the water was a twin-engine medium bomber and had a Zero escort. Well, I thought there was only one Zero, but there was two. And the one that I didn’t see was the one that was in the clouds at the moment. And so I waited until

the Zero was out of position and dove after him—dove after the Betty and splashed him and then was going to go on home.

Well, the Zero that I didn't see was right behind me, and he just tore up my windshield and my instrument panel. And the rattle of bullets on my armor plate sounded just like pouring gravel into a metal bucket. Well, first thing you know, I had lost my engine and I made a water landing. And when you hit the water with a—in a Corsair at about 140 knots, you really hit it hard. And I did hit hard. And I dove over the side just as the Zero was strafing me. And I just ducked down underneath there, and I was holding onto the engine cowl while that Zero was strafing me. And every time the Zero would go over, then I'd come up and get a breath of air. And finally, he got tired of it and left.

And here I was, out in the middle of the Ironbottom Sound out there—Torpedo Alley or whatever you want to call it. And meanwhile, Manny Segal got picked up by Arleigh Burke's destroyers, the Little Beavers. And I was about four or five miles away from where the destroyers were, and they couldn't see me at all. So I headed for New Georgia and paddled in there. I didn't get back to my squadron for three more days. But I had an opportunity to meet one of the coastwatchers, an Army cap—Australian Army captain by the name of Donald Kennedy. Well, Captain Kennedy was a delightful person, and we got along famously. It didn't take long for the guys in my squadron to eliminate a perfectly good bottle of Old Forester while they were waiting for me and drinking poor old Jim his good health. [laughs]

But those, in essence, are my two really exciting times—and getting shot down both times. I hope this comes through all right and all is well with you, my friend. Talk to you later.

00:10:08

[END OF INTERVIEW]