

## Wildcats Running Wild at Mojave



Wildcats in flight, photo courtesy midway.org

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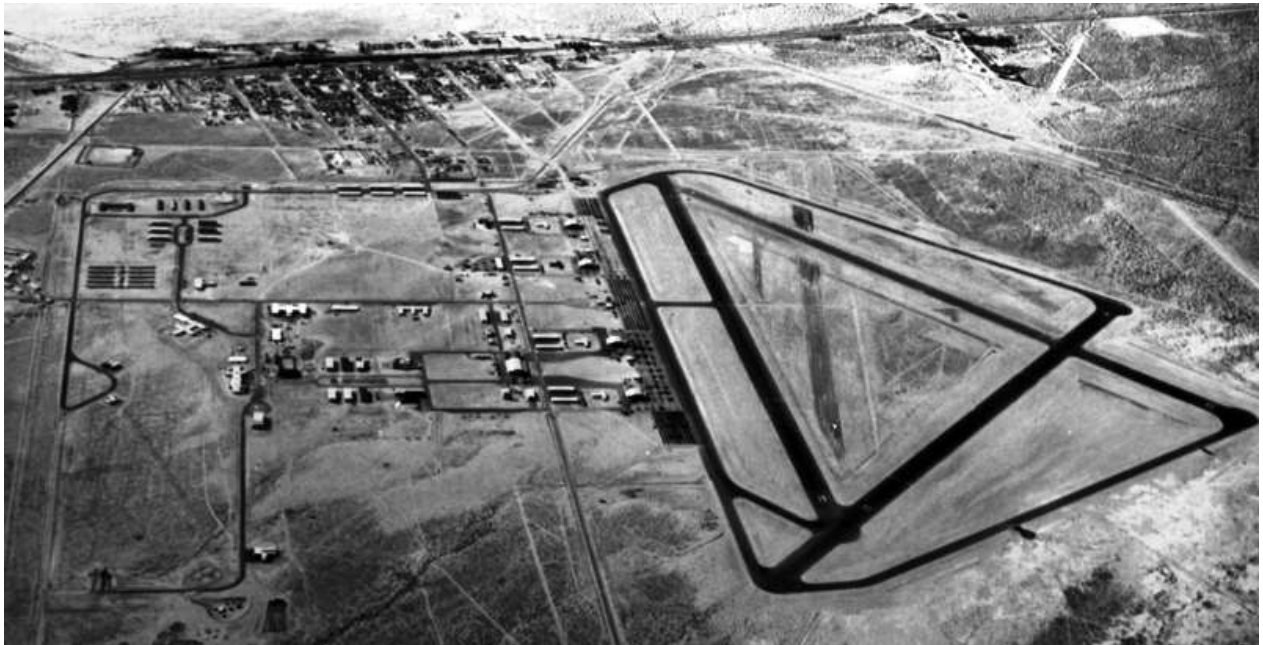
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References: War Diary of VMO-251 <http://www.vmfa251.org/>

Book: Photo Recon Became Fighter Duty- WWII history of VMO-251

<https://books.google.com/books?id=HI4fDAAAQBAJ&q=mojave#v=onepage&q&f=true>

After spending the early months of 1943 in combat at Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands, Marine Observation Squadron 251 (VMO-251) arrived to the west coast of California for re-organizing, re-equipping and a well-earned rest. By July 1943, they were assigned to Marine Base Defense Air Group 44 at MCAS Mojave California in preparation for another deployment. Their time training at MCAS Mojave included many wild flights and numerous accidents. During the period from September 1943 thru November 1943, VMO-251 destroyed 12 planes, damaged 27 and four of their pilots were killed in training accidents. This story recounts their aviation training accidents at MCAS Mojave and explores one of their crash sites.



**MCAS Mojave overview November 1943**

MCAS Mojave was one of the main training centers for Marine squadrons preparing to deploy overseas during World War Two. The desert location provided VFR flying conditions most of the time, non-congested airspace, and nearby bombing and gunnery ranges. The downside was occasional high winds that could make flight operations difficult. Furthermore, during late 1943, MCAS Mojave's runways were only 150-ft. wide. Inexperienced pilots, especially those in Wildcats, often lost control on landing and departed the runway.



**Ground officers and pilots of VMO-251 at MCAS Mojave, 25 October 1943, four of these pilots were killed during training accidents at MCAS Mojave**

An account of Marine Observation Squadron 251 (VMO-251) training activities at MCAS Mojave was found in their War Diaries. By September 1943, a large number of new pilots joined the squadron and training kicked off at a quick pace at MCAS Mojave. The pilots of VMO-251 trained on F4F-3 and F4F-4 Wildcats as well as the General Motors built FM-1 Wildcats until Corsairs arrived in late October 1943. Training included navigation, night flying, combat tactics, gunnery and bombing practice. Due to the accelerated pace of training operations, accidents were very common and occurred at an alarming rate. Their accidents at MCAS Mojave are recounted below beginning in September 1943 thru November 1943.

Aircraft accidents began in the middle of September 1943 at MCAS Mojave. On 16 September, 2Lt. Laurence L. Neal ground looped his Wildcat FM-1 while landing. The shifting winds at MCAS Mojave were blamed. 2Lt. Robert R. Rosellen ground looped his Wildcat the following day. His Wildcat's engine and tail assembly were so severely damaged that they had to be replaced. Three days later, 2Lt. John J. McMasters was uninjured when he crashed his Wildcat upon landing. Eight days later, 2Lt. Laurence L. Neal ground looped his second plane damaging the left wing tip. To round out the month of September, 2Lt. Galen K. Merkel had to make a forced landing 25 miles northeast of MCAS Mojave when an oil line connection burst in Wildcat BuNo12133.

The accident rate increased in October. On 2 October, 2Lt. Orville F. Lorch, destroyed Wildcat BuNo 15373 when he made a forced landing at Koehn Dry lake located in Fremont Valley, 12 miles northeast California City due to engine failure. On 5 October, 2Lt. Richard W. Hildebrand ground-looped his Wildcat. On 7 October, 2Lt. Russell H. Neilson ground looped his Wildcat after going into a slight skid upon landing damaging the propeller. On 9 October, 2Lt. John Fredrick Osterlund finished a day of aerial instruction practicing section tactics and was headed back to the base. During his final approach he apparently lost control and spun straight into the ground. The impact destroyed Wildcat BuNo 32470 and killed him. On 20 October, FM-1 Wildcats BuNo 20123 and BuNo 14260 were destroyed when they collided mid-air approximately 50 miles northeast MCAS Mojave. Luckily, both pilots parachuted to safety.

Four Wildcats were damaged on 22 October due to the unpredictable winds. 2Lt. Lee E. O'Harra drifted off the runway after he landed and damaged his propeller and wing tip. 2Lt. Joseph A. Condon also ran off the runway and he also damaged his propeller. 2Lt. Howard T. Willey ground looped his Wildcat. Lastly, 2Lt. Orville F. Lorch destroyed his Wildcat when he made a forced landing 2.5 miles southeast of MCAS Mojave. On October 23, the first Corsairs arrived when four new FG-1s and 12 F4U-1s arrived at MCAS Mojave. Pilots began familiarization training flights with them the next day.

November 1943 was the squadron's deadliest month for training accidents. During the late afternoon of 1 November, Captain Oscar M. Bate, Jr., an experienced fighter pilot with over 200 hours in the Wildcat, led 2Lt. O'Harra, 2Lt. Nick A. Sigan, and 2Lt. Mortimer D. Hathaway in a series of combat exercises about eight miles east of MCAS Mojave airfield. Bate taught each pilot one at a time the fine art of the scissor maneuver. After teaching pilots Hathaway and Sigan each twice before releasing them, O'Harra

then joined Bate for his turn. Sigan and Hathaway circled to the west about a mile away at around 10,000 feet to observe the maneuvering. Bate and O'Harra went through the maneuver twice, and all seemed to be going well for both pilots. Captain Bate later described what happened next in the accident report. "When we were about five hundred yards apart, I pulled up to show him (O'Harra) that even though he had the altitude advantage, I could bring to bear my guns in a head on run as well as he could his. At about two hundred and fifty yards, I nosed over intending to pass under him. He nosed over too, to keep his sights trained on my plane. I nosed down some more, still not thinking there was any danger. It was then that he nosed over again, and the only interpretation I can put on this last move of his was that he thought he could pass under me. I was already committed to a downward path at an angle, perhaps about 20 degrees, with him about at about the same angle and twenty-five feet higher than me. Although things happened very fast, I think he finally tried to pull above me. His plane hit the top of mine." O'Harra's Wildcat struck Bate's plane and the its propeller chewed up his right wing, bent his prop, glanced off his canopy, and ripped off control surfaces including the rudder and an elevator. As Bate struggled with his damaged plane, O'Harra's spun violently towards the earth. Bate's plane entered a lazy spin to the left and Bate tried to recover the Wildcat, but his controls did not respond. Bate stated, "I opened my hood, cut the main ignition switch and unbuckled my safety belt, crawled out on the right wing, then dropped off." Bate pulled his ripcord at around 1,500 feet. As he slowly dropped to the earth, Bate saw O'Harra's plane burning in a tract of land about half a mile away. O'Harra was killed when his Wildcat FM-1 BuNo 15548 slammed into the deck, he was only 23 years old. Bate landed within 70 feet of where his Wildcat FM-1 BuNo 15460 hit the ground. Bate was lucky to receive just minor cuts and bruises. It was a hell of way to start the month.



**Grumman Wildcats in flight, photo courtesy [airandspace.si.edu](http://airandspace.si.edu)**

On 7 November 2Lt. Francis C. Jennings, after an early morning flight in Corsair F4U-1 BuNo 0234, was returning to the base. As he entered the landing pattern, he lowered his wheels. His landing gear indicator showed wheels down. Coming in at 160 knots to touchdown on Runway 7, the runway duty officer gave the OK sign all the way down through the final approach. Jennings came in at a full stall for a three point landing. After Jennings' plane rolled 400 to 500 feet down the runway, the left landing gear inexplicably collapsed, causing the left wing to go down. The plane drastically swerved to the left. Soon after the right landing gear also collapsed, putting the plane on its belly. After several seconds, the plane came to a halt. Jennings was able to walk away from the crash, but his plane would be out indefinitely with the landing gear destroyed, a bent prop and a damaged left wing. An hour later on the same day, Captain Roger A. Haberman, a veteran combat pilot with over 500 hours, took off from Runway 12 in Wildcat FM-1 BuNo 1551 at around 10:30 in the morning. Shortly after the wheels left the ground, the Wildcat crashed on the edge of the field due to propeller failure. The Wildcat's fuselage buckled under the cockpit and severely damaged the plane. Fortunately Haberman suffered no injuries.

The next day, 8 November, 2Lt. John R. Kane was bringing in Corsair FG-1 BuNo 13091 for a landing after a familiarization flight. Shortly after he touched down, his Corsair suddenly swerved to the left. He immediately applied the right brake hoping to straighten the plane on the runway. It worked, and Kane immediately applied both brakes to slow the plane down. Unfortunately, the plane flipped over on its back. The plane suffered severe damage and would require a major overhaul to bring back into service. Kane was slightly injured with lacerations on his forehead.

On 10 November, 2Lt. Orville F. Lorch brought Wildcat FM-1 BuNo 15111 in for a landing following an overland navigation flight. As he touched down, the right wheel blew out putting the plane into a ground loop to the left. Lorch received no injuries, but the right wing of the Wildcat was damaged.

On 13 November, section tactics were practiced with the Corsair while several others flew Wildcats for gunnery practice. At 1630, First Lieutenant George C. Inglehart began his takeoff roll in a Wildcat. As he began his takeoff roll on Runway 7, his plane went off the runway to the left and struck a truck located between the runways. The right wing tip of his plane hit the top rear of the truck, spinning his plane around in a half-turn ground loop. The Wildcat suffered damage to its right wing, left wing tip and landing gear. Later in the evening, 2Lt. John J. McMasters had a wild landing in Wildcat F4F-3 BuNo 4002. He was making a night landing in a slight crosswind when his wheels hit the runway, the plane veered to the right causing a ground loop and dragging the left wing. McMasters, after some effort, straightened the plane out. Unfortunately, it immediately went to the left, this time causing another ground loop. McMasters then applied the brakes which caused the Wildcat to nose over and flip over onto its back. McMasters was unhurt, but the plane was severely damaged.

On 14 November, familiarization flights with the Corsair and glide bombing practice were the lessons for the day. 2Lt. Joseph A. Condon had a wild ride in Corsair FG-1



BuNo 13084. When he was returning from his lessons at 1300, he stalled his plane upon landing. His plane bounced high, swerved out of control, and after several attempts at braking, the plane ran into a ditch off Runway 4. He was unhurt, but the Corsair was hauled off for major repairs. That night, several pilots were practicing night landings when 2Lt. John J. McMasters damaged his second Wildcat in as many days. He brought Wildcat F4F-3 BuNo 03479 in too fast and long. Upon touchdown he applied his brakes to slow down to make the turn at the end of the runway. He was going too fast to make the turn and ground looped to the left, dragging the right wing. McMasters was not injured, but the plane required its wing to be repaired. No information is available concerning if McMasters continued training after his second accident in two days.

November 16 was the wildest and worst training day for the squadron when an unusual cluster of fatal accidents and two narrow escapes within minutes of each other occurred. Two pilots were killed and another injured when three Wildcats crashed in two separate accidents. Shortly before 1900, Captain Thomas R. Furlow, 2Lt. Sidney R. Goldstein, 2Lt. Howard T. Willey, and one other pilot took off for their night flying exercise. Immediately after takeoff, the pilots had to go on instruments since poor visibility eliminated any visual of the horizon. The weather on this night was high solid overcast, with the accident report specifically noting that virtually no horizon reference was available to the pilots that night. Such conditions can easily create disorientation and vertigo. As Goldstein was joining up on the flight leader, he suffered a case of vertigo or mistook lights on the ground for his flight leader and crashed into the ground. Willey's Wildcat soon followed and it also crashed. Both Goldstein's and Willey's planes crashed just under two miles northeast of MCAS Mojave. Both Wildcats FM-1 BuNo 15225 and 15434 were destroyed. Willey was killed, aged 22, while Goldstein survived with two broken legs and lacerations. Both pilots had flown less than 100 hours in the Wildcat, and both had three hours or less night flying experience.

In a separate accident that occurred within minutes of the Goldstein/Willey incident, 2Lt. Galen K. Merkel was killed. At 1900, 2Lt. David J. Schoetz, 2Lt. Max K. Robinson, Galen K. Merkel, and one other pilot took off for night flying in Wildcats. One plane turned back due to propeller trouble; Schoetz, Robinson and Merkel continued on. The planes were nearly finished with a turn on instruments and as Robinson joined the formation he noticed Merkel suddenly fall out of formation, roll inverted and dive into the ground five miles north of MCAS Mojave at 1908 hours, only three minutes after the loss of the two other Wildcats. Merkel was killed when his Wildcat FM-1 BuNo 15442 burst into flames upon impact. Schoetz, coming out of the turn looked back and saw that Merkel's plane was a mass of flames and was so engrossed in the wreckage that he did not pay attention to his instruments. Schoetz went into a vertical dive and nearly crashed himself, but narrowly recovered. He then circled over the wreck until emergency crews arrived. Like Goldstein and Willey, Merkel had slightly over 76 hours in a Wildcat, and only three hours of night flying experience. Merkel was only 21 years old at the time of his death. Vertigo was listed as the probable cause of the mishap.

Over the course of the next several days, men and aircraft were ferried over to Camp Pendleton in preparation for another combat tour in the Pacific ending their wild Wildcat training time in the Mojave. This story is dedicated to the four Marine pilots who were killed in training at MCAS Mojave. Find-A-Grave memorial links:

John Fredrick Osterlund

<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/137511042/john-f-osterlund>

Lee Earl O'Harra

<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/66326284/lee-earl-o'harra>

Howard T. Willey

<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/49363767/howard-thatcher-willey>

Galen K. Merkel

<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/110282188/galen-keith-merkel/flower>



**Wildcats from VMO-251 circa 1942**

The deeds of the young pilots of Marine Observation Squadron 251 (VMO-251) live on in memory. One of the VMO-251 Wildcat crash sites has been located and explored. The crash site of Wildcat FM-1, BuNo 15442, which crashed 16 Nov 1943, killing 2Lt. Galen K. Markel was discovered five miles north of Mojave. The crash site was first visited in 2009 and again in 2018. I can only wonder how many more Wildcat crash sites still remain in the Mojave Desert and are yet to be discovered.

**FOOTNOTE:** The Wildcats of VMO-251 were used in the filming of the movie "Wake Island" by Paramount Studios.



Screen shot from the movie Wake Island



Squadron members who participated in the film Wake Island





**General Motors (Eastern) FM-1 Wildcat in flight, circa 1943**

**Exploring the crash site of FM-1 Wildcat, BuNo 15442, which crashed 16 Nov 1943**



**Dave Trojan at the crash site March 2009**





**Artifacts at the crash site March 2009**



**Main artifact pile from FM-1 Wildcat, BuNo 15442, March 2009**





**Artifact pile from FM-1 Wildcat, BuNo 15442, March 2009**



**Artifacts at the crash site 2018, there were much less at the site compared to 2009**





**Artifacts at the crash site 2018**

**Many artifacts have disappeared and some are slowly sinking into the ground**



**Found thief who stole some of the artifacts from the crash site. Artifacts were collected by desert kangaroo rat living in a nearby bush. The rat has foraged parts from the crash site to cover the entrance to its den. This case is solved.**