

Tail Gunner Joe: Joseph R. McCarthy and the Marine Corps

By Thomas C. Reeves

IN mid-1952, Senator Joseph R. McCarthy's campaign for reelection seemed certain of success. For more than two years he had made headlines almost daily with charges of Communist subversion in American life, and was known internationally as the symbol of a reckless and alarmingly popular assault upon liberal values that historians would soon call "the Second Red Scare." McCarthy enjoyed ample campaign financing. His supporters were intensely loyal and hard-working. And he could boast a remarkable record of electoral victories, both personal and on behalf of others.

That June the anti-McCarthy *Milwaukee Journal* published a lengthy and detailed attack upon the senator's military record that stirred interest in newspapers throughout the country. Some of the preliminary research had been undertaken by a variety of researchers, but the bulk of the work was done by *Journal* reporter Robert Fleming, who had covered McCarthy since his election in 1946 and had once frankly admitted to the senator that he was out to "get" him.¹

Fleming claimed that according to official Marine Corps records, McCarthy had lied about entering the corps in 1942 as a buck private and about having been wounded overseas. He also cast doubt on McCarthy's claim

to have flown missions in the South Pacific as a tail gunner. The reporter was puzzled, however, by the presence in the file of a citation signed by Admiral Chester Nimitz which McCarthy had used in campaigns to document his war record. Moreover, at least one personal friend of the senator's had seen a scar which McCarthy attributed to an overseas airplane crash described in the Nimitz citation.²

In subsequent years Fleming's charges have been repeated so often they have come to be taken as unquestioned facts.³ A careful re-examination of McCarthy's experiences in the Marine Corps reveals that Fleming was partly right, partly wrong; and also that there are

² *Milwaukee Journal*, June 3, 1952. For earlier accounts, see *New York Post*, September 7, 1951, and *Milwaukee Journal*, November 14, 1951. See also the General George Catlett Marshall folder, box 3, Robert Fleming Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

³ See Jack Anderson and Ronald W. May, *McCarthy: The Man, the Senator, the "Ism"* (Boston, 1952), 58-66; Richard H. Rovere, *Senator Joe McCarthy* (Cleveland, 1959), 94-98; Robert Griffith, *The Politics of Fear: Joseph R. McCarthy and the Senate* (Lexington, Kentucky, 1970), 5-7; Fred J. Cook, *The Nightmare Decade: The Life and Times of Senator Joe McCarthy* (New York, 1971), 86-91; Lately Thomas, *When Even Angels Wept: The Senator Joseph McCarthy Affair—A Story Without a Hero* (New York, 1971), 23-30; National Broadcasting Company, *Tail Gunner Joe*, February, 1977. See also Thomas C. Reeves, "The Search for Joe McCarthy," in the *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 60: 185-196 (Spring, 1977).

¹ Interview with Robert Fleming, October 27, 1975; Michael O'Brien, "Robert Fleming, Senator McCarthy and the Myth of the Marine Hero," in *Journalism Quarterly*, 50: 48-53 (Spring, 1973).



Courtesy George H. Lubeley, Milwaukee

Joseph R. McCarthy (center, in necktie) with fellow law students on the Marquette University campus, October, 1931.

some shadows on McCarthy's past which Fleming failed to see.⁴

JOE (as he was always known) McCarthy joined the United States Marines for a political purpose. In 1939 he had won a stunning upset victory at the polls to become, at age thirty, the youngest circuit judge in Wisconsin history. His audacity was such that he soon announced to friends that he was going to run for the United States Senate at the earliest opportunity. He thought of enlisting in the army when America entered the war, but accepted the advice of Urban P. Van Susteren of Appleton, a close

⁴ Attempts by McCarthy's supporters to counter the interpretation fostered by his foes were desultory. *Milwaukee Journal*, February 8, 13, 1977. Roy Cohn, *McCarthy: The Answer to "Tail Gunner Joe"* (New York, 1977) is, aside from a brief introduction, a thinly disguised reprint of his earlier *McCarthy* (New York, 1968). To date, the author has conducted 125 interviews with Mrs. G. Joseph Minetti, the senator's widow, and other McCarthy relatives, neighbors, schoolmates, teachers, office employees, newsmen, political associates and opponents, and others.

friend, about the greater potential political profit in being known as a marine.⁵

On June 2, 1942, McCarthy wrote a letter to a marine recruiting officer in Milwaukee, applying for a commission. He then made arrangements for a leave of absence, during which other circuit judges would handle the district's trial work. On June 4 he drove to Milwaukee and enlisted.

He told reporters that he was entering without any promises of a commission or special favors but that he hoped to be able to get into officer's training school. At the moment, he said, he was "more interested in a gun than a commission." Van Susteren laughed heartily when he read that. Joe had an immense capacity for what his friend called "pure Irish bulls—t."⁶

The *Post-Crescent* of Appleton, managed by John Reidl, a long-time friend who considered himself McCarthy's political mentor, ran a headline declaring that the judge had enlisted as a buck private. For the rest of

⁵ Interview with Urban P. Van Susteren, November 25, 1975.

⁶ *Ibid.*; *The Post-Crescent* (Appleton), June 4, 1942.



WHi (X3) 34774

Judge McCarthy on the bench of the Outagamie County Circuit Court, July, 1942, a few days before he shipped out for the Pacific.

his life Joe would contend that he first entered the Marine Corps as a "buck private" or "private." He included the assertion in campaign literature and in biographies prepared for the *Congressional Directory* and *Who's Who in America*. He said in 1944 that he had "earned" a second lieutenant's commission.

Actually, Joe received a direct commission as a first lieutenant on July 29, 1942, and was sworn in on August 4 at that rank. At no time did he serve in the Marine Corps as a buck private. (This fact became public knowledge in 1951.) He was ordered to report to the Marine base at Quantico, Virginia, for basic training. Before leaving Wisconsin, he presided briefly in full uniform at a trial in Milwaukee. It made quite a splash in the newspapers.⁷

The judge was thirty-three years old when he reported for active duty. "I thought I was in good shape," he said later, "but in that first week's training at Quantico I thought I'd die and was afraid I wouldn't. I was in a group of 18 and 19 year old kids, most of them good athletes. We either captured or lost every hill in Virginia before we finished our training."⁸

⁷ *Milwaukee Journal*, November 14, 1951, June 8, 1952, August 12, 1942.

⁸ *Wisconsin State Journal* (Madison), July 18, 1946.

During the remainder of 1942, and into the following year, McCarthy received additional training at a number of stations. In Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, he attended the army intelligence school. In the fall he found himself at Camp Lejeune, in New River, North Carolina. There he ran into Leo Day, a young friend from Wausau, who was in the Naval Medical Corps. Both men had seventy-two-hour passes and decided to spend the time together. They flew to Washington, Joe saying that he wanted to look over his future place of residence. They exchanged pleasantries with Senator Robert M. La Follette, Jr., and that evening toured the city's nightclubs. Day thought his companion one of the most jovial and pleasant people he had ever known.

Next day they went to Baltimore, and that night, following another round of nightclubs, both became dead drunk. They awoke the following afternoon in the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York City. Neither knew how they got there.⁹

FROM January through March, 1943, Joe trained at the Marine Corps air station in El Centro, California. Now a captain, he was the intelligence officer

⁹ Interview with Leo Day, February 11, 1977.

for a newly formed dive-bomber squadron, VMSB-235. In combat his job would involve briefing the forty pilots prior to their flights, interrogating them on their return about targets, enemy resistance, and the like, and preparing intelligence reports to be sent up the chain of command. His responsibilities were supposed to confine him to a desk.

McCarthy immediately became one of the most popular men in the squadron. Many of his buddies took pictures, and the photographs show him trim and smiling, slightly balding, with a crew cut. (Overseas he would sport a beard part of the time.) He was called "Mac" by some and "Joe" by others, and he was the life of more than one party. Ken Smedley, one of the pilots, once introduced him to his parents, and his mother was particularly taken with the captain.¹⁰

The squadron arrived in Pearl Harbor aboard the USS *Kitty Hawk* on March 31 and was assigned to the Marine Corps air station

at Ewa, Oahu. Following two months of further training, during which flights were made to Midway and outlying islands, the squadron and another embarked on June 12 for the South Pacific. Joe was on the Navy's seaplane tender *Chandeleur*. He would spend sixteen months overseas (and always say eighteen).

One marine, who kept a diary, quickly struck up a friendship with Joe. "We weren't long out of Pearl [he wrote] before I decided that McCarthy was the most interesting character aboard." They enjoyed long talks on deck. Joe often spoke of a girl friend, whose picture he displayed on the desk in his cabin. When politics came up, Joe told his friend that he had voted for Franklin D. Roosevelt three times. (The McCarthys had been Democrats for generations.)

The days at sea were quiet and uneventful, and there was time for more than chatting. The Marine recalled. "Joe was quite popular with all the officers. Not only was he a fine conversationalist, but he also had found a way around the regulation banning liquor on board. He had three trunks marked 'office

¹⁰ Interview with Ken Smedley, March 29, 1977.

McCarthy debriefing Marine Corps aviators following bombing missions in the Pacific.

WHI (X3) 29727



supplies—squadron 235' and all those supplies were liquid."

Joe's shipmate remembered that when they played poker "he'd sit in a game, and suddenly, for no reason at all, bet \$101.15, or \$97.90. Not only would the bet knock other players off balance, but they'd have the problem of counting out the exact sum. Most times, they'd let him have the pot just to get on to the next hand."

The passage was so peaceful that Commander Albert K. Morehouse gave the men permission to stage a "shellback" initiation ceremony on June 22, the day the *Chandeleur* crossed the equator. The gaiety began with the announcement that the uniform for "pollywog" initiates consisted of pajamas, overseas caps, and bare feet. The diarist noted that "the war was completely forgotten as we appeared before Neptunus Rex, the enlisted man enthroned on the boat deck. Rank meant nothing, of course, as we were paddled, soaked with hoses, speared by the electric trident, and generally abused. One marine officer did an elaborate strip tease, and someone else read a long defense, typed on toilet paper. It was comic relief from the war, still hundreds of miles ahead of us."¹¹

Joe had nearly completed the initiation when he suffered an accident. Climbing down a ladder with a bucket fastened to his right foot, he slipped. His left foot caught on a lower rung and he fell backward, causing a fracture at the base of the fifth metatarsal. The squadron medical officer, Dr. George D. Barnes, put a cast on the foot. Later, when it was about to be removed, the corpsman assigned the task used glacial acetic acid rather than vinegar to soften the plaster of Paris before cutting it. The acid caused a chemical burn on McCarthy's left leg that took several weeks to heal, leaving what Dr. Barnes later called a "fairly large" scar. The accidental fracture and burn were the only injuries Joe would suffer while in the Marine Corps.¹²

McCarthy was quick to recognize the political profit in any sort of war-related wound,

and was not above transforming his prank-related mishap into an act of combat heroism. In July, newspapers carried the story that he had received a "facial injury and more serious injuries to a leg and a foot" and would be hospitalized for about eight weeks. In November a press release declared that he had been wounded in action.¹³

BY the spring of 1944, in time for his initial race for the United States Senate, Joe sported a citation signed by Admiral Chester Nimitz, commander-in-chief of the Pacific Fleet. It commended McCarthy for his very real participation as a rear gunner and photographer in the Solomon Islands from September 1 to December 31, 1943, but altered the date and circumstances of Joe's injury: "He obtained excellent photographs of enemy gun positions, despite intense anti-aircraft fire, thereby gaining valuable information which contributed materially to the success of subsequent strikes in the area. Although suffering from a severe leg injury, he refused to be hospitalized and continued to carry out his duties as Intelligence Officer in a highly efficient manner. His courageous devotion to duty was in keeping with the highest traditions of the naval service."¹⁴

The citation resulted from a letter of recommendation dated February 19, 1944, which bore what purported to be the signature of Major Glenn A. Todd, then McCarthy's commanding officer. In fact, Todd neither wrote nor signed such a letter. It seems certain that Joe himself was author of the document. As Todd explained in 1977, "Intelligence officers had very little work to do, so we gave them all sorts of odd jobs. They wrote citations for awards." (The Marine Corps admitted reluctantly in 1978 that it had destroyed the original letter five years earlier as part of an effort to obtain additional storage space. A typed copy was kept.) After apparently forging Todd's signature to the letter, Joe sent it through the proper channels. Admiral Nim-

¹¹ *Milwaukee Journal*, June 8, 1952.

¹² George B. Barnes to the author, July 13, 28, 1977; interviews with former squadron members Ken Smedley, Glenn Todd, Jerome Wander, and Everett E. Munn.

¹³ *Milwaukee Journal*, July 9, 1943; *The Post-Crescent*, November 15, 1943.

¹⁴ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, July 21, 1944.



WHi (X3) 34726

Douglas SBD Dauntless dive bomber of the type in which McCarthy flew, pictured over Japanese-held Truk in April, 1944.

itz routinely signed thousands of such documents during the war.¹⁵

Over the years, McCarthy gave several different accounts of his wound. At political gatherings he would sometimes feign a limp and say that he had ten pounds of shrapnel in his leg. Van Susteren heard him make the contention once and thought it typical McCarthy hyperbole. On one occasion he asked him specifically about the injury. Joe rolled

¹⁵ Glenn Todd to the author, October 15, 1977; G. M. Neufeld, Reference Section, Headquarters, United States Marine Corps, to the author, October 6, 1977; copy, A. H. Manhard, Jr., for the Commandant of the Marine Corps, to Congressman Les Aspin, February 13, April 5, 1978. Robert Fleming mistakenly attributed the letter of recommendation to Major Everett E. Munn, and this has become part of the standard account. *Milwaukee Journal*, June 8, 1952. This error was soon discovered by the Marine Corps. See John B. Farriter to Everett E. Munn, February 13, 1953, in Munn's possession.

up a pantleg and showed him the scar: "There, you son of a bitch. Now let's hear no more about it." He later denied ever having claimed to bear shrapnel, and blamed the story on a reporter who had once been a Communist.¹⁶

The account he gave most often was that he had suffered a leg injury when a plane he was in ground-looped on landing and overturned and burned. He escaped, spurned medical attention, and went to the intelligence shack to type a report. (A plane did ground-loop during the fall of 1943, breaking the pilot's arm. There was no fire; Joe was not aboard. It was the only casualty sus-

¹⁶ Interviews with Fleming and Van Susteren, February 21, 1976; Bob Schwartz memorandum, October 4, 1951, box 3, Fleming Papers; "Joseph R. McCarthy vs. The Post-Standard Company. . .," deposition, March 29, 1952, p. 8, in the possession of Syracuse, New York, attorney Tracy Ferguson.

tained by the squadron in over 8,000 hours of flying.)¹⁷

When someone would note that he had not received a Purple Heart while in the service, McCarthy would always point to his citation, which he published in campaign literature. In 1952 he told a reporter, "I had a leg badly smashed up, burned and broken. In fact, I got a citation from Nimitz based on that." That same year, in a deposition, he was asked if he had suffered an injury during a shellback ceremony in 1943. Under oath, Joe replied, "Oh, a minor—I forget what it was. I did suffer some minor injury."¹⁸

THE *Chandeleur* docked in the New Hebrides on July 3, and the entire squadron was soon based at Espiritu Santo. On September 1, McCarthy's unit, VMSB-235, arrived at Henderson Field, Guadalcanal, and three days later flew its first combat mission. Before long, pilots hit gun emplacements at Vila and Balale and spotted artillery for Allied troops on Arundel and New Georgia. The assignments were important and at times dangerous. The Japanese fought back with anti-aircraft weapons.¹⁹

Joe carried out his less exciting duties on the ground efficiently and responsibly. And he always found time for fun. One night, as a volunteer mess officer, he helped supervise the digging of barbecue pits and a feast that featured nine roasted cows, five gallons of "torpedo juice," and 130 cases of beer "borrowed from the Navy." He often wangled access to airplanes and would fly in canned grapefruit juice, medicinal brandy, canned turkeys, and other rare delicacies, which he

distributed freely. One grateful recipient later recalled, "You'd see Joe McCarthy come up with an airplane full of goodies from the rear area . . . kind of like Santa Claus coming in the Mason's parade."²⁰

McCarthy joined two other squadron members Jerome Wander and John A. "Jocko" Kidney, in a profitable smuggling enterprise. Captain McCarthy contacted British and Australian ships in the Pacific and purchased liquor. Kidney loaded it aboard a seaplane and flew it back to the squadron, where Wander handled distribution. All went well until Joe and Kidney quarreled over a division of the profits. This led to a brutal fist fight between the two that Wander later described as "unbelievable." As tough as Joe was, Kidney, an ex-hockey player from Dorchester, Massachusetts, was his equal. The partnership dissolved with both men lying in the dirt, covered with blood.²¹

Master Sergeant Wander was the squadron's head gunner. He and Joe were the oldest among the forty pilots and forty gunners and were close friends. McCarthy told Wander that he was going to be Wisconsin's next senator, and made it clear that his campaign would be helped by pictures and stories linking him with combat duty. Moreover, the captain was anxious to participate in some of the adventures pilots described to him daily. Before long, Joe persuaded the sergeant to teach him to shoot the "twin 30's" in the two-man SBD dive bomber's rear seat. The instruction took place on the ground in an old plane, and Joe was an enthusiastic student. At one point, he swung the machine guns around too far and accidentally shot holes in the plane's tail.²²

As Joe told the story of his first overseas flight in 1946, he had become dissatisfied with the quality of the high-altitude photography taken during the dive-bombing because the pictures failed to reveal gun positions accurately. After he had complained several times, Major Everett E. Munn, the squadron's commanding officer, "invited" him to take the

¹⁷ Jack Alexander, "The Senate's Remarkable Upstart," in the *Saturday Evening Post*, 220: 16 (August 9, 1947); interview with Everett E. Munn, September 28, 1977; United States Marine Corps, Headquarters, press release, November 1, 1943.

¹⁸ *Milwaukee Journal*, June 8, 1952; "Joseph R. McCarthy vs. The Post-Standard Company . . .," deposition, March 29, 1952, p. 8.

¹⁹ United States Marine Corps, Headquarters, "A Brief History of Marine Fighter/Attack Squadron 235 . . ." 1969, p. 1; Robert Sherrod, *History of Marine Corps Aviation in World War II* (Washington, D. C., 1952), 465; United States Marine Corps, Headquarters, press release regarding Major Everett E. Munn, September 17, 1943.

²⁰ *Eau Claire Leader*, January 31, 1947; interview with Munn; Glenn Silber interview with Penn Kimball, copy in the author's possession.

²¹ Interview with Jerome Wander, September 9, 1977.

²² *Ibid.*



WHI (X3) 33165

The press release accompanying this wartime photograph of Joe McCarthy related how the Marine captain "traded a judge's gavel for a pair of .30-caliber machine guns . . . [and] has gone along as a rear-gunner on more than a dozen dive-bombing attacks against the Japs, shedding court-room demeanor long enough to strafe enemy anti-aircraft positions. . . ."

pictures himself, giving him thirty minutes to learn how to operate a camera before the next dive bombers took off. Joe recalled, "I was the most involuntary volunteer you ever saw."

The pilot was Major Todd, the squadron executive officer. Joe asked himself, "McCarthy, what in heck are you doing here?" As the plane dove toward the Japanese-held island and dropped its lethal cargo, Todd later recalled, tracer bullets ripped through the air and appeared to hit the gunner's cockpit. Todd anxiously called Joe on the interphone but received no reply. He turned the squadron over to his wing man and headed for the nearest airfield for help. The radio soon squawked; it was Joe saying he was all right. He had tied down the camera with his microphone cord in order to fire the machine guns. Joe later admitted that he was "scared stiff"

when he first saw the tracer bullets coming up at him. A former collegiate boxer, his first inclination was to fight back.²³

McCarthy flew with several pilots on squadron missions; he went up two or three times with Ken Smedley, and six or eight times with W. H. Montfort. He strafed areas during pull-outs after the bombs were released, and shot at a number of specific targets such as supply and fuel dumps, barges, and bridges. At Bougainville, he and Montfort badly damaged a Japanese truck convoy crossing a bridge. On several occasions his own plane was under fire. But Wander restricted Joe's participation largely to the safer local strikes that the fliers called "milk runs." On the really dangerous missions, such as to the Japanese stronghold of

²³ *Wisconsin State Journal*, July 18, 1946; Glenn Todd to the author, April 4, 1977.



WHi (X3) 34722

Low-level air strike on a Japanese airfield in New Guinea, 1944. This Fifth Air Force photograph is from the wartime scrapbook of Col. Philip Fox La Follette.

Rabaul, pilots did not want an intelligence officer seated behind them. (Joe would always falsely claim, even in his official biography written for the *Congressional Directory*, that he had participated in the air strikes over Rabaul.)

"The Judge loved to shoot guns," one pilot said later. "He was really eager in that rear seat." Joe claimed to have fired 4,700 rounds of ammunition during three missions in a single day, and he made sure that the public relations officer on Guadalcanal got that figure into a press release. As a gag, men in the squadron awarded him a plaque "for destroying more coconut trees than anyone else in the South Pacific." He was also served with a formal "summons and complaint" signed by "Lever Brothers," the soap manufacturers who owned many of the trees in the area.²⁴

HOW many strike/flights did Joe make? His figures varied, rising

each time he ran for the Senate. In 1944 he said fourteen. Two years later he claimed seventeen. In 1951, applying for medals, the total became thirty-two. The Marine Corps accepted the latter figure, and in 1952 it awarded Senator McCarthy the Distinguished Flying Cross, bestowed upon those who completed at least twenty-five combat missions, plus an Air Medal and four stars. Joe said, "I have never received and never expect to receive anything I will value more highly." The extravagant praise in the DFC citation made no mention of his "injury."²⁵

Flight officers kept flight logs during the war. These were certified monthly, and served as the official record of participation in combat missions. McCarthy's was filled out by Major Todd. When the war was over, the flight logs were given to the participants.

In late September, 1951, Joe supported his request for Air Medals with "certified copies from his flight logbook," signed, he said, by Major Todd and verifying thirty-two missions.

²⁴ Interviews with Smedley, Montfort (May 24, 1977), and Wander; Alexander, "The Senate's Remarkable Upstart," 52; *Milwaukee Journal*, June 8, 1952; *Wisconsin State Journal*, July 18, 1946.

²⁵ *Milwaukee Journal*, April 25, 1944, December 31, 1952; *Wisconsin State Journal*, July 18, 1946; *Capital Times* (Madison), December 30, 1952.

Reporters, by this time highly suspicious of the senator's war record, thought it curious that the Commandant of the Marine Corps consented to certify only eleven strike/flights and recommend two Air Medals (one medal was awarded per five flights). At some point the Commandant placed an undated statement in McCarthy's file: "It is the opinion of the Headquarters that Major McCarthy participated in combat flights in addition to those used as a basis for the recommended awards, however, official records cannot be used to substantiate this opinion." Marine Corps leaders were well known to be sympathetic to Senator McCarthy. Major Todd, who was in Indonesia, received what he considered a "very strange" order from Marine Corps headquarters forbidding him to comment on McCarthy's missions or citations. Newsmen did not contact him.

Actually, Major Todd certified eleven strike/flights after Joe sent him his flight log in the spring of 1949. He authorized two air medals. The figure eleven came from his wartime entries in the log, entries that jibed perfectly with his memory of events. (He was unaware that Joe had received the Distinguished Flying Cross until he was told by the author in 1977. At first he was unwilling to believe it, and requested official documentation.) He strongly denied the possibility of McCarthy's participation in thirty-two flights, or even twenty. He himself flew in only fourteen combat missions. Major Munn flew in fewer than twenty.²⁶

In 1977, after viewing the National Broadcasting Company's television production *Tail Gunner Joe*, Jerome Wander checked his wartime records to see how many flights they revealed for the captain. The figure corresponded exactly with Todd's recollection and the Marine Corps' official records. Todd, Munn, Wander, Montfort, and Smedley unanimously reject the figure of thirty-two as far too high. Marine Corps records show that Air Medals were awarded in 1952 for flights that occurred a few days before McCarthy's initial trip with Todd and two months after he left the squad-

ron. (Which is why he later claimed to have been overseas for eighteen months.)²⁷

Other circumstances surrounding the issuance of Senator McCarthy's awards raised eyebrows at the time. Dan A. Kimball, President Harry Truman's Secretary of the Navy, granted final approval on the recommendation of Assistant Secretary John F. Floberg, who had assured his superior that the matter was "routine." When reporters reached Kimball at home in California, he was said to have understood that the senator was to receive only a single Air Medal. Floberg, it was noted, had been a member of an important law firm in Chicago that represented the pro-McCarthy *Chicago Tribune*.²⁸

Whatever the machinations involved, the Distinguished Flying Cross bestowed upon Senator McCarthy near the height of his national political prominence was clearly unearned and was granted with the collusion of top Marine Corps officials, who were fully aware of his actual service record. The senator was tight-lipped about the subject, and in 1952 attributed all queries into his wartime experiences to sinister, subversive forces.

MCCARTHY decided to run for the Senate in 1944 against the popular Republican incumbent Alexander Wiley. He had made a handsome sum of money from railroad investments and was determined to invest it in a campaign he knew he could not win, but which would give him ample publicity and lay the foundation for another Senate bid after the war.

Joe courted newspapermen and photographers who were in the vicinity of his squadron. He had pictures taken of himself in a dive bomber, next to the machine guns and wearing a flying helmet. These were for display in campaign literature, where he would

²⁷ Interviews with Todd, Wander, Munn, Montfort (May 24, 1977), and Smedley; A. H. Manhard to Les Aspin, February 13, 1978. In 1951 Joe wrote to Montfort, "As you recall, I did make a few trips in the back seat and shot hell out of the coconut trees." Joe McCarthy to W. H. Montfort, July 18, 1951, in Dr. Montfort's possession.

²⁸ *Milwaukee Journal*, December 31, 1952. See Constantine Brown in *Washington Evening Star*, December 31, 1952.

²⁶ *Ibid*; G. M. Neufeld to the author, September 19, 1977; interviews with Glenn Todd, March 29, 31, 1977; interview with Munn; Glenn Todd to the author, April 4, 19, 1977, April 27, 1978.



WHi (X3) 29732



WHi (X3) 29725



WHi (X3) 29730

McCarthy used these photographs for publicity purposes during and after his tour of duty in the Pacific.

call himself "Tail Gunner Joe." When his name appeared in a press release about a bombing raid to Bougainville, he told his public relations officer on Guadalcanal, Lieutenant P. T. Kimball, "This is worth 50,000 votes to me. Come, have a drink on it."²⁹

McCarthy especially liked a story that made his home-town newspaper that glorified his role as an intelligence officer. It reported that "every evening 'the judge' holds court in a dilapidated shack just off a jungle air strip deep in the South Pacific combat zone. The folks back in Wisconsin might be a trifle shocked at his lack of dignity now. He stands barechested before his bench, an ancient table reeling on its last legs, and opens court with: 'All right, what kind of hell did you give the Japs today?'"³⁰ He volunteered to represent several men in court martial cases, and was pleased by a dispatch about the "flying judge."

Friends sent clippings that included his name, and he carried them around, showing them to whoever might be interested. One fellow officer, Captain Jack Canaan, later recalled, "At the time, I was young and didn't understand the significance of his knowing wink that this clipping and picture of himself in a helmet would help out in the States." Joe put signs proclaiming, "McCarthy for U.S. Senator" on two trucks and a jeep, and painted, "Headquarters, McCarthy for U.S. Senator," across his tent.³¹

He sought out troops from Wisconsin, introduced himself, and said that he was running for office. Joe seemed genuinely interested in the man he was meeting, and wanted to know all about his family. John F. Thompson of Racine thought him extremely ingratiating. (McCarthy's powers of memory were such that in 1952 he spotted Thompson in the audience at a rally in Racine and immediately left the stage to shake his hand. They had not seen each other since 1944 at Bougainville.)³²

McCarthy arrived in Milwaukee on July 20 to conduct his campaign. While overseas he had served with VSMB-235 on two combat

tours, from September, 1943, through March, 1944, and April through June, 1944. In early July he was routinely (but no doubt at his own request) transferred to the Marine Air Fleet in San Diego and given an automatic thirty-day leave, which he used to speed toward Wisconsin.³³

He proudly displayed his uniform and ribbons, and showed reporters the Nimitz citation and a commendatory letter from a major general. He limited his conversation with the press to modest pleasantries. When asked about missions as a tail gunner, he replied, "All I can say is that I've ruined a hell of a lot of coconut trees on those islands." When a reporter wanted to know what the troops talked most about overseas, he grinned and said, "What do you think?" "Next to that, what?" the reporter continued. "The same thing," Joe replied.³⁴

The candidate made several campaign appearances but was forbidden by law, as a serviceman, to speak directly about politics. He stuck to generalities, exhibiting an interest in international government. This was acceptable to McCarthy, for he had long been convinced that people were interested in images, not issues, and he had come home to be seen—in his uniform, smiling.³⁵

Four newspapers endorsed McCarthy: the *Post-Crescent* of Appleton, the *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, the *Shawano Evening Leader*, and the *Madison Wisconsin State Journal*. This support was largely local (only the *State Journal* was published outside the Appleton area) and almost entirely personal. John Reidl wrote in the *Post-Crescent*: "McCarthy, about 35 years of age, had the wholesome judgment to hang his robe as circuit judge in the closet, ignore the adequate income to which the law entitled him and shove off with the tough

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 61; interview with Montfort, May 24, 1977; interview with John Thompson, October 7, 1975. McCarthy's powers of memory were such that he sped through four years of high school in nine months and completed law school while working fifty and sixty hours a week on the side.

³⁰ See General George Catlett Marshall folder, box 3, Fleming Papers; Glenn Todd to the author, September 16, 1977.

³¹ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, July 21, 1944.

³² *Milwaukee Journal*, August 4, 14, 1944; interview with Van Susteren, January 15, 1976.

²⁹ *Milwaukee Journal*, June 8, 1952.

³⁰ *The Post-Crescent*, November 15, 1943.

³¹ *Milwaukee Journal*, June 8, 1952; Anderson and May, *McCarthy*, 60.



WHi (X3) 34773

McCarthy (right) was best man at the wedding of Urban Van Susteren and Margery Conway at the U.S. Army air base in Syracuse, New York, June, 1945. Helen Burke (left) was the bride's attendant.

young fellows in the Marines. If a combination of the McCarthy qualities cannot make a statesman, then what can?"³⁶

Senator Wiley won renomination easily and went on to be reelected. But Joe placed second in the primary and garnered almost 80,000 votes. He solidly won the counties within his judicial district and came close to victory in seven other counties. He was elated at the outcome, and grew anxious to devote all his energies to a campaign for the Senate.³⁷

Captain McCarthy reported to El Centro in August and was soon at El Toro, another Marine training base in California. He knew that he was eligible for more overseas duty early the next year. On October 19 he applied for a four-month leave, pleading pressing duties at home. In fact, he was up for reelection to his judgeship in 1945 and wanted to be on hand to prepare for the contest. The

Marine Corps rejected the request but gave McCarthy the option of resigning. He took that route on December 11, 1944, and was home in late January.³⁸

Joe publicly attributed his departure from the Marines to his "war wound." When he arrived in Milwaukee on January 29, 1945, he told reporters that he had recently been confined to a hospital bed at El Toro, suffering from a leg injury. (In 1951 he would have Senator Harry Cain declare that he resigned after telling the Marine Corps that "it would either be necessary to place him in a naval hospital or permit him to return home so that his leg could benefit from medical attention.") No one noticed a limp. That would come later. Rather than mentioning his resignation, he said that he would be on furlough until February 20 and thereafter go on inactive duty. He was back on the bench in Appleton, wearing his uniform, the next morning.³⁹

³⁶ See Anderson and May, *McCarthy*, 68-69.

³⁷ See *Wisconsin Blue Book, 1946* (Madison, 1946), 595. A number of important documents pertaining to the primary election are in the Alexander Wiley Papers, Archives Division, State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

³⁸ *Milwaukee Journal*, November 14, 1951. He was relieved of active duty on February 20, 1945, and his resignation "under honorable conditions" was accepted on March 29.

³⁹ *Ibid.*; *Milwaukee Sentinel*, January 29, 1945; *The Post-Crescent*, January 31, 1945.

McCarthy was reelected in April, without opposition, and almost immediately began preparations for the race against Senator La Follette in 1946. When Urban Van Susteren returned home from the Army a few months later, he was astonished to learn that McCarthy had his campaign strategy completely mapped out.⁴⁰

CRITICS would often only publicize Joe McCarthy's exaggerations and distortions of his military record, noting that his resignation from the Marines exempted him from some of the most bloody battles in the war: the return to the Philippines, Iwo Jima, Okinawa. But in fairness it must be said that he served the corps and his country ably and with distinction. He risked his life on several occasions, and not entirely for the later political dividend. Posing in the gunner's seat and joining one or two flights would have been adequate for campaign advertising.

Those who served with McCarthy admired

⁴⁰ See Joe McCarthy to William M. Lamers, May 12, 1945, Thomas C. Reeves Collection, Marquette University; Van Susteren interview with Glenn Silber, in the author's possession.

him greatly. Glenn Todd recalled: "He was a sincere, patriotic, excellent Marine Corps Officer and as brave as the rest of us." Major General Field Harris, air commandant of the Marines, wrote, "Without exception the commanding officers under whom he served spoke of the performance of his duties in the highest terms. . . ." One of them, Major General H. R. Harmon, thought McCarthy had "shown marked qualities of leadership, cooperative spirit, and loyalty. His initiative, good judgment, determination, and diligence have made him an unusually useful member of the section in which he was assigned, and his unfailing good nature and ready wit made him well-liked and respected by his associates. This officer should be classified as 'excellent.' "

The *Wisconsin State Journal*, quoting the last two commendations in 1946, felt obliged to add: "He didn't have to go to war, but he did. There's nothing forcing him to run for the United States Senate either. Joe just feels that 'there's a job to be done' in Washington."⁴¹

⁴¹ Glenn Todd to the author, April 4, 1977; *Wisconsin State Journal*, July 18, 1946.