



Dirty Eddie's War: Based on the World War II Diary of Harry "Dirty Eddie" March Jr., Pacific Fighter Ace by Lee Cook.

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While primary source materials relating to the American experience in World War II abound, few record the experiences of individual men or women. Most firsthand accounts take the form of memoirs or oral history interviews produced years and often decades after the fact. The US military closely censored the letters of personnel stationed abroad. Consequently, they tend to focus on family and personal matters rather than what the soldiers were actually doing or how they reacted to what they witnessed. Many soldiers who saw combat and its gruesome effects censored themselves, not wanting to worry their family and friends at home. Diaries, which might have given them an outlet for expressing themselves, were strictly forbidden as security risks. The American Navy fighter pilot Harry "Dirty Eddie" March defied the rules and kept a diary of his service in the South Pacific from 1942 to 1944. It shows far more clearly than censored letters or official documents the physical and mental challenges confronted by fighter pilots and the toll they took on them. Thanks to British author Lee Cook, March's diary is now fully accessible to the public.

The diary itself is an unusual document. Aware of the ban on diaries, March composed his entries in the form of letters to his wife, Elsa. These include much of the personal and sentimental material common to letters home, but interspersed are accounts of his combat experience that would have landed him in a good deal of trouble had they been discovered. In the end, the diary remained secret and March brought it home with him, where it remained until Cook came across it many years later. A manager for the Royal Mail by profession, Cook developed an interest in VF-17, the last fighter squadron that Harry March served with. He began working in the 1990s with its surviving members and their families, eventually publishing its history.¹ Cook continued to research the squadron, and eventually became interested in Harry March, one of its "aces," who had died in 1946. By the time he connected with the family in 2008, Elsa had died, but her sister shared the diary with him and he set about editing it for publication.

Born in Ohio in 1919, Harry March grew up in Washington, DC, and attended the University of North Carolina, graduating in 1940. Along the way, he became a star athlete and even qualified for the 1940 Olympics as a hurdler. Those Olympics, of course, never took place, and March instead joined the Navy and trained as a fighter pilot until the Pearl Harbor attack, when he was assigned to squadron VF-6, which flew F4F Wildcat fighters off the carrier USS *Enterprise*, which he joined shortly after the Battle of Midway in June 1942. He flew some of the early missions over Guadalcanal, initially from the *Enterprise* until it withdrew due to battle damage, then from the *Saratoga* until it too was damaged. He then wound up as one of the first Navy pilots to reinforce the Marines, flying from Henderson Field on Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands, where he arrived on 11 Sept. 1942.

1. Lee Cook, *The Skull and the Crossbones Squadron: VF-17 in World War II* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer, 1998).

Life in the “Cactus² Air Force” came as something of a shock to the former carrier pilots. The American toehold on the island was tenuous and the airfield and surrounding installations came under regular bombardment from land, sea, and air. There were Japanese army attacks and infiltrators periodically threatened the airfield. Accommodations were primitive, supplies short, and disease, mud, and heat made day-to-day functioning a challenge, quite apart from having to fly missions against the Japanese, who at this stage of the war often outnumbered them in the air. Men responded to these stresses in various ways. March seldom bothered to bathe or shave, which led another pilot to call him “Dirty Eddie.” The nickname stuck and he took pride in, even though his “dirty” period lasted only a couple of weeks. Losses of men and aircraft were high, and the remaining pilots were soon in no shape to continue. March was rotated to the rear after less than a month on Guadalcanal. His diary entry of 6 Oct. 1942 indicates why this was necessary:

None of that nerve-racking waiting between 1015–1400 to wonder whether or not Tojo is coming and if he comes, to wonder whether or not you were going to get it that day. That’s where it got me toward the last, honey. After “Dutch” went, I began to get too jumpy and started to think that maybe I wouldn’t come back from one of the hops. When a man gets to feeling like that, he’s no longer any good as a combat flyer. Gee, I tried to fight that feeling off, but all I could see was Bill crashing and those two Zeros jumping “Dutch.” Darling, things are getting tough up at Cactus. An enemy fleet of three cruisers, seven cans [destroyers] and two transports are heading that way. If the big boys don’t hurry up and realize that some help is needed there, it’ll fall. Those flyers can’t possibly last more than a week longer. (77)

Real letters, of course, could never say such things. Much like combat infantry or bomber crews, fighter pilots had their limits.

The overall situation was less grim than March made it out to be. The Japanese attacks on Guadalcanal peaked in October, but the “big boys” had provided just enough support to enable the Marines to hold their positions; soon Marine and Army forces were on the offensive and the Americans gradually achieved both air and naval superiority in the Solomons. Meanwhile, Harry March went back home on leave and then joined a new squadron, VF-24, assigned to the new light carrier, USS *Belleau Wood*. While training with the squadron, March did some publicity work for the Navy, and at one point gave a radio interview about being a fighter pilot. Cook located a transcript of that interview, which he includes in the book (104–111). Here, of course, March paints a brighter picture of the situation, praising the fighting ability of the Marines and the virtues of the Grumman Wildcat and the training that US pilots received; he insists he wanted to return to action as soon as possible to support his buddies.

Return he did, flying F6F Hellcats off the *Belleau Wood* and participating in attacks on Tarawa Atoll in the Gilbert Islands in September 1943. He then transferred to another squadron, VF-17, where some of his old friends were serving. Flying F4U Corsairs from different bases in the Solomons and on New Britain, the new squadron compiled an excellent record and helped to drive the Japanese from the skies in the region by early 1944. March had done his job, helping along less experienced pilots, but he was showing the strains of flying regular patrols. One by one, the surviving veteran pilots were rotated home, and March served out the war training fighter pilots. He remained in the Navy after the war, only to die from a sudden attack of pneumonia in 1946.

Most of the information provided in *Dirty Eddie’s War* will not surprise readers familiar with the war in the South Pacific, but the immediacy of the material sets it apart from most other ac-

2. A code name for Guadalcanal.

counts. March knew little about the “big picture” of the war: how much was actually being done to support the Marines and pilots on Guadalcanal early on, or the degree to which the Allies were gaining the upper hand. He saw events as darker than they appeared in hindsight, nor did he blithely assume that the good guys would win. The diary entries reveal the ups and downs of his mental state during his time in the combat zone as well as his observations of what was happening to other pilots in his units. Taken as a whole, *Dirty Eddie's War* captures an individual pilot's experiences and makes them fully accessible to its audience.