



NAVY POW/MIA PUBLIC AFFAIRS
NAVY PERSONNEL COMMAND
MILLINGTON, TN
(901) 874-2438



FIGHTER SQUADRON (VF) 21*

Thomas Arthur Ruth

Birthplace: DeSmet, South Dakota

Date: April 23, 1917

Hometown: Jackson, Minnesota

Enlisted: Minneapolis, Minnesota

Date: Jan. 15, 1941

Rating/Rank: Lieutenant Junior Grade
Lt. (j.g.), A-V (N)

Description: Officers commissioned in the Volunteer Reserve and designated as naval aviators upon completion of training as aviation cadets.

Designations/Promotions:
Aviation Cadet: 03/15/1941
Ensign A-V(N): 11/06/1941
Lt. (j.g.) A-V(N): 10/01.1942

Loss Date: June 30, 1943

Duty Stations:

Fighter Squadron (VF) 21, Fighter One Airfield, Guadalcanal: 05/01/1943
Escort Scouting Squadron 12 renamed Fighter Squadron Composite (VC) 12: 03/01/19423
Escort Scouting Squadron 12, Northwest Sea Frontier, Seattle, WA: 08/13/1942
Scouting Squadron 201 renamed Escort Scouting Squadron 1: 04/01/1941
Scouting Squadron 201, Advanced Carrier Training Group Atlantic Fleet,
Norfolk, VA: 11/06/1941
Student, Naval Air Station Miami, FL: 09/05/1941
Student, Naval Air Station Pensacola, FL: 03/20/1941
Reserve Officers Training Corps, South Dakota State College: 09/1936
South Dakota National Guard, Rapid City, South Dakota: Dec. 4, 1933

Awards and Decorations*

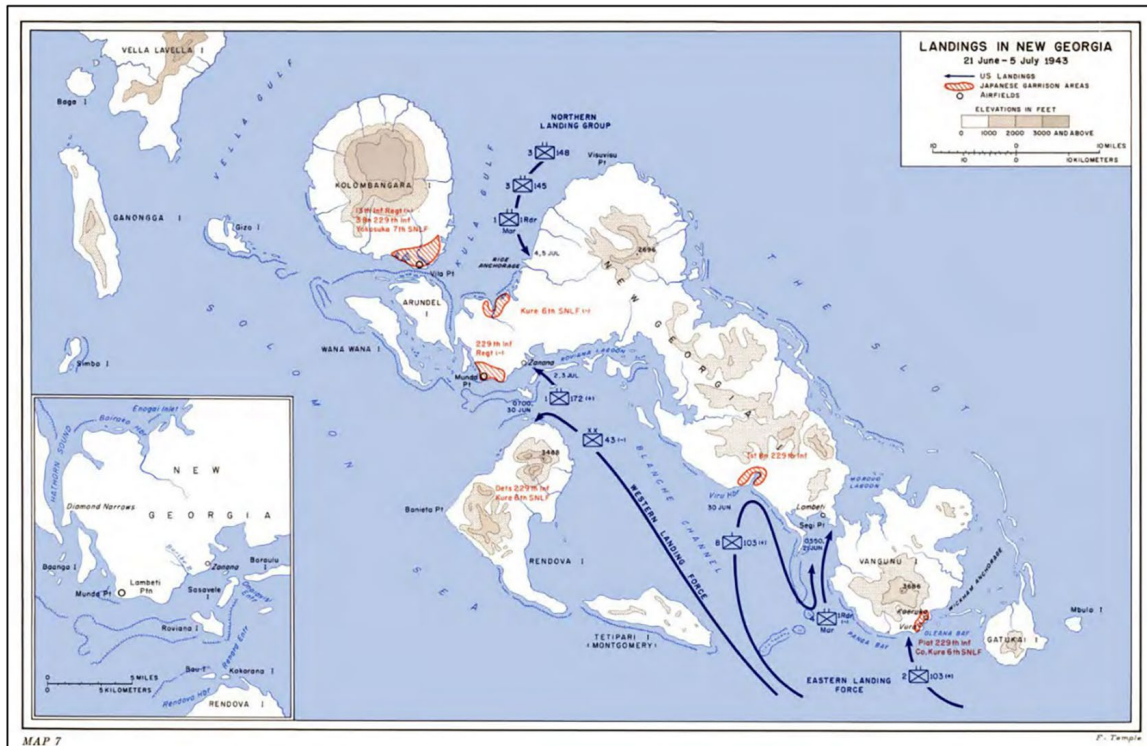
Purple Heart Medal
Air Medal (2)
American Defense Service Medal (with Fleet Clasp)
Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal (2)
World War II Victory Medal





*This biography reflects only information present in the service member's Official Military Personnel File and NAVPERS 1650, Transmittal of and/or Entitlement to Awards. Many war records were lost as a result of the attack, so certain Sailors' entries may be incomplete.

Ruth's Final Mission



Map of the New Georgia Islands Campaign.

Following the successful seizure of Guadalcanal, Tulagi, and the Russell Islands during the previous months, the allies launched Operation Toenails, with the intention of isolating and capturing Japanese-held Munda Airfield, at the southwest corner of New Georgia Island.

The campaign began with amphibious landings on Rendova Island. On 30 June 1943, 32 VF 21 pilots in F4F-4 Wildcats, including Lt. (j.g.) Ruth, took off in the morning to provide air support for naval ships and assault forces on Rendova Island, a flight referred to as the "Rendova Patrol." The squadron conducted two combat patrols that day—one element in the morning and another that afternoon—and split into two teams, each consisting of 16 aircraft.

That morning, Lt. Cdr. George Henry served as the second team's flight leader and commanded Flights Gold 5 and Gold 6. Ruth led Flights Gold 7 and Gold 8. Each flight consisted of four aircraft and pilots.

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The Grumman F4F Wildcat was the primary fighter aircraft operated by the United States Navy and the Marine Corps. By 1942 every American Navy fighter squadron flew the aircraft.

VF-21's morning mission arrived over Rendova beginning at 9 a.m. At approximately 11:15 a.m., ground control reported an incoming flight of Japanese aircraft in A6M "Zeke"/"Zero" and G4M "Betty" aircraft near the south end of Rendova. During the ensuing dogfight, VF-21 claimed three shoot downs, including one by Ruth. During the action, however, VF-21 pilots lost contact with Henry, and the squadron later reported him MIA. The remainder of the pilots landed at Banika Field, Russell Islands at approximately 1 p.m., and prepared for the afternoon patrol.

At 1330 hours, the afternoon teams began departing Banika Field. The second, now led by Ruth, arrived at Rendova just before 3 p.m. About 30 to 45 minutes later, ground control reported enemy bomber aircraft arriving from north of Rendova, likely targeting the Allied ships in Blanche Channel. Gold 7, led by Ruth, flew north to meet the Japanese aviators. As the formation dove over the Japanese bombers, Ruth's teammates lost contact with him. Following the battle, Ruth and Lt. (j.g.) M. C. Thrash, did not return to base.

In the days after the battle, Thrash, the Gold 4 flight leader, returned to his unit after surviving a water landing near New Georgia. He reported that Ruth's plane, in an inverted spin, crashed in the jungle east of Lambeti Plantation, about one-half mile from the beach along the north bank of Roviana Lagoon, Munda Island. He was declared missing that same day, and presume dead on Jan. 6, 1946.

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F4F Wildcats in flight.

In January 1949, native Willie Paya, who was present during the conflict, and had been helped Thrash to safety, was questioned by members of the 604th Quartermaster Graves Registration Company, but had no recollection of Ruth's crash. The team searched the Rendova and Munda Beach areas, but found no traces of wreckage. Therefore, it was believed that Ruth crashed in deep water, where the depth is between 100-600 fathoms deep. A board of review declared Ruth's remains as non-recoverable.

In 2013, a Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) investigation team located a Wildcat crash site. Later Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) research and analysis efforts indicated that the Unknown X-31 remains could be reasonably associated with Lt. (j.g.) Ruth. In 2018 analysts recommended the disinterment of the remains, which were disinterred in 2019, and the DPAA Laboratory accessioned the remains and related evidence as CIL 2019-040.

After laboratory analysis and comparison with family reference samples, a positive identification of CIL 2019-040 as Lieutenant (Junior Grade) Thomas Arthur Ruth was made on April 8, 2025.

For more information:

US Navy POW/MIA:

<https://www.mynavyhr.navy.mil/Support-Services/Casualty/POW-MIA-Branch/>

Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency and DNA Identification:

<http://www.dpaa.mil/>

<https://www.dpaa.mil/Resources/Fact-Sheets/Article-View/Article/569602/dpaa-laboratory/>

DPAA Public Affairs Office:

dpaa.ncr.oc.mbx.public-affairs@mail.mil