

Richard Eugene Fleming

1917-1942

Compiled by June Gossler Anderson Anoka Chapter DAR

Birth: November 11, 1917
Ramsey County, St Paul, Minnesota

Entered Service: 13 Dec. 1939, Minnesota
Branch: U.S. Marine Corps Reserve
Marine Scout Bombing Squadron 241

Conflict: World War II
Battle of Midway 4-5 Jun. 1942
Presentation Date: 24 Nov. 1942

Death: 5 Jun. 1942
Midway Island, Missing in Action



Early Years

Richard Eugene Fleming was born on November 11, 1917, a cold day in Minnesota, to Richard Fleming, the English-born vice president of a wholesale collier (coal dealer) and Octavia Fleming. He attended St. Thomas Military Academy, a Roman Catholic military prep school in St. Paul. After graduating as Top Student Officer from St. Thomas in 1935 he enrolled in the University of Minnesota and joined the Delta Kappa Epsilon fraternity where he became its president. In 1939 he received his Bachelor of Arts degree.

The War Years

Soon after graduating from the University of Minnesota, Fleming, then 22 years old, enlisted in the Marine Corps Reserve on December 15, 1939 and applied for flight training. He was accepted as an aviation cadet on January 25, 1940 and sent to the Naval Air Station in Pensacola, Florida for training, finishing at the top of his class in 1940. He received his wings and commission on December 6, 1940. The Naval Air Base at San Diego became his first duty station. He was posted to VMF-214, a Marine dive-bombing squadron known as the "Black Sheep Squadron" where he piloted a Vought SB2U-3 Vindicator out of San Diego, and then out of Ewa field in Hawaii.

Fleming's father died the following year leaving Octavia Fleming as the matriarch of the clan. Richard's letter to her dated December 3, 1941 stated, "This is the last time I'll be able to write

for probably some time. I'm sorry I can't give you any details. It's that secret." The secret was that eighteen of his squadron were flying their Vindicators out to sea for a touchdown on the US Lexington. They continued on to Midway Island where they were two days later when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, destroying their home field, Ewa, in Hawaii.

The pilots returned to Ewa shortly after the attack and on December 17 were ordered to proceed to Midway where Fleming would later engage in the Battle of Midway as Flight Officer of Marine Scout Bombing Squadron 241. He was promoted to first lieutenant in April 1942 and on May 25th he and five other lieutenants were promoted to captain.

Early in the morning of June 4, 1942 the aviators on Midway got the word to stand by and warm up their aircraft. Led by their squadron commander, Lofton Henderson, they roared off to intercept waves of incoming Japanese aircraft. Then, climbing into the sky, they headed towards the spot where the Japanese fleet was believed to be lurking. When Major Henderson was shot down during the initial attack on a Japanese aircraft carrier, Fleming took command of the unit. Leaving the remainder of his formation, he dove to the perilously low altitude of 400 feet exposing himself to enemy fire in order to score a hit on the ship. After failing to drop a bomb on the aircraft carrier, Akagi, his aircraft limped back to base with 179 holes in it.

Captain Fleming was promoted to squadron commander the following day, June 5, 1942. He returned to battle after four hours of sleep to direct his squadron in a coordinated glide-bombing dive-bombing assault upon the Japanese. Pressing his aircraft to an altitude of 500 feet he put his plane into an approach glide for a screaming dive at the Japanese cruiser Mikuma. Diving low he succeeded in scoring a near-miss on the objective. His plane, hit by anti-aircraft fire, caught fire but Captain Fleming managed to keep his burning aircraft on course until he could release his bomb. Unable to pull out of his dive, Fleming, his plane a mass of flames, crashed into the sea. He, along with his gunner, Private First Class George Albert Toms, was killed. There is some inconclusive evidence that Fleming might have deliberately crashed his plane into the battleship, Kamikaze, style gutting the Mikuma which sank the next day.

For "extraordinary heroism and conspicuous gallantry above and beyond the call of duty," Captain Fleming was posthumously awarded the nation's highest military decoration — the Medal of Honor, while Pfc. Toms received the Distinguished Flying Cross. On November 24, 1942, President Franklin Roosevelt presented the Medal of Honor to Captain. Fleming's mother. Fleming's citation, signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt reads:

“The President of the United States takes pride in presenting the MEDAL OF HONOR to Captain Richard E. Fleming, United States Marine Corps Reserve: For extraordinary heroism and conspicuous intrepidity above and beyond the call of duty as Flight Officer, Marine Scout-Bombing Squadron Two Forty One during action against enemy Japanese forces in the Battle of Midway on June 4 and 5, 1942. When his squadron Commander was shot down during the initial

attack upon an enemy aircraft carrier, Captain Fleming led the remainder of the division with such fearless determination that he dived his own plane to the perilously low altitude of four hundred feet before releasing his bomb. Although his craft was riddled by 179 hits in the blistering hail of fire that burst upon him from Japanese fighter guns and anti-aircraft batteries, he pulled out with only two minor wounds inflicted upon himself. On the night of June 4, when the Squadron Commander lost his way and became separated from the others, Captain Fleming brought his own plane in for a safe landing at its base despite hazardous weather conditions and total darkness. The following day, after less than four hours' sleep, he led the second division of his squadron in a coordinated glide-bombing and dive-bombing assault upon a Japanese battleship. Undeterred by a fateful approach glide, during which his ship was struck and set afire, he grimly pressed home his attack to an altitude of five hundred feet, released his bomb to score a near-miss on the stern of his target; then crashed to the sea in flames. His dauntless perseverance and unyielding devotion to duty were in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.”

Captain Richard Fleming was the only person to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor for action in this crucial battle

After the War

Although Captain Richard Eugene Fleming is officially listed as “missing in action” his name lives on. The United States Navy ship, the USS *Fleming*, commissioned on September 18, 1943, was named in his honor, and his name is listed on the “Tablets of the Missing” at Honolulu Memorial in Honolulu, Hawaii.

Closer to home Richard Fleming is memorialized each year at his high school alma mater, Saint Thomas Academy, during the Cadet Colonel Promotion ceremony when he is remembered by the presentation of the "Fleming Saber," to the Cadet Colonel. In 2008 this military academy added another award, “The Fleming Alumni Veterans Award.” Since 2014 Governor Mark Dayton has proclaimed March 25th as Minnesota Medal of Honor Day. The proclamation specifically names Richard Fleming along with three other MOH recipients. Fleming has also been memorialized in his home town. The former South St. Paul Municipal Airport was renamed the Richard E. Fleming Field in his honor. Though his body is not there, a memorial marker to Captain Fleming has been placed at Fort Snelling National Cemetery.

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