

Len Plog and the Real Yak Killer



By Jim Burridge

When Lieutenant (jg) Leonard H. Plog became the first Navy jet pilot to down an enemy plane, he made history. His aircraft, however, became a target of mistaken identity. Seldom has a particular aircraft been so consistently misrepresented in aviation literature as the F9F-3 *Panther* of Fighter Squadron (VF) 51 flown by Plog when he downed a Yak-9 on 3 July 1950. Books and magazine articles have portrayed various F9F-2s from VF-51's second Korean deployment on board *Essex* (CV 9) as the Navy's first jet victor in aerial combat. It happens that the squadron insignia, which includes a star superimposed on a circle, can be easily mistaken for a North Korean kill marking.

In the black-and-white photos of the period, every model of *Panther* in VF-51 might therefore appear to be Plog's. But according to his logbook, Plog flew F9F-3 BuNo 123071 that day, and the photo of his aircraft—taken on either 18 or 19 July—con-



Top, the “real Yak killer” rests aboard *Valley Forge* (CV 45) in July 1950. Above, *Wolverine* (IX 64) was converted from the pleasure steamer *Seeandbee* to a training carrier in 1942; coal fired, she was noteworthy for her four stacks and paddle wheels.

firms his recollection that no kill marking was applied. Thus ends the mystery of the “real Yak killer.” Now, about the pilot . . .

Len Plog entered the Navy as an Aviation Cadet in November 1942 and graduated from the training command at Corpus Christi, Texas, in June 1944. After carrier qualification aboard the training carrier *Wolverine* (IX 64) in the SB2C-4E *Helldiver*, he was assigned to an escort carrier with other replacement pilots and aircraft. Plog went on to Air Group 83 on board *Essex* (CV 9), serving with Bombing Squadron (VB) 83 until the end of the war.

During WW II, antiaircraft artillery (AA) was the squadron's biggest threat,

claiming the lives of 13 aircrewmembers and downing nine VB-83 *Helldivers*. The worst flak Plog remembers was during an 18 July strike against the battleship *Nagato* at Yokosuka, Japan, which cost the squadron a pilot and gunner. The captured pilot, Ensign Ernest Baker, had come to VB-83 with Plog from the replacement pilot pool. Plog vividly remembers loading the bomb bays with cigarettes, candy and food, and dropping them into prisoner-of-war camps the morning after the war ended.

A man of few words, Len described the *Helldiver* as a “pretty interesting airplane” to fly, with lots of good points and lots of bad ones. One problem was that the SB2C was a completely hydraulic airplane, but without color-coded controls for all the functions, such as flaps and dive flaps, which led to many mistakes in switchology. VB-83’s CO was blunt in his June 1945 recommendations and comments based on the first two and one half months of combat experience. He noted, “In spite of the SB2C, heavy losses and frequent

kamikaze attacks on *Essex*, the morale of the pilots has been and continues to be high.”

After the war, Plog went to NAS Pensacola, Fla., and instructed at Barin Field for a year. While there, he met Ens. Granis Schell, a Navy nurse who would be his wife for over 50 years. In 1946 the Navy



Clockwise from above: Len and Granis Plog on their 50th wedding anniversary in 1995; Plog (upper left) and other replacement pilots in San Diego before departing for Hawaii, 1945; the Navy’s first jet transition class, October 1949 (Plog is standing, second from right); and Plog receives an Air Medal for the 3 July 1950 Yak shootdown from RAdm. John Hoskins, Commander Carrier Division 3.



sent him back to the University of Washington to complete his education, which had been interrupted by the war.

After finishing college, he was off to NAS North Island, San Diego, Calif., to ferry TBM-3 *Avengers*, F4U-4 *Corsairs* and SNJ-5 *Texans*. In the fall of 1948, he was assigned to the Navy’s first jet transition class, conducted by Fighter Squadron (VF) 52 in Lockheed TO-1s. Plog was then ordered to VF-51 at North Island where he got about 10 hours in the FJ-1 *Fury* before transitioning to the F9F-3 *Panther*. Plog

describes the FJ-1 as a “fine airplane” which was simpler to fly than the TO-1. Although the *Fury*’s J-35 engine put out about the same amount of thrust as the TO-1’s J-33, he remembers the FJ-1 as a much more nimble aircraft. On 23 July 1949, Plog and another VF-51 pilot went to the Grumman plant in Bethpage, N.Y., picked up two brand-new F9F-3s and flew them back to North Island.

VF-51, a mix of WW II veterans

and new pilots, left San Diego in May 1950 as part of Air Group 5 for a western Pacific cruise on board *Valley Forge* (CV 45). When the Communists invaded South Korea on 25 June, she was the only U.S. carrier in the area, a day out of Hong Kong and headed for the Philippines. *Valley Forge* arrived in the Yellow Sea as Task Force 77's flagship, and the first strikes were launched on 3 July in conjunction with aircraft from the British carrier HMS *Triumph*. Plog and 11 other VF-51 pilots were strafing an airfield near Pyongyang when a Yak-9 took off; Lt. (jg) Plog blew off its wing with a short burst, scoring the Navy's first aerial victory in Korea. Ens. Eugene W. Brown, also of VF-51, downed another Yak a few minutes later.

After this first mission, VF-51 concentrated on road and rail interdiction. Len remembers that in Korea, in contrast to WW II, small arms fire was a bigger problem than AA. The North Koreans had a hard time adjusting to jet speeds, and he routinely saw the AA bursting anywhere from 50 to 500 yards behind. The F9F-3's Allison J-33 engine produced substantially less thrust than the F9F-2's Pratt and Whitney J-42, and the lower thrust imposed real limits on its capabilities. It could not carry any underwing ordnance and was therefore limited to air-to-air and strafing missions. Takeoff in a fully loaded F9F-3 required 30-knot winds over the deck, which in turn required *Valley Forge* to steam at speeds that were less than efficient for fuel consumption. Eventually, all surviving -3s were given the J-42 and redesignated -2s.

After Korea, Plog was assigned to the general line school at Monterey, Calif. Of the 461 officers in his class, 343 were aviators so there was much demand for proficiency flight

time at Monterey. There were a few F6F *Hellcats*, but they were hard to schedule and most of his flying was done in the SNB *Kansan* until his graduation in December 1951. Len was later assigned to a weapons project at Naval Air Special Weapons Facility, Albuquerque, N.M., where the flying was done in AD-4 *Skyraiders* and F2H-2 *Banshees*. He checked out in two other aircraft while there—the R4D *Skytrain* and F7F-3 *Tigercat*, which were used for supply flights.



PHCS (AC) R. L. Lawson

Two FJ-3D *Furys* (foreground) “chase” an F9F-2KD *Panther* drone, being used to simulate a Regulus missile, during GMGRU-1 training operations in the late fifties.

His next assignment was with Utility Squadron (VU) 3's Regulus Assault Missile Detachment (RAM Det) at Brown Field, a naval auxiliary landing field in California. Len flew a variety of aircraft there, including TV-2Ds, F2H-2Ps, F9F-2KDs, SNB-5s and F9F-6Ds. In September 1955, VU-3's RAM Det and Guided Missile Unit 52 were combined to form Guided Missile Group 1 (GMGRU-1) and moved to North Island. When GMGRU Det, Point Mugu, Calif., was established in June 1956, Len was the first officer in charge.

In June 1957 he went to Washington, D.C., for a three-year

assignment in the Missile Division of the Bureau of Aeronautics. Among other projects, he worked with the Air Force on a targeting system for the Sidewinder heat-seeking missile. From there he went to VU-1 at Barbers Point, Hawaii, where he flew the FJ-3. In addition to the usual fleet utility service duties, VU-1 had assumed responsibility for the Regulus program when GMGRU-1 was decommissioned, and continued to support the program until the missile was phased out.

Len Plog may be best known as the first Navy jet pilot to down an enemy aircraft, but he also compiled an outstanding record as a dive-bomber pilot in WW II and after Korea did pioneering work in nuclear weapons delivery techniques and surface-to-surface missile operations. Flying a variety of aircraft during his naval career, Plog noted that although he and the *Panther* made Naval Aviation history, his favorite plane was the *Fury*, which he called “a real forgiving, honest aircraft.”

After retiring from the Navy as a lieutenant commander in 1963, Plog kept his hand in aviation, working for the Texas-based Vought company for six years. Now completely retired, he spends time in his wood-working shop; rooting for the Dallas Cowboys, the Texas Rangers and his granddaughter's volleyball team; fishing with his grandson; and in activities with the Fort Worth Quiet Birdmen. Of course, when reminiscing about his Navy days, he continues to set the record straight on the “real Yak killer.”



Mr. Burrige is a career civilian intelligence officer currently assigned to the National Intelligence Council, and a Naval Aviation enthusiast. This article evolved from his correspondence with Len Plog regarding the markings of the *Panther* he flew on the day of his historic victory.