

# Friendship Forged in Flight

By Tom Jarrett

*Many lasting friendships are formed in the Navy. The following story chronicles a bond between two Naval Aviators that forged lifelong friendships within their families and community.*

**W**illiam “Billy” E. Stulce and William “Bill” W. Eldridge met and became friends while at the University of Chattanooga, Tenn., during the 1940s; both were from nearby towns. Later, they both joined the Navy and became Naval Aviators.

During WW II, Lieutenant (jg) Billy Stulce went on to fly FM-2 *Wildcats* with Composite Squadron 96 aboard *Rudyard Bay* (CVE 81) and *Shamrock Bay* (CVE 84), supporting the landings of Americans during the invasion of Okinawa. He was credited with two assists in downing Japanese “Vals” bent on destroying American ships on 6 April 1945. In August he received orders to Naval Air Station (NAS), Jacksonville, Fla., for further assignment to NAS Melbourne, Fla., as a flight instructor.



After completing flight training, 1st Lieutenant Bill Eldridge entered the Marine Corps because he wanted to fly the F4U *Corsair*. He flew reconnaissance and ground support missions with Marine Fighter Squadron 441 in the South Pacific and during the battle of Okinawa, he downed two “Vals,” a “Betty” and a “Zeke” in his first aerial combat. After the war, Bill also received orders to Melbourne.

When Billy Stulce was checking in at Melbourne, he spotted Bill Eldridge. A grand reunion followed during which Bill told Billy that a hurricane was on the way and he had to fly a plane out of the area. He told Billy to grab a plane and join him. “We’re going home!” Bill said.

Bill and Billy each checked out an F6F-3 *Hellcat* and took off toward Atlanta with several other planes. After refueling, the flight proceeded to Smyrna, Tenn., where it would stay until the hurricane threat was over. At Smyrna they surprised their families by telephone and Billy's parents drove to pick them up. After dropping off Bill at his parents' house, Billy and a friend from the flight spent the night at his home in Daisy. The next day, Bill's parents took them back to Smyrna.

On the following day, 18



Clockwise from facing page, top: Ltjg. William "Billy" Stulce, USN; *Rudyerd Bay* (CVE 81), Stulce's first shipboard duty station; Stulce, second from left, flew to the island of Maui, Hawaii, in a Torpedo Bomber, to get fresh pineapples for his ship; Ltjg. Stulce flies in formation with his squadron mates in FM2 *Wildcats*.

September, Bill and Billy once again climbed into their *Hellcats* and headed back to Melbourne. About 40 minutes into the flight, just as they reached the Cumberland Plateau halfway to Chattanooga, Billy radioed the flight leader that his engine was starting to cut out and was smoking. The leader told Bill Eldridge to stick with Billy as the rest of the flight continued on.

Billy radioed Bill that it didn't look good and he had better jump. As he climbed out onto the wing, the engine smoothed out so Billy climbed back into the cockpit. After

reseating himself, the engine suddenly burst into flames and Billy radioed Bill that he was going to jump.

Billy had gradually lost altitude until he was only a few hundred feet over the mountain. Billy rolled the plane upside down and dropped out of the cockpit. The plane started into a dive and blew up. Billy crashed into the ground without his parachute opening. He came down in a heavily wooded area and landed face down. Not knowing if Billy was alive or dead, Bill Eldridge was in a panic and started buzzing the local residents in an attempt to get someone to the crash site.

Two women had just come out on their back porch when they heard a loud noise. They looked up to see a Navy plane coming out of a dive and turning to make another dive toward them. Eldridge had definitely gotten their attention. When he flew over again, he



dropped a wrench with a hastily written note telling them to follow him. They could see a thin line of smoke coming from that direction and started running toward it. Meanwhile, Bill buzzed every house around. Witnesses later said he was knocking the tops off the trees trying to alert more people.

When the women arrived at the crash scene, they saw wreckage all over the place and Billy lying face down on the ground. One woman

turned him over. She could see that he was not alive. She took off her apron and waved it at Eldridge overhead to let him know that someone was there.

Bill Eldridge flew into the airfield at Chattanooga and reported the accident to a nearby Army base, which sent out a search and rescue team. Billy was transported back to the base, while the team investigated the wreckage. The accident report stated that the plane was so badly demolished it was impossible to determine the exact cause of the engine failure.

Devastated, Bill Eldridge continued his flight to Melbourne. A few days later he traveled back to Tennessee to attend the funeral of his friend.

Eldridge became good friends with the Stulce family, visiting them on many occasions and staying in contact over the years. Bill later became a highly decorated Marine aviator. He retired from the Marine Corps as a colonel in 1973, and in 1991 passed away at the age of 69.

On 18 September 1997, a memorial marker was dedicated in Altamont, Tenn., donated by the citizens of Grundy County, honoring the patriotism and sacrifice of Ltjg. William Everett Stulce. The ceremony was attended by friends and family of the deceased, including his 95-year-old mother, Mrs. Lillie Stulce, and brother, state Rep. Arnold Stulce. The event was highlighted by a missing-man formation fly-over by four

T-34 *Mentors* from the Tennessee Warbirds.

The memorial program noted that the accident brought together the citizens of Grundy County with the parents and brother of Lieutenant (jg) Stulce and eventually sparked lasting friendships—born from a friendship forged in flight. ✈️

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