

AN ACE AMONG ACES

By JO1(SW) Ed Wright

Most people think of an “ace” as the highest card in a deck of playing cards. The dictionary also defines the word as an expert in a given field—someone at the top of their “game.” The latter accurately describes former Marine pilot Lieutenant Colonel John F. Bolt, USMC (Ret.). A Naval Aviator during WW II and Korea, Bolt is one of only a few aces to shoot down five or more enemy aircraft during two wars, and the only Marine jet ace in Korea.

Born on 19 May 1921 in Laurens, S.C., Bolt’s family later moved to Florida where he attended college. He began his Marine Corps career in 1942 at Pensacola, Fla., and earned his wings later that year. His first tour of duty was with the famed *Black Sheep* of Marine Fighter Squadron (VMF) 214 during WW II. Bolt scored his first six victories while flying the Vought F-4U Corsair during the Solomon Islands campaign. The six kills were recorded in less than four months. On 23 September 1923, then-Captain Bolt got his first two Zeros. Three weeks later he shot down a Zeke, and while making his way back to base destroyed an enemy barge with 25 to 30 Japanese aboard. In December of that year he added two Zekes and finished his sixth kill on 4 January 1944. During this time, one admiral called Bolt “a one-man war on Japanese shipping.”

Bolt stayed on active duty after the war, and following a staff tour he was assigned duty in Korea in mid-1952, flying ground attack

missions in F9F Panther jets with VMF-115. In March 1953, he was one of only four Marine pilots invited to fly a 90-day exchange tour with the Air Force. Attached to the 39th Fighter Interceptor Squadron, he became wingman to Capt. Joseph McConnell, the Air Force’s leading jet ace. Bolt flew the North American F-86 Sabre on 34 sweeps and shot down 4 MiG-15s, one each on 16 May and 22, 25, 30 June. He got a three-month exchange extension and added two more victories on 11 July to become a jet ace.

Of all the combat missions in which Bolt participated, one stands out. “The only one I vividly remember after 50 years is when my wingman, Ed Harper, got a kill just before I got one,” Bolt said.

Below, Capt. John Bolt as a transition jet pilot in 1949 climbs into his TO-1 Seastar while assigned to VMF-311.

“He was down 300 or 400 feet below me. We were going through a gaggle of enemy aircraft, and they were all scattered around. I looked down and old ‘Harpo’ had blown one up, and then he flew right into a fireball. About that time I was in a shooting position, so I turned around and was banging away. I shot down one or maybe even two. I didn’t expect to ever see Harpo again. I didn’t on the way home; we were separated. When we got home, his plane was just smoked up. We could take our fingers and drag them down the wing or anywhere on his plane, leaving lines in the soot.”

The flying skills and courage it takes to make an “ace” is what sets these fliers apart. With his extraordinary records compiled during two wars, John F. Bolt is indeed an ace among aces. ✈

Lt. Col. Bolt retired from the Marine Corps in 1962 and went on to prosperous careers in both business and law. He and his wife of almost 60 years, Dottie, reside in New Smyrna Beach, Fla.

