

# ENLISTED NAVAL AVIATION PILOTS: A LEGACY OF SERVICE

By Capt. Mark J. Campbell, USCG

What business does a Coast Guard officer—a ship driver, no less—have writing about enlisted Naval Aviators? It started with a picture on my colleague's office wall. I'm not sure what attracted me to the black and white photo, but it led to a discussion of our fathers, their service specialty and the inevitable, "What did your Dad do during the war?"

Of course, I knew that my Dad, John W. Campbell, was career Navy—a fact he was proud to share with anyone who asked and some who didn't. I knew that he served for 21 years, retiring in 1959. I also knew that he had been an enlisted pilot, and sailed aboard the icebreaker *Edisto* as a helicopter pilot during an Operation Deep Freeze Antarctic expedition. One of his favorite pictures was a photograph of him shaking hands with Rear Admiral Richard E. Byrd, the famed polar explorer.

What I didn't know was exactly what he *did* during the war. Most of his sea stories were about shipmates and their predicaments, flying when aviation was an adventure every time one climbed into a plane, daring rescues, and Antarctica. I regretted not learning more about that period of my father's life before he passed away—not only from a son's perspective, but as a seagoing professional. Thus, I embarked on a personal quest that led me through scrapbooks, photos, flight logs and yearbooks into the annals of Naval Aviation history—to some of the most incredible men to wear the uniform of the sea services, Naval Aviation Pilots (NAP).

The first Navy pilots received training directly from the airplane builder. In 1911, training was conducted at the aviation camp at Greenbury Point, Md. The training eventually moved to the aeronautic station, later naval air station (NAS), at Pensacola, Fla. Initially, enlisted training in aeronautics applied to the ground support role. Designated as "Airmen," they maintained the aircraft and flew as support crew. Because of terminology regarding flight designations and inconsistent policy directives, there is confusion over when enlisted men first received pilot training. However, a March 1916 memo from the



Director of Naval Aeronautics to the Secretary of the Navy stated: "On the 1st of January 1916, a class of 10 enlisted men was formed and placed under instruction in flying." The term Airmen continued to be applied to enlisted personnel in the aviation field. Some enlisted men who received "certificates" as Airmen did become qualified pilots. By the end of 1917 the policy was to select enlisted men for flight training, discharge them

from the regular Navy and enroll them as pilot trainees in the Naval Reserve for flight training and subsequent commissioning.

WW I upset this arrangement when Naval Aeronautic Detachments, largely consisting of enlisted men, were deployed to Europe where out of necessity many enlisted people were trained as pilots by their French, British and Italian hosts. Many of the enlisted pilots would receive commissions once they had completed flight training and had been certified as pilots. However, some enlisted pilots flew many patrol missions before the administrative system authorized their commissioning. In addition, the drawdowns after the war caused many newly minted commissioned pilots to revert to their former enlisted status. This presented a problem for the Navy as it no longer had a program for enlisted personnel with pilot designations.

WW I illustrated the potential application of aircraft and pilots to fly them and provided the impetus to more fully develop a Naval Aviation branch. To overcome the exodus of people and talent in this area during postwar demobilization, the Navy revisited the concept of enlisted pilots since they were by this time a proven commodity. Three important issues were decided: there would be a program dedicated to training enlisted men as pilots which allowed them to maintain enlisted status; they would wear the same "wings of gold" as their officer counterparts; and they would be designated Naval



Facing page, Chief Machinist's Mate (Aviation) Floyd Bennett was NAP No. 9. Above, Chief Machinist's Mate (Aviation) Eugene Rhoads, NAP No. 27, in 1921. Right, the NC-4 is moored in the harbor at Lisbon, Portugal, in May 1919, two days after completing the first transatlantic flight.



Aviation Pilots. By late 1919 the Bureau of Navigation announced that a class of 25 enlisted men had been ordered to Pensacola, Fla., to take the course preliminary to appointment as NAPs.

Perhaps the most recognizable name in that first group was Chief Machinist's Mate (Aviation) Floyd Bennett, formerly a pilot for then-Lieutenant Commander Richard Byrd and later a Medal of Honor recipient. On 9 May 1926, Bennett and Byrd became the first to fly over the North Pole. Floyd Bennett was Naval Aviation Pilot No. 9.

Although not a member of the first class, the distinction of Naval Aviation Pilot No. 1 was bestowed upon Chief Quartermaster (A) Harold H. "Kiddy" Karr, one of the WW I pilots trained overseas by the French. By a twist of fate, the first NAP certifications were assigned in random order. Kiddy Karr thus became the first of a long line of Naval Aviation Pilots that ended on 31 January 1981 when the last active duty enlisted pilot, Master Chief Air Controlman (NAP) Robert K. Jones, retired at NAS Pensacola.

Another member of the original 1919 group was Chief Machinist's Mate (Aviation) Eugene "Smokey" Rhoads, NAP No. 27. Smokey shoveled coal on railroad steam engines prior to enlisting in the Navy, and became a pilot on his own time using his meager Navy pay to buy commercial flying lessons. Later, he found himself as one of two flight engineers and the only enlisted man in the crew on the first transatlantic flight.

The United States' transatlantic effort proved to be a national venture, and Naval Aviation was its instrument. Determined to be the first to fly across the Atlantic, the Navy intended to do it with four-engine Curtiss flying boats, NC-1, NC-3 and NC-4. After much planning, training and preparation, they departed on 8 May 1919. The flight began in Rockaway, Long Island, N.Y., and concluded in Lisbon, Portugal, on 27 May. Smokey Rhoads was a last-minute replacement for the assigned enlisted engineer who tragically lost his left hand in the prop of the NC-4 just days before the epic journey. The NC-4 was the only aircraft to complete the flight. Upon their return to the States, Congress ordered a special medal struck to commemorate the achievement. Unfortunately for the crew, 11 years elapsed before Congress produced the medal and the recognition they so richly deserved.

On the other hand, Congressional recognition for three other NAPs was more timely, in the form of the nation's highest military decoration, the Medal of Honor. The first to receive this honor was Chief Machinist's Mate (A) Francis E. Ormsbee, Jr., for extraordinary heroism in a rescue on 25 September 1918. Seeing a plane crash nearby, he landed his plane on the water and dove in. He succeeded in partially extricating the gunner so that his head was out of the water and held him in this position until a speedboat arrived. He also made a number of desperate attempts to rescue the pilot, diving into the midst of the tangled wreckage with cut hands, but he was too late. Following Floyd Bennett in 1926, the third NAP to receive the medal was First Lieutenant Kenneth A. Walsh, USMC, the highest ranking NAP ace with 21 air victories. In actions on 15 and 30 August 1943, "Walsh repeatedly dived his plane into an enemy formation outnumbering his own division 6 to 1 and, although his plane was hit numerous times, shot down 2 Japanese dive-bombers and 1 fighter." Two weeks later he found himself even more greatly outnumbered and did it again:

"Separated from his escort group when he encountered 50 Japanese Zeros, he unhesitatingly attacked, striking with relentless fury in his lone battle against a powerful force. He destroyed four hostile fighters before cannon shellfire forced him to make a dead-stick landing off Vella Lavella, where he was later picked up."

No less impressive are the courage and combat proficiency of the NAP known as "the instant ace," Chief Petty Officer Wilbur B. "Spider" Webb. Sailing aboard *Hornet* (CV 12) as a part of Fighting Squadron 2 and Task Force 58, Spider had seen a lot of action in Pacific operations, but none to match one June day in 1944. During the two-day Battle of the Philippine Sea, Webb found himself flying lone cover for a downed pilot in a life raft. He noticed a formation of Japanese aircraft making an approach for landing on Guam when he made his famous radio transmission: "Any American fighter near Orote Peninsula, I have 40 Jap planes surrounded and need a little help." Spider slipped into the Japanese formation undetected and unleashed the six .50 caliber guns on his F6F Hellcat. At ranges as close as 30 feet, Webb destroyed 6 "Val" dive-bombers and 2 other "probables," making him an instant ace in this one engagement. When Spider landed, the landing gear was shot off his F6F, his goggles had been shot off his helmet and there were 147 bullet holes in his plane, yet he did not receive a scratch.

**Fighting Squadron 2 was chosen by the Navy on 1 January 1927 to utilize mostly NAPs as squadron pilots to ease the drain on the Navy's officer corps for its growing aviation needs. The unique squadron insignia highlights the chief aviation pilot's rating badge above the Roman battle cry "Adorimini," which loosely translated means "up and at 'em." The VF-2 aircraft shown above on 20 April 1928 is a Curtiss F6C Hawk.**

With nicknames like Kiddy, Smokey and Spider, it's obvious that this was a colorful group. Not only men of high moral character, there were some true "characters" in the bunch. NAP Dale "Chubby" Lyons lost his left leg in the December 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Not to be deterred, he was fitted with an artificial limb, regained his pilot status and even went on to gain carrier qualification in fighter aircraft. Obviously not one to indulge in self-pity, one of Chubby's favorite stunts was to stage a mock verbal battle in a bar, which would end by having his "adversary" jam a conveniently handy ice pick into Chubby's artificial leg!

In our current age of specialization, with pilots holding qualifications in one or two types of aircraft, the statistics of Chief Boatswain Patrick J. "Pappy" Byrne are nothing short of amazing. A member of the first NAP class in 1919 and designated NAP No. 10, Pappy amassed 23,000 flight hours in 140 different types of aircraft over a career spanning 40 years. Enormous accumulations of flight hours and qualifications in various types of aircraft, from biplanes to jets to helicopters, was not unusual for the NAPs.

My own brush with one of these legends occurred in the summer of 1975 when I was a Cadet 2/c at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy. As part of our exposure to Coast



**Top, NAP John W. Campbell, the author's father, flew the TBM Avenger. Above, his WW II NAP certification.**

Guard aviation, we spent a couple of weeks in Mobile, Ala., learning about and flying in Coast Guard planes. I had the good fortune and honor to be assigned to a flight with NAP Master Chief John P. Greathouse. A 37-year veteran of the Coast Guard, he had over 15,000 flight hours, was the first to parachute from a helicopter and held the service's Ancient Albatross Award signifying the active duty Coast Guard aviator who has held the designation the longest. I'll never forget it.

I was in the right seat of the long retired HU-16 Albatross in the sky above Mobile Bay, and Master Chief Greathouse asked, "All right, you got it?" "I got it," I replied. Immediately, "the Goat" assumed a nose-down attitude and went into a dive. The feeling of weightlessness was too much for my classmates waiting their turn in the rear of the aircraft. It sent them scrambling for barf bags. This, of course, made Greathouse laugh even harder. So ended my flying career. I've been a ship driver ever since.

So, what exactly did my dad do during the war? The short answer is "a lot." My research brought me to a

basement bookshelf that contained a treasure trove of information. He enlisted in the Navy and found a second home, and he was fiercely loyal to his new "family." He attended Aviation Metalsmith School and graduated in November 1939. He was one of the "chosen" for enlisted flight training, receiving his preflight course at the University of Georgia, followed by flight school in Pensacola. He earned his wings on 31 July 1943, likely a classmate of the instant ace Spider Webb, who also earned his wings in July of that year. He was designated Naval Aviation Pilot No. 177-43 and became a part of the NAP legacy.

Fresh out of flight school, he was assigned to the Pacific theater as a member of Utility Squadron (VJ) 14 in

Pearl Harbor. His flight log revealed the nature of his wartime service. In the 26-month assignment between mid-October 1943 and the end of November 1945, he logged over 1,100 hours in 17 varieties of aircraft on 425 separate flights. Typical of a utility squadron, missions were photoreconnaissance, submarine coverage and target towing—while not as exciting as combat, vital and dangerous business nonetheless. I envision the task force of admirals Spruance or Halsey heading west out of Pearl, calling for equipment calibration runs or gunnery exercises. NAP J. W. "Soup" Campbell responds, completing the mission in his JM-1 Marauder, a small but significant contribution to the war effort.

Like so many of the WW II-era NAPs who received a temporary commission, he became an ensign on 18 December 1944. By the time he left VJ-14 as a lieutenant (jg) in 1946 to join VJ-7 in San Diego, Calif., the war had been over for about a year. Once stateside, he was discharged and began applying his metalsmith skills in the civilian field of bridge construction. That lasted a grand total of 89 days after which he resigned his commission, returned to the Navy and the enlisted ranks as a Chief Petty Officer/Naval Aviation Pilot. Amassing a total of 3,441.7 flight hours in 68 aircraft types (53 fixed wing and 15 rotary wing), he did what he loved to do until his retirement in 1959.

From the North Pole to Antarctica, Midway to Okinawa, through two world wars, Korea and Vietnam, from biplanes to jets, Naval Aviation Pilots represented the best of the United States. In 65 years of distinguished service to their country, the 5,000 enlisted pilots of the Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard left a record of dedication and heroism that will be remembered as an inspiration to generations of Americans . . . and sons. ✪

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