

# WINGS



# THINGS

## GREAT PLAINS WING - COMMEMORATIVE AIR FORCE

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### 4th Quarter 2022

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Photo: Greg Jacobsen



GPW Member Bruce Mundie at the GPW Open House in his Bi-plane, a replica Nieuport 28.

### Update from the Hangar:

We had a good turnout for our August 7th Fly-In and Drive-In Open House. The Pancake Man, Blue Penguin, and Jimmy's Hot Dogs provided food and drinks.

Galaxy Enterprises, out of Holdrege, Nebraska, offered helicopter rides, and the local FBO Revv Aviation offered introductory flights in a Cessna.

## *“Lest We Forget”*

Photo: Greg Jacobsen



The Pancake Man serving up delicious pancakes.

Photo: Greg Jacobsen



Open House supporters having breakfast.

Photo: Greg Jacobsen



Terry and his daughter welcoming supporters

Photo: Greg Jacobsen



A young Model Builder assembling a Bell Helicopter model provided by GPW.

Photo: Greg Jacobsen



Future Engineers and Pilots visit the STEM Booth(ed.gov/stem)

Photo: Greg Jacobsen



Galaxy Enterprises Helicopter on another ride flight.

An O'Neill, Nebraska Fall Mystery Travel Motorcoach Tour stopped by to visit the hangar and museum on October 8th.

Photo: Greg Jacobsen



Jerry Mason was on hand to explain the operation of the T-6.

Photo: Greg Jacobsen



George Dewitt explained hangar operations

Photo: Greg Jacobsen



Jim Freibert gave the group guided museum tours.

The Gunfighter has spent most of the summer traveling the country, offering rides as part of the CAF Air Power History Tour. The Gunfighter's last appearance before winter maintenance is at the Wings Over Dallas Airshow in November.

That sums it up from the hangar until next time. Have a safe and wonderful holiday season.

Greg Jacobsen  
Executive Officer

### An American Patriot: The Last WW2 Fighter Ace in Nebraska

(This is closer to a Chronological Bio of Ensign Don M. McPherson's life from interviews - from Sun. afternoons, May 22, 2022 to July 31, 2022. By James Freibert)

Photo: James Freibert

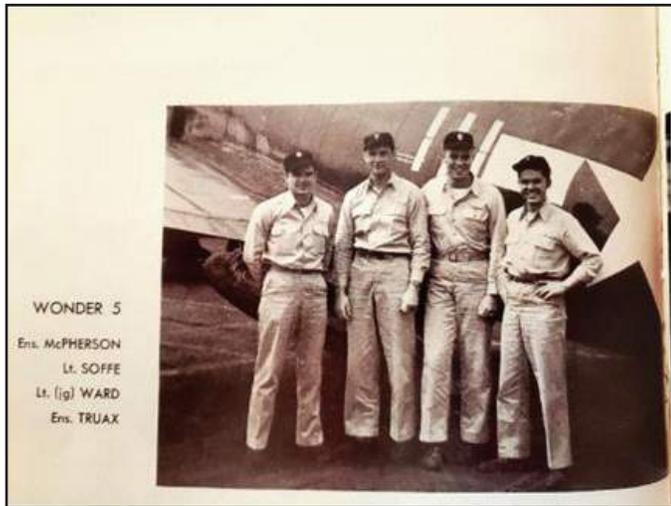


Don McPherson, 100th Birthday

I had the pleasure of meeting World War II Navy veteran Don McPherson in Adams Nebraska a few days before his 100th birthday just after a quarter of the town, 160 people celebrated two weeks early, at a party that made local papers and regional TV news broadcasts - seeing that, one knew Don was a treasure!

Donald Melvin McPherson is now Nebraska's last surviving WW2 fighter "ace." He's still a remarkably clear voice recalling history that most have forgotten, and too many Americans know nothing about, at all. He was part of sinking a battleship and the invasion of Okinawa. In that war with Japan, McPherson shot down two Japanese Aichi D3A "Val" dive bombers in one of his first 1945 combat missions. Weeks later, he and a "Wonder 5" wingman from the *USS Essex* (CV-9) destroyed five kamikazes swarming over two destroyers. *USS Ingraham* crew members sent him a 'Thank You', 'for saving hundreds of men and their ship!'

Photo: James Freibert



[This is the first place Don's Wonder 5 pic has been published]

I just missed Don's 2021 reunion with one of the nation's only flying Grumman F6F Hellcats, painted like the #115 that he shared. Unlike the Army Air Corps/Forces a Navy pilot would jump in the 'Cat lined up for take-off, usually your aircraft, but not always "your" plane, and very few were customized! But this one F6F was intentionally restored by the Hintons' Southern California "Fighter Rebuilders" to be painted as The "DEATH N' DESTRUCTION" that Don's 'Wonder 5" team of aces flew for a few months of 1945. It was a project from 2019 to '21, then Steve Hinton Jr., flew himself and the F6F-5 Grumman Hellcat to Beatrice NE. There are great videos online of McPherson's family, a color guard, a *Sweet Revenge* P-51 Mustang which Evan Fagen flew in to join the party set-up for McPherson's family, friends, and this Hellcat. It is hard to fathom what a resource the sharp mind, and great memory of an F6F ace has been for this fine war-bird restoration.

On to the story from a guy who always lived and worked near home, except for the Navy sailing him half way around the world at war. He grew up just a good walk's distance from the living room that this military history geek was welcomed into.

We'll let Don McPherson tell his story, "*Our family farm home was six miles West of NE Highway 41 (Adams),*" and he returned right to it after the war. "*I still own part of the farm,*" you might think after his 100th birthday he might relax a little more, but in addition to four generations of family within an hour's drive, he still gets inquiries, calls, and a few postcards every month. "*One of my son-in-laws really pushed me and he said, "Don, you just to have to write (your story), and put it in a book for all your,.... for your great, great, greats."* Even after hours of calls, several conversations, and time at the Fagen Fighter's spectacular air show in May, *An American Patriot: The Donald M. McPherson Story*, his self-published auto biography supplied details we may've missed. It's sold out again (unless Fagen Fighters have a few left in Granite Falls, MN), so you'll find some insights here into more World War II history. McPherson recalled, "*I wrote a pretty detailed (account),... about my six months of combat (March - September 1945, at the end of WWII), just for my family,... printed them out, on my own printer,... but then my family, and all of sudden (after), they'd gone a couple places where they asked me to speak (some of them hadn't heard me do that before), they kind of collectively thought I should write about more, scouting, coaching summer ball."* In his first 100 years McPherson's stayed fairly active!

Going back, to over 80 years ago, one wondered, did he catch a bug about flying, "*Do you remember your first memories of planes? Or did you see planes at local air shows, or...*" McPherson answered, "*You know, I didn't know much about flying, or anything*" [obviously aside from farming or football!]. "*When I graduated from High School, just a few days before my 17th birthday, I was (planning) to go to the University of Nebraska (a half hour from family home/farm). I was wanting to be a High School football coach. Well, the war took care of that. When you got to be 18, well then you had to register for the draft. I knew exactly what I was going to do. I wasn't going to be drafted, I was going to join the Navy, because I had a brother that was already in the Navy, and so before I had a chance... I didn't rush right in to joining (but he volunteered, so he was on)... a list, you knew it would be a while before you got called. About that time it came out in the news that the Navy was needing pilots. And where before you had to have two years of college, why, they were going to waive it out if you could pass a mental and a physical exam. So I decided that's what I was going to do. Not knowing a lot about airplanes, all of a sudden, you know it just struck me, if I'm going to fight (why not) do it from the seat of an airplane!"*

"*But, I had a little trouble convincing my family, my parents, because well, back there they thought flying was a dangerous thing. We talked about that for a few weeks, and my girlfriend (Don's beautiful HS sweetheart Thelma) and I were,... I'd given her an engagement ring so we had to talk about it a little too."*

"Mom and Dad and I were talking about it again (remember, he wasn't 21), my mother said, "You know Don, I just have an awful time supporting what you want to do because I just feel like it's really dangerous."

I told them, "We'll, I'm going to serve my country, and I'm going to do it in the Navy, but"... I said, "you know what, if I get drafted, well, I'd a lot I'd rather do my part from the seat of an airplane than from a foxhole. That did it then (finally) they were willing to agree that I should do what I wanted to, so that's when it happened, the Navy had taken over a lot of the parts of small colleges (all over the country). When I started out, they'd move me every three months. I started out in a little college in Mt. Vernon, Iowa, and we didn't do any flying, it was all studying and kinesiology, physical conditioning."

### **College Campus Hopping through Navy Flight School**

"Then on to Grand Junction Colorado, that was at a junior college, and there we first started flying. We flew the Cub, the Taylorcraft, and the Aeronca. Then I went to St. Mary's College in California, and there again we didn't fly, it was just studying aeronautics and navigation. They really stressed physical conditioning. We played about every sport there ever was, and ran obstacle courses. You could have a major sport the three months you were there, and I chose football because that was my best sport in high school."

Asked Don about that well-known St. Mary's campus. "Yes, oh I loved it there! [the Navy had almost 400 men filling all the empty rooms on campus]. Yeah, and the thing that was amazing to me, being a farmer, or from a farm, was their (CA) agriculture. They had these big round dome hills, they had to farm around them, you know they were so steep, (while there) we'd make a five, or maybe an eight mile hike in the morning. Then we'd go to the redwood forests."

Next,..."we went to Norman, Oklahoma, a division of the University of Oklahoma, and I was there for three months, where we (naval cadets) flew the Stearman (PT-17) to learn acrobatics, and we flew the SNJ" (Navy's version of the AT-6 Texan - ed), "I'm sorry, (first) the SNV, it looks like the SNJ but it's fixed landing gear, and it doesn't have quite as big an engine, so we flew that." (McPherson was enlisted from Sept. '42 through all war years until after the Japanese Sept. 1945 surrender).

### **Out of the Dorms, Into Naval Barracks and On To Aircraft Carriers**

"Then to Corpus Christi Naval Air Station, that was the first actual Navy base that I'd been at, and at that point, of course, I flew the SNJ, pretty much all the time there, even with instrument flying, strafing, dive bombing. I thought I'd get some leave after I graduated and got my wings, my Ensign's officer's commission."

[More than 35,000 Naval aviators earned their wings at NAS Corpus Christi during WWII]. "But they already

had my orders cut for Daytona Beach, in Florida. "So my wife came down to my graduation and we jumped on a train and rode to Daytona Beach. We'd gotten married as soon as we got there (they were barely 20, but had been dating for five years), and after three months of flying the Hellcat they picked some of us to make up what was, a "Combat Replacement team" they called it, that was six of us, so then they, we were supposed to report then to Great Lakes Naval Base to check out carrier landing." [Great Lakes N.T.C.\NTS is just north of Chicago, with their aircraft carriers just off-shore in Lake Michigan].

"Yeah, they had two old, what used to be luxury liners. One of them had been so old, it was a paddlewheel (Don laughed). That was something else! Of course they were so doggone small, so much shorter (barely half of) what the big carriers were. That was kind of interesting, 'cause they took us out to this little paddlewheeler one day to observe others who were qualifying. This skipper of that ship was a pistol. He had [like a DI with] a bull-horn. He was hollering at these guys if they made a little rough landing. Pretty soon this one guy had made about four -- not very good landings. All of a sudden he [the Wolverine skipper] was down off the bridge, up onto the wing of that plane, he's pounding that pilot on the shoulder with his fist, really telling him off. I was sitting there thinking, 'Man, I hope I don't draw this one tomorrow!' (laughed, then Don said) "And I did, but (USS Wolverine) it was so slow in the water, it could only do about seven knots, and so, you had to have a 25 mile an hour wind or else you couldn't slow the planes down enough to land on deck. So we went out, and we circled for an hour, the wind never came up, so we went back, and the next day they assigned us to the other carrier (the USS Sable) and I got in my eight landings. And THEN I got to go home, and for fifteen days!"



Photo: From the Web  
The USS Sable, date not specified.

### **1944 Orders to San Diego - then Christmas Eve in Hawaii**

"Then of course I had more orders for San Diego, and we, well, I took my wife with me when we went out there because (we didn't know), if we would be shipped over-

seas just right away or... It was a good thing we did because it was at least a week before we got aboard a sea-plane tender, which is a very big vessel that took us to Pearl Harbor. Then when we were out at Diamond Head, the ocean water is kind of a blackish color, not a really pretty blue, all of a sudden it was like somebody drew a line, and that water was just the prettiest blue. They natives said that was because there was coral underneath."

"And then we pulled into Pearl Harbor, and that was just like a junk yard because they had dredged up all those ships onto the banks, you know, all those blown up ships. It was a terrible mess,... (even) in '44. So we landed there and we stayed the night on Ford Island, its right up against Pearl Harbor. That was Christmas Eve, and I could look out my bunk, and see the battleship Arizona, sitting on the bottom, with just antenna or two sticking up out of the water. It sure woke you up as to how terrible (war) was."

"So we stayed (the night), then they moved us all down to Barber's Point, the Naval Air Station on the southern part of Oahu and we were supposed to be there as a replacement unit for three months. But I didn't get to stay there a month, because the Air Group 83, was finishing their training. They'd formed as an Air Group on the East Coast of the U.S., and were sent to Maui to finish up their training. After they'd lost a pilot in carrier landings, he got killed, they needed a replacement, I was jerked out of my unit and flown over there one afternoon. When I got there I found out they were all packed going to combat the next day."

Photo: From the Web



Essex 1944.

"We got aboard a British troop transport that took us to Ulithi, in the Caroline Islands, where we joined the Air Group and we went aboard the USS Essex. So the first day I actually flew in combat, I was flying with guys that I'd never flown with before, so that just added to the tension. Then to top it off, I'd flown a couple flights of combat air patrol (CAP) over the fleet, but,... the Navy flies in groups of four, they called it a 'division,' and our call sign was 'Wonder 5'... When one of the (VF-83) pilots that flew on the Division Leader wing took off; it had rained, the

deck was wet, and they were taking off before dawn. His Hellcat slid and he went off the side into the ocean. Well, they picked him up, and the next time he tried it he did the same thing. They decided he wasn't fit for combat, and I took his place."

### Gaining Combat Experience Over Japan

"The first day that I flew with (this division), we were flying 300 miles to the target and we were hitting Nittagahara Airfields up on Kyushu, which is the southernmost - big island of the Japanese three main islands."

"We'd got them out of bed, and we could see them running to their gun mounts, and a couple running to their airplanes. Well, there was nothing airborne which was our first priority, so we picked out targets of opportunity and I saw this twin engine bomber sitting on the tarmac and I thought, 'That's a pretty good target.' So in my dive I fired my rockets and then was strafing too, I stayed into my dive until I saw it blow up. I had to pull out pretty fast because I was getting kind of low, and my engine quit!" He coughed, and continued.

"With the engine quitting, why, where they were shooting behind me before, (now) I could see tracers crossing in front of me. It wasn't terribly serious because of speed, the propeller kept rotating, so it's cranking, one just needs to get gas to it, so we've got an auxiliary pump with a handle on it in there, so I pumped gas to it, (imagine how fast he was working on that!), and boy, the 2,000 horsepower engine took, but that pulled me right back into those bullets! Came back with a hole in my airplane. It was about a foot behind my back (he laughed), I lucked out on that one. I was probably the luckiest guy in the world (angels!?), in about 60, to 65 missions over the next six months, well, I never did pick up another hole, so that was good." "Sure the flight crew was appreciative." McPherson chuckled, "Yeah." "Well, the only problem with the hole in it, why, the airplane didn't fly just quite right on the 300 miles back. Definitely used the trim tabs and stuff, kind of got it to where I didn't have to fight it all the way home. When I landed and pulled up to the barrier, there's always a plane captain, and sailor, maintaining, and he crawls up to help you unbuckle, and chat with you a little bit."

Photo: From the Web

F6F traps aboard Essex.

Sailor on USS Essex deck shouted, "I see you picked up a little lead today!" McPherson, "Yeah!? Whereabouts?" The sailor on the flight deck said, "Well there's a hole about a foot behind your back!" "What had happened, they could figure it was the Japanese equivalent of a 20 or 30 millimeter, and it cut the cable that controls the tail surface, so that's why it wasn't flying just quite right!"

### One Mission - Two Victories - April 6, 1945

McPherson had been aboard the USS Essex (CV-9)

for 37 days when he got his first two victories - shooting down two Aichi A3D1 "Val" dive bombers [the Val bombers were credited with sinking more Navy ships, more tonnage than any other Japanese weapon!] "We were on our way home and saw a couple dive bombers. They were flying Really low, on the water,"..."It was a good thing I still hadn't put my guns on safety, because I didn't have time to do anything except to put the stick down, and put the sight on the leading one, and I saw him slump forward, and he crashed into the ocean. Then I did a wingover to see what happened to the second one, thinking probably the other guys were trying to take care of him, but there he was flying alone and headin' for this airfield. So, I did a wingover, and at full throttle (the Hellcat's) 2,000 horsepower responded really well so I got close enough. I was just ready to pull the trigger, and my division leader [USN Lt. Carlos Soffe] hollered at me," "Don, get out of there! They're shooting at you from the shore batteries..." "But I squeezed the trigger anyway, and that one exploded. I did a little evasive maneuvering to keep from getting shot down, and to join up with the other two guys."

"Well, I found out when we got back that there were two more Vals in that group on the side that I didn't even see. Also, there was some kind of a plane called a 'Lily' (Kawasaki made less than 2,000 Ki-48 Type 99 twin-engine light bombers for the I.J. Army Air F. Obsolete by 1944, most ended up as kamikaze aircraft), and the last guy in the division shot down a Lily. My division leader shot down the one Val, the other leader in the division [remember the Navy's 2 flights of 2 = 4 planes = 1 division], shot down one, so each one of us scored that day."

Photo: From the Web



Essex, Apr, 1945

### Back and forth between Okinawa and Japan

"I think it was actually about two weeks after the invasion of Okinawa [the Kerema Islands surrounding Okinawa were captured March 26th. Then the initial invasion of Okinawa was on April 1, 1945, and it was the largest World War II amphibious assault in the Pacific Theater].

"We had been hitting Kyushu all the time, southern big island, then we re-started in on Okinawa, messed up the airfields, and things like that. Our division didn't happen to be in a position to get any air-to-air kills during that time. Then we helped support the invasion of Okinawa We were carrying napalm bombs, fire bombs, and we scorched the beach."

"The invasion armada,... had all those ships out there. Battleships were lobbing shells in,... they even had a rocket launcher shooting rockets in there. Of course we scorched the beach ahead of the landing barges, then went elsewhere to start picking out targets. I don't think there was a terrible loss in that invasion because they thought that,... as we heard afterwards...that they figured the first airfield, and I have no idea how close that was to the beach,.. they thought it would probably take 'em six days to take that, and they had it in hours, because the Japanese, don't know if they'd guessed right, or we got some info, but they'd pulled back to the hills, and the mountains!" [the first week on Okinawa had fewer casualties than expected, the US also had rapid advances until April 12], "and then it was different, a Terrible, terrible loss of life." [Okinawa became the bloodiest Pacific War battle; over 240,000 died including about 150,000 Okinawans; 77,845 Japs, and 14,010 Americans, plus hundreds of other soldiers from the UK, Korea, and Taiwan].

After walking up his driveway in May one of the first questions to Don was about big Grumman F6F wind vane at the top of his driveway! Questions followed initial introductions, "Don, was your Hellcat marked with '115' or squadron markings?"

### Grumman's Hellcats were all DEATH N' DESTRUCTION to Japan

His home is not well disguised, this big Navy blue Hellcat is clearly visible from the street, and as told when I first arrived in Adams, "Everybody knows Don," and Don graciously began one of many enlightening conversations. "Yes, those are the Air Group markings. We call it the Hour Glass, on the rudder, and on the wing." "They have other names for it (inc. Diamond Glass), but what they do, they (were) painted, so each (carrier) Air Group was different [visible ID's, unique throughout the Pacific.

Photo: James Freibert



Don's Wind Vane

"VF-83 was a Hellcat squadron. VBF-83 was Corsairs, we had them aboard, and a small contingent of Dive Bombers and also some Torpedo bombers," of course I'd more questions, and McPherson patiently shared a "You Are There" view of World War II Naval aviation, he continued, "To finish with that Hellcat aboard the carrier (I started) combat the 1st of March 1945 [He went aboard with more replacement pilots for the Essex], flying into September. When it [his particular Hellcat] came, we had probably been in combat,... at least two months. And it had come aboard as a replacement, and stayed aboard for like, something like three months, then I don't know if it had too much flight time on it, they'd decided that it,... they needed to bring a new one in to replace it. But anyway, it left,... and according to the Bureau Number it was taken back to Pearl Harbor, and then it disappeared,... so apparently it was junked, at that point,... it was salvage."

"The way it started, it showed the Bureau number when it was in Pearl,... before they got planes, new planes, replacement planes.... and then it went to, what island was it!? It must have been in a Navy unit that was stationed on an island, it was there for a while, and I think that's probably when the nose art was put on it. It had the nose art when it came to us. We can't claim it, the nose art." [either the DEATH N' DESTRUCTION" lettering nor the nine, 3x3 Imperial Japanese flags], "Yeah,"

[not being sure if Don had five, six, or as many as nine aerial victories,, I asked him]. "Five, but those (referring to the nine Japanese flags) were painted on here when it came aboard the Essex. I don't know why but, checking it through,... I'm saying checking it through, I didn't do that, I have a friend down in Texas who's writing a book on our Air Group, then he's going to write one on the USS Essex aircraft carrier. Well, I've been helping him for a year-and-a-half. He had an Uncle that was aboard the Essex, part of the time that I was out there. He left after our first 79 days. When he passed away (that author's Uncle), he, Mark Herber is his name. Mark inherited all this stuff. His Dad wasn't a pilot - he was up in CIC, all that stuff has been declassified, they've released it, so he started writing his book. He's been calling me, so he'd ask, "Well Don, I found this, what does this mean?" "I'd answer him, and I'd be able to help him. He thought he'd have a book out by now, but he's still doing some research..." [Herber posts information online, on facebook and elsewhere Very regularly!] It's worth noting that three of the four "Wonder 5" aces who flew #115, actually had twice as many air-to-air victories, eighteen, as the nine flags that were always on that plane!

Photo: From the Web



Death N' Destruction, The aircraft Don McPherson, flew, in flight, probably in 1945.

Don corrected another assumption, "Actually a (Naval carrier) squadron would be more like our Hellcats, VF-83, and/or the Corsairs, VBF-83. Others were smaller, you know, so I'd guess they would be more like **Units**. I think earlier, probably they had as many dive bombers and torpedo bombers as they did the fighters, you know, [True it was the kamikazes that forced carrier groups to adopt "the big blue blanket," a second system of tactical genius from Adm. John Thach, who, as a Naval Academy graduate and squadron leader developed "the Thach Weave," which became the 'A' in a naval aviator's A-B-C's of fighter tactics], "less fighters and more of the other two, but that was changing." "Later in the war you probably had Avengers?" "Yeah" and Helldivers?" "Yeah"

#### **A "Wilder Wildcat" to beat the Zeroes, and Win the Pacific Air War.**

Although they did not enter combat until August 1943, Grumman Aircraft just made a few slight modifications, and versions, totaling 12,275 F6F Hellcats from June 1942 to November 1945. The "Wilder Wildcat" was about as perfect as any American aircraft made during WW2. It was said any farm boy who had driven a John Deere tractor, and the family's Ford could buckle into Grumman's F6F and fly it away. After America's hard start in World War II when an Imperial Japanese Army and Navy's thousands of pilots - had leaders who had been training in combat since as early as 1931 over Manchuria and China, and they'd much more maneuverable Mitsubishi A6M Zeke/Zero, and the Ki-43 Oscar, fighters killing our best, slower F4F Wildcats and P-40's, our airmen began to get more and more, superior combat training. Plus they got far better aircraft, like the Hellcat (Corsairs, Thunderbolts, Lightnings, and Mustangs). F6F pilots trained for months in 1942-43, so a rookie pilots had hundreds of flying hours logged to carry him in battle, to score victories across sixty-four million square miles of the Pacific Ocean. The bigger, beefier, Grumman's were better armored for pro-

tection, with six 50 caliber machine guns, and soon rocket and bomb mounts under the wings. The Hellcat could out-climb, out-dive, and pull away from nearly anything over the Pacific, 383 Hellcat pilots became aces, and Hellcats accounted for 80% of the 6,826 enemy planes shot down by US Navy pilots (and that's not counting Marine Corps pilots)!

### **Hellcats as Fighter Bombers + Sinking the Yamato and Nagato**

Back to our F6F Ace and why the carriers didn't carry many bombers in 1945, *"The reason they didn't have as many as they did earlier is,... we fighter planes, we could do a lot of things that they could do. I mean, we could do everything a Helldiver could do, and then fight... We couldn't carry torpedoes (like the Avengers),... and so, they come in pretty handy against shipping, like, we ended up,... the Air Group was part of sinking the Yamato (April 6-7, 1945),...*

In fact, *"We were in on destroying, sinking two of their battleships, the big Yamato, [the 1953 Japanese movie shows how important the Hellcats were in its loss], they caught out in the open. Our division ('Wonder 5's four 'Cats) was not in on that kill, because we had been on the search that found it the day before! And so we,.. I do not think any of us were flying that day, but the Essex was one of the leading (Air) groups to get in on that fight. In fact our, the commander of our Air Group was the one who circled up there and led (directed) the attack on"... the Yamato. "But the Nagato then was in Kure Naval base, and we were in on that one."*

Author Barrett Tillman quotes another Navy Ace, Lt. Comdr. Bardshar, about that round of attacks, *"Kure's defenses were, I think, the strongest and certainly most spectacular. They used colored bursts for air spotting as we did with surface naval rifles. Concern with flak at Kure was somewhat tempered by concern with mid-air collisions."*

McPherson continued, *"We banged around on that (Nagato) all day. Then they sent us out the second day to start on it again, and I think we were just climbing to get some altitude to come in again. They notified us that the film taken from the attack the first day, it was sittin on the bottom. So we wouldn't have needed to risk anti-aircraft fire for nothing. [The Nagato was another deadly, super-dreadnought battleship. It was completed in 1920, and served as Admiral Yamamoto's flagship during their Pearl Harbor attack. It had to be crippled in 1945 attacks; before being towed to and sunk in 1946 Bikini Atoll nuclear tests].*

*"Just a little later on, we still were heading back and forth from Kyushu to Okinawa - they'd give us targets each day. So then we did an experiment, after we'd taken over that (1st) airfield, of course the Air Force had come in and they were busy with what they were doing. They had, I think if I remember right, maybe six dive bombers, and*

*about four torpedo bombers which carried bombs too. They had them land at an airport and get taught, or we'd show them how to do troop support. That worked out pretty darn good, I mean we'd help the Air Force out then. We drew that duty several times. I'd have to say that was the toughest duty we ever drew because our forces, the Marines, the infantry, they had the Japanese bottled up in some of those caves, tombs and the only way they could get them out of there would be with flame throwers, so they'd give us a position on the grid map. We used the,... we liked rockets the best, they were a little bit more accurate than bombs. But if sometimes they'd put bombs on our planes, and we'd dive, and fire into that. And it was tough, you had no room for error, because your own guys were all around, but we got by with it."*

*"They told us there was one bomb that was dropped into our forces, and it didn't go off. Another thing that we did that kind of interesting, I can't remember what the official name for those guys, but they called them, a nickname was "bird dogs?"*

*"The Air Force would have a guy flying a small airplane like a Cub Cadet," our GP #2 Greg Jacobsen asked, "the L-3's?" "Yes, Don continued, "and he had a radio in it so he would go over there, we would report in and I definitely remember two of them. The first one, we asked, "What are you up for," then he replied, "Well, I got an old hut down here, I don't like the looks of," he said, "Put some ammo into that, and see what happens." began a round of laughter among Don, Greg, me and three more guys at our July 31 interview. Don said, "Boy, talk about a 4th of July, that was an ammunition dump. Then another time, why he had an old hay stack he didn't like, so we put a couple rockets into that, and that was a fuel storage (dump), so black smoke was rolling up,... two of probably a half dozen of those duties."*

### **3 kamikazes downed on 4 May 1945**

Greg asked about Don's other air-to-air victories. Don said, *"Well then, getting to the other airplanes I shot down, that would be (some) weeks after the invasion. One day they sent all the Hellcat fighters from the Essex, and I'm not sure whether they sent any Corsairs that day, or not, but anyway they sent us over there, they had put destroyer ships (gesturing), like if this is Okinawa and then Kyushu here, they'd have these destroyer ships operating here as radar pickets. So they could pick-up enemy planes that were coming in and vector us to intervene,... so we got our orders then. And boy, the attack had already started, there were airplanes everywhere. They estimate now that there were OVER 360 Japanese suicide planes. And they were flying everything from Zekes, to Tonys, to these float planes which were kind of search planes for submarines and things like that, but they could,... they had a machine gun on 'em."*

Barrett Tillman, in his *Hellcat Aces of World War 2*, describes this on page 68, from Don's earlier recollections, confirmed by US Navy records, "followed on 4 May

by three 'Alf' biplanes that had been re-rolled from recce floatplanes into kamikaze bombers - over 100 aircraft (in 96/97 Tillman further confirmed a count of 105,... may've been more!) were downed in one frantic hour on this date as the Japanese launched a huge assault on (their Task Force) TF-38."

*"I was holding on my division leader, so I saw what had happened, and we were probably (flying at), oh maybe 10,000 feet. And these rascals were flyin right low on the water, so we had to dive to get on 'em, and there was two of them heading for this one destroyer. Ooh, we found out they were so darn slow that we overshot the first one. Neither one of us got a shot at him, but I shot down the second one just before it could dive into that destroyer."*

*"So Carlos Soffe, my division leader (Lt. Soffe), got on the radio and said - (a lot of times we were on radio silence, so they couldn't pick up our location), he picked up his mic and said, "Guys split up. Get all those rascals you can. So that's one of the few times that we split up and fought individually, as it was not in the way we were supposed, I was supposed to protect the leading man, and Tail-end Charlie was supposed to protect Division Leader and"... I had to ask, "Did he say rascals, or was that for our church audience?" "I'm not sure, that might have been mine, I'm not sure. He might have said something a little stronger... no I don't think he would have, I don't think he was that kind of guy... But anyway, we split up then individually and "I ended up getting three that day, which, with the two before made me an Ace." The division leader got three, and he'd had one before, so he missed ace by one [That day! But he was not done, Lt. Carlos Soffe ended WW2 with several victories, before flying in Korea]. "But then, here about two months ago,... from the research that the guy in Texas is doing, he seems to think that maybe, my division" [a kitchen blender was louder than Don, who said there may have been more air-to-air victories that day]. "I sure hope that's true,... Why then the Section Leader, he and his wing man, they were in a higher level, and they (the Japanese kamikazes) were coming in at all levels, they could maneuver better. With the slow speeds, we were maneuvering all right, but we'd had to dump our fuel, our flaps and everything else in order to stay slow enough(while chasing float plane kamikazes), so we could even get one burst in. They had a bit more room [altitude = opportunities), so the division leader he got four, plus one and that made him an Ace. Then 'the tail end Charlie' started up a little bit higher yet, he ended up gettin six that day" [That's Ens. Myron Melton Truax who splashed four Type 93 trainers, a 'Val' dive bomber, and an 'Oscar!'], "so + one he had before made up his seven kills for the war, what they called a... someone jumped in, "an "Ace in a Day!" Don continued, "He was the only Hellcat, Ensign that I know of who was advanced to a Lieutenant Junior Grade, and I think that was what got it for him, because he was "an Ace in a day."*

Importantly for the guys on the water, from a facebook post by author Mark Herber, he'd got this post script from

Don, that "nearly 50 years after this mission, (Don) was put in contact with a former USS Ingraham gunner, Art Jones, and they talked, and Jones described the Hellcat pilot's actions, and felt certain that he had saved their ship! About a month after their conversation (in '95), our Cornhusker ace received a package in the mail from Art: a photo of Ingraham with 36 of her crew's signatures on it. Quoting Don, "I went to bed that night with a great satisfaction that I had been at the right place at the right time to save some Navy guys from injury or worse. That is one thing that makes war worthwhile."

Naval records show that she (the *Ingraham*) came under concerted air attack on May 4, 1945, with the crew also downing four Jap planes (not counting what the Navy fighter pilots shot down), but a fifth kamikaze that made it past the air cover crashed into her port side resulting in 51 casualties, including 15 dead.

This *USS Ingraham* was DD-694, a Sumner class destroyer commissioned Mar, 10, 1944. She displaced 2,200 tons and had a complement of 336 men. From mid-Nov 1944 until V-J Day her duty was screening aircraft carriers. After that kamikaze hit she was repaired in California, operated off our West Coast in '46, joined the Far East fleet in '47, then toured the Mediterranean with the Sixth Fleet, and returned to Japan in '53 as part of a Carrier task force during the Korean War, so McPherson was a lifesaver, and like another ace from our Museum, who you may meet later, he's "The Taxayer's Friend!"

### **Quieter Times and Finding Our P.O.W's Camps**

Almost to the end of McPherson's WWII story, he continued, "And then after that why, we,... hardly every saw (enemy) planes in the air. I think that just about wiped out what they had, except that... they were holding a lot back for the actual invasion of Japan proper. There were some airplanes shot down. I know one of our guys, one of our Lieutenants got one,... and we'd already pretty much defeated their fleet. From then on we didn't fly as much."

The lunch bunch still had questions, Greg asked, 'What were you doing after V-J Day?' Don replied "...Some of the better fighter pilots,... they made it our duty to fly low level," "at tree top level over the big cities and chart where the Prisoner of War camps were, and the Japanese were ordered to write a big "PW" on the roofs. We found a couple that weren't marked too."

*"But this one in Tokyo, we hit that the first day, and dropped (thought took a step back),... 'they gave us packets, like you could drop a message on ships when you fly over, you'd dip a wing, and toss it out, it would open into a little parachute, it would float down and I don't know what all it had... Candy, cigarettes,... nuts and stuff... Apparently they had put our Squadron number on it because when we went back the next day to check on them, why they had "VF-83" written on their roof! And "News ???" with question marks. So we went back and told the ship fellows, "they don't know what's happening." So they*

*printed up leaflets and we went back and dropped those to let them know that the cease fire come about and they would be gotten out of there as quickly as possible."*

Maybe we'll add an epilogue to this, on another day, but suffice to say McPherson's had a long and productive life since 1945. He came home to farm, raise a family, take one of four, then three, then two rural mail routes that served ALL of his hometown of Adams Nebraska, and eventually he retired from the US Post Office. But that's not the half of it, there was coaching, managing the local ball field, now named for McPherson, working with church and civic groups, and answering mail from other World War II history geeks! Thelma and Don had four kids, but like many grandparents, Don's focus went to *"I've only got one grandson, and I've got eight granddaughters. The grandson, he lives in West Omaha I guess you'd call it."*

We'd need another page to list a fraction of the books, magazine and newspaper stories McPherson's been in, but must recommend several videos from the Fagen Fighter's "Voices of Valor" series that you can find on YouTube. Anchors Away!

## 2022 CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Nov. 19	Wing Meeting	11:00 AM	GPW Hangar
Dec. 17	Wing Meeting	11:00 AM	GPW Hangar

## MONTHLY EVENTS

*Council Bluffs Airport - Great Plains Wing hosts a monthly cookout on the 3rd Wednesday of each month from April to October - 5:30 - 7:00 p.m.*

Great Plains Wing  
COMMEMORATIVE AIR FORCE  
Council Bluff Iowa Airport  
16803 McCandless Road  
Council Bluffs, Iowa 51503

## 2nd to the Last Nebraska WWII Fighter Ace - Lester Arasmith - 1924 - 2019

Putting Don's hundred years and his history as a WWII combat ace in perspective, the second to the last Nebraska Ace of WWII, went to glory in 2019. My friend, Pastor Dennis Waddelow (of Calvary Chapel Lincoln) met with Lester Arasmith twice. They met at a coffee shop, where he asked Arasmith if he was a vet (USAF hat?). Lester told Dennis he was an Ace, flew a P-51C, very nice guy, and they got into some detail, he thought he'd been the youngest ace in the Air Force. He told me a story, Dennis said, "he had this encounter (DW thinks it was probably a Tojo), one day, and as he was typically fighting with slower Oscars. As the distance between them closed, he thought "piece of cake" (Nakajima Ki-43 'Oscar,' had two smaller machine guns), but then all of a sudden Arasmith saw cannon rounds coming by him, then the plane passed him at a high rate of speed, (which shook him up). Dennis recalled Arasmith saying, "I immediately broke the wires (pushing his Mustang into full 'Emergency' power) and I went to the deck, back to my aerodrome." Lester Arasmith was born on June 9, 1924, was a long time member of Lincoln's Indian Hills Community Church, and went to be with his Lord and Savior on December 25, 2019, from Lincoln NE.

*York, NE Airport: EAA Chapter 1055 hosts a fly-in breakfast on the 1st Saturday of each month from 8:00 to 10:00 a.m.(free-will offering)*

*Crete, NE Airport: EAA Chapter 569 hosts a fly in breakfast on the 3rd Sat. of every month from 8 to 10 a.m.*

*If you would like to put a event on this calendar, please send an email with the necessary information to Terry Helphrey at [terry.helphrey@outlook.com](mailto:terry.helphrey@outlook.com)*