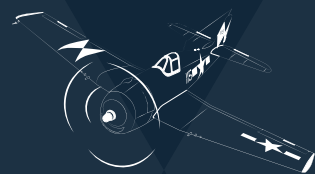




TRIBUTE TO AN ACE



FAGEN FIGHTERS' F6F-5 HELLCAT AND
THE VETERAN WHO INSPIRED IT

BY SAM OLESON



EIGHTY YEARS AGO, DON McPherson was a young ensign in the U.S. Navy, heading off to war against the Japanese in the South Pacific. Serving for three years until the conclusion of World War II, Don became an ace in arguably the most successful and important fighter aircraft of the Pacific theater: Grumman's F6F Hellcat. This past summer at EAA AirVenture Oshkosh 2021, Don's service to his country was on display in the form of his old airplane. Fagen Fighters WWII Museum's newly restored Hellcat, an F6F-5, carries the same markings as the one Don flew all those years ago and is a tribute to his and his fellow servicemen's sacrifice.



FROM ENSIGN TO ACE

DON FLEW WITH THE Navy from 1942 to 1945 and saw combat in some of the significant battles toward the end of the war in 1945. But early on, he needed to learn to fly the Hellcat just like anyone else, which was somewhat of a challenge when it's a one-seater with no room for an instructor pilot.

"It's a one-seater, so how do you learn to fly it? You don't have an instructor to take you up and introduce you," Don said. "What they did is they gave you time enough to get in the cockpit and study all the instruments and gauges, and then they blindfolded you and you had to pass a blindfold checkout. You didn't have to learn every single little control, but blindfolded you had to be able to pick out the ones that were the most important when you were in flight. That wasn't much of a problem. I got by with that all right. Then you just get in and you start flying it — field carrier landings is what they called them. They'd have a circle marked out in a grass strip, and it was to prepare you for approaching carrier landings. You had to slip or slide the airplane, whichever you needed to do to lose altitude so you'd land with the wheels in the circles."

The paint scheme on Fagen Fighters' F6F-5 honors U.S. Navy veteran Don McPherson, who flew the Hellcat with VF-83 in the Pacific theater of World War II.

Following carrier qualification training in the Great Lakes, Don went from San Diego to Pearl Harbor to Maui and then shipped out for combat, traveling to Ulithi as part of the Fast Carrier Task Force, serving on the USS Essex in VF-83 of Carrier Air Group 83. Shortly after arriving on the Essex, Don saw firsthand the Japanese strategy of kamikaze bombing.

"We kind of started finding out what the kamikaze suicide corps was all about," he said. "The Japanese sent in two twin-engine bombers and one of them targeted the Essex, but he overshoot his dive and just clipped the radar mast off the top of our ship and missed the ship completely. The other one did hit the Hancock carrier that was next to us, and I don't think it did terrible damage; it was kind of a glancing blow on the flight deck, because I know they left the next day for combat with us."

Don's first real combat was a strafing mission over an important airfield on the Japanese island Kyushu, and it turned out to be one he wouldn't soon forget.

"We took off in the dark to try to get them out of bed, so to speak," Don explained. "There was no airborne aircraft to worry about, and we saw a couple [pilots] that were running toward their planes, so each of us individually picked out a target on the ground. I started to dive and spotted a twin-engine bomber on the ground. ... I picked this one out, and I fired my rockets, and I stayed in my dive long enough to see it blow up. I was getting low enough that I had to pull up pretty hard and fast. When I pulled up, my engine quit."

Thankfully, Don was able to get his engine restarted by pumping some fuel into it and made a run for the ocean and out of harm's way, or so he thought. But when he'd gotten his massive 2,000-hp Pratt & Whitney restarted, the surge took him right into a tracer barrage and he was hit. Fortunately, the damage wasn't critical and he was able to limp the airplane back to the Essex and make an "okay" landing, though he had a surprise in store for him.

"We always had a sailor that's called a plane captain," Don said. "He came and crawled up on the wing and he says, 'I see you picked up a little lead today.' I said, 'Yeah, whereabouts?' He said, 'Well, there's a hole about a foot behind your back.'"

Around this time in early 1945, kamikaze attacks were becoming more and more frequent. To combat this, the Navy sent fighters and bombers to destroy Japanese airfields on tiny islands in the Pacific. Returning from one such mission at Kikaijima, Don recorded his first and second kills in the Hellcat.

"We decided we'd better get back to the ship [after damaging the airfield], because we were getting low on ammo," he said. "We started back and I remember we were around 1,800 feet off the water, we weren't very high, and all of a sudden I saw two 'Val' dive bombers. Boy, I was lucky I hadn't put my guns back on safety, because all I had time to do was put the nose down and squeeze the trigger. I saw the pilot plunge into the ocean. I was wondering what happened to the second one, and I thought maybe the other guys had taken care of him. But I made a wing-over turn, and this one was heading toward the airfield we'd just damaged. ... I started catching up until I was ready to squeeze the trigger to make the kill."



DEATH N' DESTRUCTION





The Hellcat joins an impressive collection of warbirds at the Fagen Fighters WWII Museum in Granite Falls, Minnesota.



VF-83 continued to hit suspected kamikaze bases on small islands before supporting Allied forces during the Battle of Okinawa.

“On April 1, Easter Sunday, we helped with the invasion of Okinawa,” Don said. “I think most all of us fighters were carrying napalm fire bombs at that point. We went in and scorched the beaches where the landing boats were coming in.”

Don’s three other kills came in May while the Battle of Okinawa continued to rage on. Don was with his squadron of Hellcats, flying north of Okinawa on a combat air patrol mission for American radar picket destroyers, when hundreds of Japanese kamikazes approached from mainland Japan, and he was able to score three victories on the day, taking his total to five and making him an ace.

During the remaining months of the war, Don flew missions around the main Japanese islands, including Kyushu, Honshu, and Hokkaido, damaging and destroying a number of airfields and other ground targets.

When the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, the Essex was close enough for the sailors and pilots to see the mushroom cloud from many miles away.

“I didn’t fly that morning,” Don said. “We knew that something was going on, because the area we were supposed to be at, they had notified the fleet to not go there. We found out why. All of a sudden on the loudspeakers throughout the ship, they announced, ‘If you look to the west, you’ll see a big mushroom cloud. The United States has dropped an atomic bomb.’ We didn’t know there was such [a thing].”

After the war, Don returned to his family farm in Nebraska and also conducted rural mail delivery for his local post office.

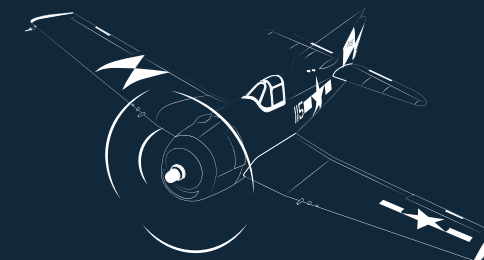
CONNECTING WITH DON

Featuring an impressive collection of World War II-era warbirds, the Fagen Fighters WWII Museum in Granite Falls, Minnesota, was missing the U.S. Navy’s most successful fighter from the war: the F6F. As Evan Fagen, EAA 659292, Warbirds 551646, began his search for a Hellcat to add to the museum’s collection, he began researching paint schemes and came across Don’s VF-83 scheme from his time on the Essex.

“It was one of those things where I’d been looking for a paint scheme for this airplane,” Evan explained. “And I was actually looking for a paint scheme long before I had purchased one, because I’d been on a hunt for Hellcat for a long time, but it was after I had purchased it. Then I found this scheme and saw an article about Don, and my wife, Melissa, looked up his number and I called him up. And that’s how our friendship started.

“But I wanted to ask permission to paint it in his markings, and he was happy to do so and excited,” Evan said. “And a lot of it is just a wealth of information during the restoration. So it’s been a lot of fun, and I’ve been to his house several times and gone to lunch and talked and gone through a lot of the details of the project. And he’s been involved every step of the way.”

Now nicknamed *Death N’ Destruction*, the aircraft that Fagen Fighters restored was purchased from Yanks Air Museum in Chino, California, a number of years of back. Accepted by the Navy as BuNo 78645 on March 2, 1945, the aircraft served with VF-14 and VF-80 before completing its military service in a reserve unit at Naval Air Station Squantum in Quincy, Massachusetts. Fagen Fighters’ Hellcat went through a couple of private owners following its military service and was eventually purchased by Yanks in 1978 and remained at the museum until 2017.



SPECIFICATIONS

AIRCRAFT YEAR, MAKE, AND MODEL: 1945 Grumman F6F-5 Hellcat

LENGTH: 33 feet, 7 inches

WINGSPAN: 42 feet, 10 inches

HEIGHT: 13 feet, 1 inch

SEATS: 1

POWERPLANT MAKE AND MODEL: Pratt & Whitney R-2800-10

HORSEPOWER: 2,000

PROPELLER: Hamilton Standard

MAX SPEED: 340 knots

CRUISE SPEED/FUEL CONSUMPTION: 180 knots at 75 gph

MAX RANGE: 945 miles

MAX RATE OF CLIMB: 2,600 feet per minute, normal

SERVICE CEILING: 37,300 feet

EMPTY WEIGHT: 9,238 pounds

MAXIMUM GROSS WEIGHT: 12,598 pounds





RESTORATION

The bulk of the restoration took place just across the Chino Airport from Yanks at Fighter Rebuilders. Headed up by Steven Hinton, son of founder and legendary warbird pilot Steve Hinton, EAA 181203, Warbirds 12506, the project from start to finish took about two-and-a-half years, from mid-2018 to early 2021.

Although the main priority of the restoration was a safe, reliable, and accurate aircraft, making sure the restoration didn't drag on for years and years was also a point of concern, as Evan wanted to reunite Don with a flying airplane.

"Evan was anxious to not have a restoration project that would take five years, and part of the motivation for that was trying to reunite Don McPherson with the airplane. Don is now 99, so at the time, he's 97 I suppose," Steven said. "As you know with veterans, unfortunately, they're not sticking around much longer. So, that puts a timeline on it. For Evan too, I believe he had spent about two to three years attempting to acquire the airplane from Charles Nichols and Yanks. So, all that predicated back to we want a restoration that's not going to take five years, that it's going to be up and going sooner rather than later."

One of the first steps in the process was taking a look at the various systems within the aircraft and determining what work needed to be done. Although the aircraft was kept in good condition at Yanks, it hadn't flown in many years, which meant that a variety of systems needed to be rebuilt or replaced.

"As we started opening it up, getting the engine off, it was pretty apparent that all of the hoses — fuel hoses, oil hoses — were real old; they were rock hard," Steven said. "And then the fuel system, the Hellcats got three bladder tanks, two in the center section wing, and then one in the fuselage, and those were rotten. The original tanks had a bulletproof or a self-sealing gelatin so if they got shot, it would seal up the tank. Anyway, the tanks had been dry for so long, the inner membrane cracked out and that gelatin becomes exposed, and it contaminates the fuel system."

"So, I think we were really looking at trying to make the airplane reliable systems-wise," he continued. "As you know, with a lot of these warbirds, they get flown maybe five hours a year; they sit for the rest of the year. And Evan had expressed his desire to be able to fly this airplane 80 hours a year, like his flagship or go-to airplane, if you will. That's a pretty good chunk of time on an airplane like that, so we wanted to make sure that the airplane was going to be reliable so he could go do that, not have to fix broken stuff all the time."

While the Hellcat didn't need a complete restoration, Fighter Rebuilders in Chino, California, performed a thorough IRAN (inspect and repair as needed) over two-and-a-half years.



Steven described the restoration as more of an IRAN (inspect and repair as needed), as opposed to a complete and total restoration, but that doesn't mean a significant amount of work wasn't needed. With a focus on reliability and maintenance, Steven and his team got started, replacing or overhauling a variety of systems while also cleaning anything original.

"We replaced the fuel tanks and every single hydraulic line and fitting; they're all new," he said. "All the hydraulic actuators and valves got completely disassembled, overhauled. It really didn't focus on areas of the airplane that were still original from the depot. The airplane went back through like a Navy overhaul in the '50s when it was a drone."

"The inside of the fuselage tail cone is all that original paint, so it's old-looking in there, but all of the flight controls and the systems are all new," Steven added. "When Evan expressed what he wanted, we talked about making the cockpit — kind of anywhere that you would see the airplane externally — make it look nice. So the cockpit was a complete overhaul, and we repainted it. We tried to go for originality with the cockpit. When it showed up, it was a 1980s, 1970s, typical warbird, so a lot of the stock components were out of the airplane or actually not there at all. We had to fabricate a lot of that and did a lot of research on -5 Hellcats. The wing butts and the wheel wells, because those are exposed, we wanted those real nice, and then same thing with the firewall forward on the engine."

The Hellcat's Pratt & Whitney R-2800 Double Wasp engine was overhauled by Anderson Aeromotive in Idaho, though Steven explained that too was more of an IRAN than a complete overhaul.

"They're [Anderson Aeromotive] pretty much the specialist for 2800s, and the engine on that airplane's unique," Steven explained. "I believe Collings Foundation is the only other Hellcat with the original engine, which is an R-2800-10. That engine is a two-stage, two-speed supercharger. Most of the other airplanes today have something that's a little less complicated and easier to deal with. But, because it had the original engine on it, it had all of the inner coolers and all of the ducting, and we figured, 'Well, why not make it all operational? It's all there anyway?'"

"So, the engine was also an IRAN, not a complete overhaul. It was overhauled sometime in 1980, or actually right after the last time it had flown, they took the engine off and had it overhauled by JRS and then it never returned to flight. So, because of that, we just asked the engine shop to tear it all the way down, inspect, and repair as needed. So, four cylinders got changed; the supercharger, because it had not been operational, was overhauled completely so that it is operational; and then, they run it on their testing for about five hours."



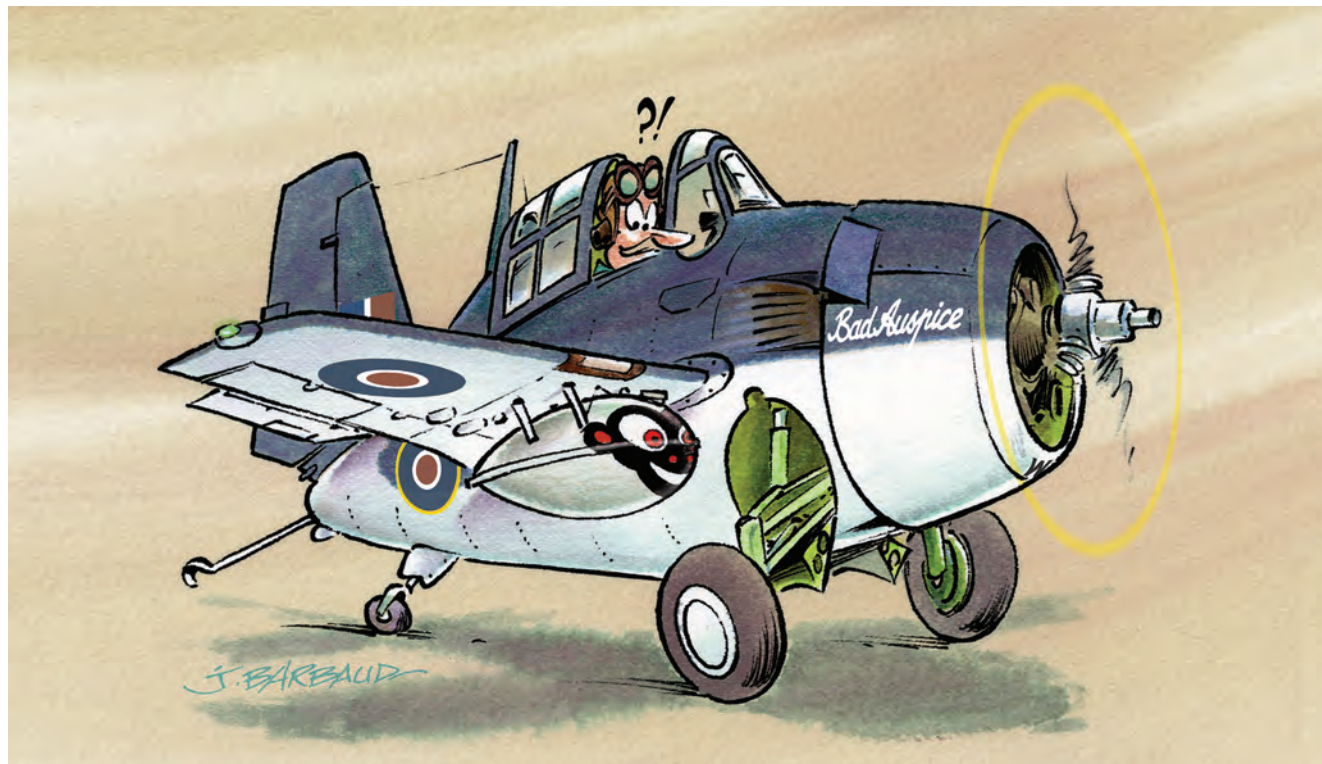
For *Death N' Destruction's* wings, Steven actually used an old friend, LD Hughes, from his highly successful air racing days to help out.

"He was my crew chief on [P-51] *Strega*," Steven said of LD. "He's got a company called Valley Aircraft. A Hellcat's a real large airplane, obviously, and because of the time frame we were looking at, initially there was only two of us working on it at Fighter Rebuilders. So, we sent the wings up to him in Bakersfield, and they did all the fabric work as well. So, the flaps, ailerons, elevators, and rudder. And then, same thing with the wings; it was a little bit of sheet metal, but for the most part, it was clean, inspect, repaint, that kind of thing. The wings are pretty simple. There's like two hydraulic lines in each wing, there's not much to them."

The final paint job depicting *Death N' Destruction's* VF-83 squadron markings was done in-house, and it first flew on January 3, 2021. In March 2021, the aircraft was flown to Nebraska for Don to get his first look at *Death N' Destruction*. At AirVenture 2021 in July, the

airplane was named Grand Champion World War II, and Fighter Rebuilders earned the Gold Wrench. Although Steven has been involved with Fighter Rebuilders for the past decade, the Fagen Hellcat was his first opportunity to manage a restoration project, and he was very proud of the work he and his team accomplished.

"We're really proud of it," Steven said. "I think the biggest takeaway too is just how pleased Evan's been with it. And to be a part of a restoration for an owner like Evan and his family that are down to earth, great, great people, great museum ... but his intention of flying the airplane constantly, as opposed to just having it sit, I think was really special. I think there's only, I'd have to count, but it's like five or six flyable Hellcats in the world. So, to be able to get another one out there, especially in the Midwest where there isn't a Hellcat based, they're all West Coast or East Coast based. It's such an important airplane in the history of our country and obviously World War II [for] what it did. It was just a very special opportunity to be able to be a part of it." ✈



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