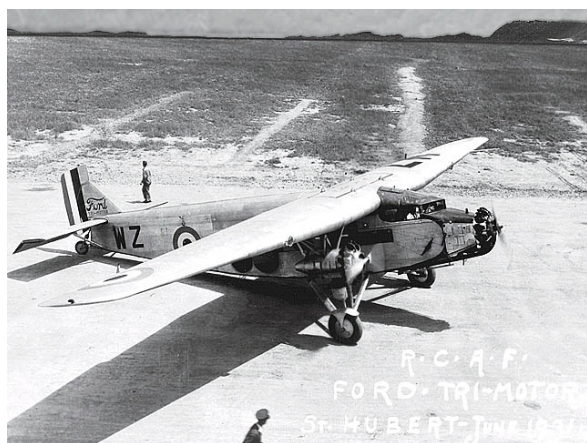


## JEREMIAH J. O'KEEFE, III, - THE PILOT

Born July 12, 1923

By: Tom Simmons July 13, 2013 / Jeffrey O'Keefe Aug. 31, 2018

As a child Jerry had an interest in aircraft. He built a model for a contest and won a ride in a Ford Trimotor pictured here below. His interest in aviation never ceased after that.



In 1941, Jeremiah J. O'Keefe was attending business school in New Orleans when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. He had never heard of Pearl Harbor, had no idea where it was, but he knew America was at war and joined the Navy. Because he was only 18 he had to get his father to sign a permission slip.

He said he joined because “everyone wanted to do their part.”

Jerry expressed his interest in aviation to the Navy recruiter. The nation needed pilots, in fact, every role was needed during this time. The U.S. was mostly unprepared for war. The wheels of preparedness turned slowly during those times. Jerry waited and waited for orders. They were slow coming.

First “communique” or official announcement drove his interest and direction to Nacadish Junior College in Louisiana where he was able to take 8 hours civilian pilot training in a J-three Cub pictured here below.



The Navy paid his expenses but no pay. He completed that training satisfactorily having soloed at the end of his training in the cub.

More months passed and he finally got orders from Navy to go to the University of Georgia at Athens for Pre-flight school which entailed classes on aviation and a sort of boot camp including physical training and military drill and customs.

Jerry passed that and again waited months for orders.

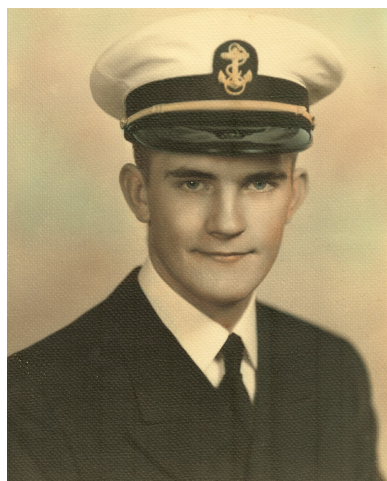
**On January 1, 1943, he was ordered to Naval Air Station Dallas where he was to receive primary flight training and check out in a Yellow Peril ... a Stearman biplane pictured here below:**



**The Stearman was a large yellow biplane with a 220 hp engine. On the first day on the flight line, an instructor climbed into the front cockpit and had Jerry climb into the rear cockpit. The instructor told Jerry to taxi out and take off. Being young and eager as a navy aviation cadet, he did as he was ordered without question. They did some flying around. The Stearman was a lot heavier demanding on the controls than that**

**of the 65 hp J-three Cub that he had gotten his 8 hours training in, but it answered the control inputs about the same. The instructor then pointed to a small grass field and told Jerry to land. He did. It was not too pretty and a little bumpy which agitated his instructor, but evidently was acceptable. The instructor got out and told Jerry to take off and fly a while, practice some maneuvers for about 20 minutes while the instructor took a smoke and then come back and get him.**

**Remember that Jerry had a grand total of 8 hours in a 65 hp cub only about thirty minutes of which was solo. Still being a young and eager Navy aviation cadet, Jerry did as he was told..... shoved the throttle forward and took off. Twenty minutes later he came back and made his second ever landing in that Stearman.....got the plane back on the ground in a bounce or two. The instructor got back in and they flew back to base.**



**It was just after that that the Navy office staff found out that Jerry's records had somehow been mixed up with another pilot who had 25 hrs in the Stearman.**

**The training squadron officer called him in and told him, "O'Keefe, we got your records mixed up and thought you had 25 hours time in the Stearman. We could have killed you but you did very well so carry on." Jerry then got proper training in the Stearman.**

**Jerry did well and was sent to Pensacola for advanced training in the North American SNJ-5B Texan. The SNJ Texan is a two place, 600 hp trainer built as transition trainer to heavier aircraft including fighters pictured here below:**



**Jerry graduated with good marks. Upon graduation a limited number of pilots were offered the opportunity to go into the Marine Corps Aviation Division. Jerry and about five of his classmates chose the Marines thinking that was a sure way to advance into the “newest” combat fighters. He was commissioned a Second Lt. in the Marine corps.**

**From Pensacola, he was sent to the Marine base at El Toro California to transition to the Grumman F4F Wild Cat pictured here below:**

**This was the Navy’s first line carrier fighter, but the planes the new Cadets trained in had been shipped back to the states from the war in the pacific and were quickly becoming obsolete or as one might say “a little long in the tooth”. More than one pilot had experienced engine failure, but the plane was built tough and most pilots walked away from situations of a forced landing. The Wildcat had a 1200 hp motor and a top speed of about 320 mph... which was considerably slower than the Japanese Zero which clocked in with an average speed of 351 mph. Jerry and his classmates all went through carrier training in the Wildcat in of all places the Mojave Desert. A carrier deck was marked off and the pilots practiced taking off and landing on it. If they did in within the carrier markings they were deemed to be carrier qualified.**

**Jerry had a little accident...flipped a Wild Cat. He and other Cadets had been training doing take off and landings. The next day they were going out to do so additional training. It had been raining overnight and there were a few puddles. As Jerry began take off, accelerating with full power, the plane’s engine was so powerful that it would cause the plane to drift to one side or another while accelerating down the runway. His plane was drifting to the right when it’s wheel caught a mud puddle and this actually caused the plane**



to flip upside down and it was sliding down the runway upside down. The plane came to a stop as the ground crew was running up to the plane. They got there and were hollering “WAIT RIGHT THERE !!!!..... WE’RE GOING TO GET YOU OUT OF THERE !!!!!” Jerry determined that he wasn’t waiting on anyone.....as the gasoline was pouring out and over him. He unbuckled himself and climbed from under the plane. He later said that it was a good think that he did.....because they brought the boom lift over to pick the plane up and reset it and they dropped the plane twice in the process !!!

Jerry had heard about a big navy fighter called the Corsair built by Chance Vought. He applied and was sent to Cherry Point, NC to join the new VMFA “Air Marine Fighter



Aircraft” Squadron 323, when the Squadron was commissioned on August 1, 1943. VMFA-323 was nicknamed The Death Rattlers because three fighter pilots killed a 6 foot rattlesnake and hung it’s skin in their squadron ready room. This squadron was to become the most successful in the Pacific in 1945.

The Chance Vought F-4U Corsair was, in certain ways, a peculiar bird. It had bent wings, a fourteen-foot-long nose in front of the

cockpit, and an 18 Cylinder double row 2000 horse power Pratt and Whitney radial engine. Top speed was 425 mph. It had six 50 caliber machine guns. It had a 1000 mile range without a belly tank. You could load it with bombs and rockets until it had a total gross weight of 14,000 lbs. This was the biggest, meanest, fastest fighter in the Pacific and the best all around fighter for both air combat and ground support. The plane is pictured here below:

Nicknames included “the bent wing bird” and also “the Ensign Eliminator” because it took more time to train pilots to fly the Corsair and there were accidents.

So imagine here is Jerry, walking up to the biggest single engine plane he had ever seen. He had moved from a 65 hp Cub to a 220 hp Stearman to a 600 hp SNJ to a 1200 hp Wildcat, but this Corsair had 2000 hp !!!!. This plane has a “one person” cockpit. Either you got in and flew it or you didn’t. Jerry, embraced the challenge as he climbed up on the wing and into the cockpit. He strapped on his parachute and safety harness. He followed the ground school procedures he had studied to start the 18-cylinder engine and that was that,

sort of. Because of the 14-foot nose elevated out front and a low tail wheel, one had to “serpentine” or taxi like an “S” to see what was in front. (One of Jerry’s classmates started to taxi and didn’t see another classmate taxiing in. There was a collision and the big prop chopped one of the classmates to pieces).

Because of the tremendous torque and the huge propeller, Jerry had to put in a lot of right rudder as he pushed the throttle forward. He had never in his life felt power like that. Jerry mastered this new unbridled power and learned to love it. It was a joy to fly, responsive, fast, quick in maneuver, and climbed like a homesick angel.

VMFA 323 Squadron moved across the continent to El Centro, California, then to Camp Pendleton, California (where Jerry married his sweetheart Annette Saxon).



Then pilots and planes were loaded onto a jeep carrier and was ferried to a series of bases across the Pacific including Emirao, Espitito Santo and Manus. Then onto another jeep carrier, *White Plains*, from which the planes were launched to land at Okinawa’s Kadena airfield in April 1945 while the fight for the Japanese Island was raging. The squadron flew into Kadena airfield in support of “Operation Iceberg” during the Battle of Okinawa.

VMFA-323 was tasked with flying cover over the invasion fleet which was under severe attack from hundreds of Kamikaze suicide attacks. This was a crucial mission. During the battle for Okinawa 368 ships were damaged with 28 of those being sunk by Kamikaze attacks. The Americans lost 768 planes. The navy suffered more deaths than either the Army or Marine Corps estimated at 5,000 plus deaths.

April 22, 1945 was the biggest single day for the VMFA 323 Death Rattlers. As many as 80 Kamikazes attacked radar picket ships off Okinawa. VMFA- 323 downed 23 of the 80. Three members of the squadron earned the distinction of ACE that day by shooting down at least five enemy aircraft or more. Within the span of a half hour, Exec Officer Maj. Jefferson Dorroh knocked down 6, CO Maj. George Axtel got 5, and Lt. Jeremiah O’Keefe shot down 5.

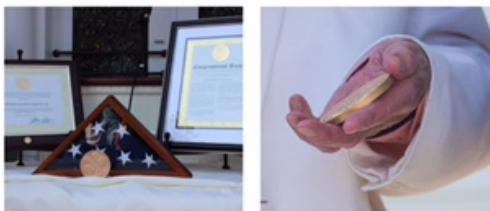
A week later on April 28, Jerry was part of a flight of twelve Corsairs led by Major Axtell. Lt. O’Keefe was in his usual place as the skipper’s section leader and Bill Hood was flying

on his wing. The weather was sunny and clear. Heading east at approximately 12,000 feet, Jerry spotted five unidentified planes below at about 6,000 feet. He called Major Axtel. “I See five bogeys down below us, Skipper.” He suspected they were Japanese, because the formation was composed of five planes, instead of the usual formations of four, eight, or twelve planes the Navy and Marines usually had.

The Major couldn’t see them. “Well sir I see them. Can my section go down and investigate?”

With approval, Jerry began a slow turn to the south and began bearing down on the bogeys from above and behind.

O’Keefe and Hood got close, armed their machine guns and positioned themselves at 5 o’clock and 7 o’clock to the enemy aircraft were old Imperial Army fixed gear Ki-27 “Nates” headed for a kamikaze run against the U.S. ships. O’Keefe opened fire on the leader at 300 yards, hitting it around the cockpit. The plane exploded. He streaked by the enemy in a shallow dive, pulled up and over to find a single plane diving for the ocean. Jerry flew straight down on the Nates tail and exploded it. His section mates got all the rest. This gave Jerry a total of 7 for the war.



Jerry also flew ground attack missions and later his squadron wound up at Awase airfield and continued to attack Japan until war’s end.

Jerry has never liked the word hero, but what other word can be applied to his Marine service. I should mention that besides the title fighter ACE. The 21-year-old Jeremiah J. O’Keefe also earned the Navy Cross, the Distinguished Flying Cross, and several Air Medals. On the 150 Year Anniversary of the O’Keefe’s Funeral Home business, Jerry was presented with a newly minted Congressional Gold Medal for American Fighter Aces.