

# Hero of the Skies

In an amazing act of daring and bravery, Butch O'Hare earned his place in history as America's first naval Flying Ace of World War II

BY GREG RIENZI

On Feb. 20, 1942, Navy Lieutenant Edward "Butch" O'Hare hopped into his Wildcat fighter plane aboard the USS *Lexington* aircraft carrier. This was no reconnaissance mission, flight drill or exercise. Duty, danger and fate beckoned.

The *Lexington* sat some 450 nautical miles from New Guinea and Japan's Pacific naval headquarters at Rabaul harbor.

Earlier that afternoon, the *Lexington* had been discovered by a four-engine Kawanishi flying boat. A U.S. fighter shot down the spotter plane, but not before it had radioed the carrier's position.

A full squadron of Mitsubishi G4M "Betty" bombers flew out of Rabaul to take out the *Lexington*. To counter, the *Lexington* dispatched six Wildcat fighters, which took down most of the enemy planes. The ship's anti-aircraft guns finished off the rest before any damage was done.

A second wave of bombers, however, was soon incoming. O'Hare and five other pilots roared off the carrier's deck to stop them.

These were the times when heroes were made.

Although just 27, O'Hare was already a seasoned and senior pilot who had established himself as a favorite with crew members. The handsome Irish-American was popular for his sense of humor and his modesty. A man's man, who

took his crew on fishing and swimming trips, he smoked Camel cigarettes and often flashed a Hollywood smile.

O'Hare also possessed remarkable stick-and-rudder and gunnery skills that made him a standout pilot and—on that fateful February afternoon in 1942—a nation's knight in airplane armor.

**Edward O'Hare was born** in St. Louis, Mo., on March 13, 1914, to Edward Joseph O'Hare and Selma O'Hare. Young Butch, as he quickly became known, had two sisters, Patricia and Marilyn.

Butch's father was a lawyer who early in his career met a St. Louis inventor, Oliver Smith, who developed a mechanical rabbit for use in dog racing, a new and popular pastime. Edward O'Hare helped Smith take out a patent for the device, and the two later toured the country introducing the rabbit (later popularized in a Bugs Bunny cartoon) at several racetracks.

When Smith died in 1927, the elder O'Hare allegedly swindled Smith's widow out of any rights to the mechanical rabbit and took all the earnings for himself. "Fast Eddie," as he would be known, was born.

Butch's parents divorced that same year,



Lt. Edward H. "Butch" O'Hare in his Grumman F4F-3 Wildcat giving a thumbs-up at Naval Air Station Kaneohe, Oahu, Hawaii, on April 10, 1942. Note the five Japanese flags representing the five enemy bombers he was credited with shooting down. Courtesy of The National Archives.

when Butch was 12. His sisters stayed with their mother in St. Louis, while Butch and his dad moved to Chicago. It was here that Fast Eddie met Al Capone, the American gangster whose crime syndicate was at the height of its powers. Capone brought on O'Hare to help run his horse and dog track operation in Chicago. The two struck up both a partnership and friendship.

Despite his father's dealings with such a notorious figure, Butch had a fairly normal childhood, with summer vacations to river camps, where Butch learned to sail and fish. His father also bought him a .22-caliber rifle that he used to shoot tin cans and other targets.

By all accounts, the elder Eddie doted on his son and praised him at every turn. But perhaps knowing the extent of Capone's villainy, he worried for the boy's future. At age 13, O'Hare was sent to Western Military Academy,

learned the basics on such naval aircraft as the Factory N3N-3, or *Yellow Peril*, and the Stearman NS-1 biplane trainer. He trained in aerobatics on the Boeing F4B-4A, an agile pursuit aircraft, as well as in aerial gunnery. He also flew the SBU Corsair and the TBD Devastator.

During his training, O'Hare received heartbreaking news from home. On Nov. 8, 1939, his father was gunned down by some of Capone's men, just weeks before the famous mobster was released from Alcatraz prison. Fast Eddie was killed instantly. He was 46.

Butch O'Hare finished his naval aviation training in May of 1940 and was assigned to the USS *Saratoga*'s fighter squadron, then transferred to the carrier USS *Enterprise*. O'Hare speedily mastered the fine art of carrier landings, a pulse-raising maneuver he could not get enough of, impressing

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a private military preparatory school located in Alton, Ill.—an academy that in addition to O'Hare turned out several war heroes, including Paul Tibbits, who would go on to pilot the *Enola Gay* over Hiroshima.

O'Hare graduated from the Western Military Academy in 1932, and the following year enrolled at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md. Around this time, Fast Eddie provided incriminating evidence during Capone's infamous tax evasion trial, which helped finally to put the gangster behind bars.

In 1937, O'Hare graduated from the Naval Academy and was appointed an ensign. Though he longed for naval aviation, like all new officers of the time he had to spend two years on surface warships before he could specialize.

He served two years aboard the battleship USS *New Mexico*, and quickly moved on to flight training at Naval Air Station Pensacola in Florida. There he

even more experienced pilots.

During the summer of 1941, O'Hare returned to St. Louis. During a hospital visit to a friend, he met a nurse named Rita Wooster and fell head over heels in love. He proposed on the spot. She said yes, but with a catch. O'Hare had to convert to Roman Catholicism so that they could marry in a Catholic Church. Butch agreed and the two married on Sept. 6, 1941.

The couple honeymooned in Hawaii, and then moved to Coronado, Calif. where Butch was reassigned until he was called to duty the day after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941.

In January 1942, after the USS *Saratoga* was struck by a Japanese torpedo off Hawaii, O'Hare's squadron relocated to the USS *Lexington*, and O'Hare was temporarily promoted to lieutenant. One month later, O'Hare would cement his legend in military aviation history.

On Feb. 20, the *Lexington* was deep in enemy waters in preparation for a surprise air strike against the Japanese ships in the harbor of Rabaul. With their position spotted, the mission had to be aborted. Now it was just a matter of self-preservation. The second wave of enemy Japanese bombers took the *Lexington* off-guard, and O'Hare and his squad had to scramble.

The launch from the carrier, however, was far from ideal; four of the Wildcats quickly found themselves too



A recruiting poster, ca. 1942, appeals to the patriotic fervor of the day. Butch O'Hare's heroism undoubtedly inspired many young men to join the ranks of U.S. naval aviators.

far from the Japanese planes to reach them before they released their bombs. Only O'Hare and his wingman were within intercept distance, but the wingman's guns jammed.

O'Hare and his plane were all that stood between the eight enemy bombers, roughly 12 miles away from the carrier, and the *Lexington*'s 2,000-man crew. As if these odds weren't long enough, O'Hare had only enough ammunition for 34 seconds of firing. He had to



make each round count.

Squinting into the sun, he quickly spotted the V-shaped bomber formation and took the enemy by surprise. On his first pass, O'Hare dived full throttle directly at the formation and took out two bombers in mere seconds. A burst from his plane's Browning M2 .50-caliber guns made a direct hit on a bomber's wing, and the engine ripped right out of its mountings.

O'Hare came around for another pass and took out another crop of bombers, which were now in complete disarray. With five bombers now taken out and another badly damaged, O'Hare was out of ammunition. More U.S. fighters joined the battle. Although three Japanese bombers managed to get

commander and awarded him the Medal of Honor. With the president looking on, Rita placed the medal around her husband's neck. The citation laid out his daring in dramatic detail.

"Without hesitation, alone and unaided, he repeatedly attacked this enemy formation, at close range in the face of intense combined machine-gun and cannon fire. Despite this concentrated opposition, Lieutenant O'Hare, by his gallant and courageous action, his extremely skillful marksmanship in making the most of every shot of his limited amount of ammunition, shot down five enemy bombers and severely damaged a sixth before they reached the bomb release point. As a result of his gallant action—one of the most daring,

cigarettes. The Camel smoker accepted the gift and wrote a letter of thanks to the Grumman employees: "You build them, we'll fly them and between us, we can't be beaten."

O'Hare would later embark on several war bond tours and other public relations duties throughout the country. In June 1942 he was relocated to Maui, Hawaii, to instruct other pilots in combat tactics. His daughter, Kathleen, was born in February 1943, but he didn't get to meet his firstborn until a month later.

O'Hare was kept out of combat until late October 1943, when he flew in attacks on Wake Island. In November, as Air Group Six commander on the USS *Enterprise*, O'Hare participated in



A squad of Grumman F4F-3 Wildcat fighter jets on a mission (plane in foreground piloted by Lt. Commander John S. Thach; pilot of plane in background is Lt. Commander Butch O'Hare) on July 3, 1942. O'Hare and Thach shake hands in front of a Wildcat fighter plane at an Oahu air base, ca. April-May, 1942.

through, none of their bombs would score a direct hit on the *Lexington*.

It was estimated that O'Hare used only 60 rounds per enemy bomber, an impressive display of marksmanship.

O'Hare's bravery and skill that day made him the first true naval "ace" of World War II (a designation for those who shoot down five or more enemy aircraft) and earned him the nation's highest military decoration. He would return to the United States to officially receive his honors. On April 21, O'Hare and his wife visited the White House. President Franklin D. Roosevelt promoted O'Hare to the rank of lieutenant

if not the most daring, single action in the history of combat aviation—he undoubtedly saved his carrier from serious damage."

On Saturday, April 25, 1942, O'Hare received a hero's welcome in his hometown of St. Louis. With confetti raining down, a beaming O'Hare rode down Washington Avenue with his wife and mother beside him, as some 60,000 took to the streets to cheer him home. As a token of appreciation, the workers at the Grumman plant in New York, where O'Hare's Wildcat was manufactured, took up a collection and bought him 1,150 cartons of Lucky Strike

the Gilbert Islands invasion.

Then, his good fortune ran out. On Nov. 26, O'Hare volunteered to lead a night interception to counter Japanese attacks with torpedo-armed Betty bombers, which attacked at night at low level. The pilots of the *Enterprise* had developed a clever counter to these attacks: Once an enemy plane was spotted, the carrier would launch Avenger bombers equipped with radar that would lead them into a position where the Hellcat fighters could spot the enemy bomber's exhaust flares.

O'Hare led one of these teams of two Hellcat fighters and one Avenger.

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It is not clear what went wrong, but a confused dogfight in the darkness took place, with the Avenger taking down two Japanese bombers. O'Hare was lost to radio contact.

Despite a search, Butch O'Hare's fighter was never found. He was officially listed as dead one year later.

What happened that night in November remains a mystery, but three theories persist. Some military historians believe that a Japanese bomber killed

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O'Hare outright with a lucky burst, others that O'Hare was shot down by the other Hellcat in the darkness, or that O'Hare took evasive action and clipped the ocean, crashing his plane into the waters. The surviving two U.S. pilots in that night raid defended the carrier and were awarded the Navy Cross. Rita O'Hare received her husband's posthumous Purple Heart and Navy Cross on Nov. 26, 1944.

In 1945, the U.S. Navy destroyer USS *O'Hare* was named in his honor.

Four years later, in September 1949, Chicago's Orchard Depot Airport was renamed O'Hare International Airport in memory of the fallen flying ace. O'Hare officially opened to commercial air traffic in 1955. In March 1963, President John F. Kennedy laid a wreath at O'Hare International Airport in Butch O'Hare's honor and spoke of his bravery.

"I remember as a young naval officer myself how the extraordinary feat of Butch O'Hare captured the imagination not only of our armed forces but also of the country," Kennedy said. "His extraordinary act in protecting his ship, shooting down, while he was alone, five of the enemy during difficult days in the Second World War, gave this country hope and confidence not only in the quality and caliber of our fighting men but also in the certainty of victory." ◀