

## Salute to

**DESMOND CANAVAN, U.S. MARINE CORPS HELICOPTER PILOT NUMBER ONE***Introduction by CAPT Vincent C. Secades, USN Ret.*

The first Americans to learn to fly helicopters were the men that created the new crafts and had to learn to fly them literally “on the flight” as they took their experimental contraptions to the air for the first time. They soon hired fixed wing pilots to learn the new flying skills and serve as their test pilots. These civilian test pilots, in turn, trained the first military pilots that pioneered the introduction of the helicopter into the U.S. armed services. This was the case with LT Frank Gregory, the first USAAF helicopter pilot, LCDR Frank A. Erickson, the first USCG helicopter pilot, and CDR Charles T. Booth, the first USN helicopter pilot. However, the introduction of the helicopter into the Marine Corps lagged a couple of years behind that of the other naval services, and no Marine pilot received manufacturer’s plant training. Thus, the first Marine helicopter pilots were trained by Navy test pilots at the newly established Naval Air Test Center, NAS Patuxent River, MD. Although for a time there was some confusion as to who was the first Marine Corps pilot to solo a helicopter, the historical record clearly indicates that Lt. Colonel Desmond E. Canavan earned that credit. He was the third Marine aviator to be assigned to test pilot duties, and, as he later would boast, the first Marine to survive that tour. He was not only the first Marine to fly a helicopter, but also the first Marine to fly a pure jet airplane. Colonel Canavan had a long and illustrious career in the Marine Corps. At age 92, he died on March 30, 2005. His daughter, Nancy Canavan Heslop, has written a biography of her father based on the many letters that he wrote to his wife and family throughout his life. In this article, Nancy gives us a glimpse at this remarkable man, who achieved extraordinary deeds during very difficult times. Nancy’s work should put an end to any lingering doubts regarding her father’s *firsts*.

*Continue on page 33*



# MARINE CORPS HELICOPTER PILOT NUMBER ONE.

Article by Nancy Canavan Heslop

**M**y father, Desmond E. Canavan was a U. S. Marine Corps pilot, Naval Aviator number 5159, whose long career spanned both World War II and Korea. He was among a corps of pilots, including his highly decorated college friends, Gregory "Pappy" Boyington and Robert E. Galer, who made headlines dominating the skies over the Pacific during WW II. But while Galer and Boyington were famous fighter pilots, Des quietly turned his talents as a Marine Corps and naval aviator to what was called "Flight Test." And while he participated in some major battles in the Pacific Theater, his brief airline pilot stint following the fulfillment of his Aviation Cadet contract led him to fly transports for Naval Air Transport Service (NATS) and later serve as Commanding Officer of the greatly expanded squadron VMR-253, Transport Air Group (TAG) on Guam.

It may seem strange in an era of wartime necessity that Des' work with transports would bring him to Flight Test. As a test pilot at the Naval Air Test Center, Naval Air Station (NAS) Patuxent River, he was the first Marine to fly America's first jet airplane and the Navy's first helicopter. But his story was one I never completely knew until it was almost too late.

It wasn't until around 1978, when my father was 65 years old, only a little older than I am now, that he unlatched the locks on his sea chest of memories and began telling me these stories about the days and years before I was born; small seed pearls that he handed me one-by-one to sew on a veil of tatted camouflage netting that had been my upbringing in the Marine Corps. He wanted someone to know what he had done and he trusted me to tell the tale. Since he died in 2005, I've been in a race against time to do the one unbidden task he ever assigned me. I just can't disappoint him or my mother, who saved *everything* he wrote to her from their first meeting until her death.

My father was born in West Sound, Orcas Island, Washington, on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1913. He met my mother, Alice Marie O'Keefe, when

she was a month shy of sixteen and he was but eighteen years old. They began their correspondence, becoming soul mates for life. By the time I was born in Seattle in 1946, my parents had been married eight years and, as a matter of course, had been moving back and forth across the country like nomads seeking greener pastures, though tarmacs were the pastures and aviation gas and sonic booms were background scents and sounds to our life in the Marine Corps. My parents didn't think anything of throwing their few possessions onto a moving van, clothes into duffle bags,

**I**t wasn't until around 1978, when my father was 65 years old, only a little older than I am now, that he unlatched the locks on his sea chest of memories and began telling me these stories about the days and years before I was born; small seed pearls that he handed me one-by-one to sew on a veil of tatted camouflage netting that had been my upbringing in the Marine Corps. He wanted someone to know what he had done and he trusted me to tell the tale.

and we were gone. They were married at The Post Chapel, Marine Corps Air Station, Quantico, Virginia, on May 1, 1938. As years rolled by, that day was *the* single date central to our family, but also to those who attended as guests or members of the wedding party. The invitation list, written in my father's hand, reads now like a Who's Who of World War II in the Pacific Theater. My parents' friends were their friends for the length of their lifetimes, whatever it was to be. The same people literally flew in and out of our lives like unpredictable asteroids with irregular orbits. We never knew when or where, but we always expected that someone might return. It's hard to explain to those who have lived

their entire existence within a mile or two of where they were born that you can develop the same support system, a very close community, among people who are never on the ground, let alone in the same state longer than a year. But you can!

Four boys who knew each other from the University of Washington were Greg Boyington, Bob Galer, Jim Mueller, and Des Canavan. They played basketball and wrestled at school, fished the San Juan Islands, shared a jalopy with no floorboards, waited tables, parked cars, and typed papers for tuition, or spent summers chopping wood or as lifeguards at Seward Park. In the midst of the

Great Depression these irrepressible youngsters, this crop of 1934-35 University of Washington college graduates, were looking for jobs with a future. And the most dramatic tangible symbol of the future was the airplane. Aviation caught the imagination of everyone.

For the opportunity to fly, those four young men signed up for Elimination Trials, a series of flight physical examinations and physical fitness tests, to enter the Aviation Cadet Program, a new program created to provide additional naval aviators. They reported to Captain Dick Mangrum, USMC, another University of Washington graduate, at nearby NAS Sand Point, after first enlisting as Private First Class in the Marine Corps Reserves on September 5, 1935. By February 20, 1936, they were in Pensacola, Florida, to become members of class 88-C, joining the first year roster of Aviation Cadets.

Galer and Boyington went onto Marine Officer Basic School in Philadelphia, while Des flew with the precision team, Marine Bombing Squadron One, under Captain Frank Schilt, participating in the 1937 Cleveland Air Races alongside Joe Henderson, Zack Tyler, Ziggy Dawson, Ralph Johnson, Stephen Marshall, Dave O'Neill and Jim Beam, all of whom would play pivotal roles in the defeat of the Japanese.

*Continue on page 34*



*Continued from page 33*

From September of 1939 until February 1940, Des found himself as an instructor at NAS Pensacola. As reservists, Des and Jim Mueller were released from active duty when their contracts with the Marine Corps were up. They both went to work for Northwest Airlines for a few months, flying DC-3s, a new Douglas transport that moved passengers and mail, opening up the entire country to air travel as a public transportation. In the fall of 1940 President Roosevelt declared a national emergency that would activate the reservists, including Des and Jim Mueller. By December 1940, Des was on his way by troop train to San Diego, and then sailed for Oahu aboard USS *Lexington* (CV-2), arriving on January 21, 1941, disembarking the next day while his first child was being born at Bremerton Navy Hospital. The following month, Marie and infant Susan sailed for Oahu on the ocean liner SS *Lurline*.

Upon returning to active duty, aviation cadets who had left the service to fly for the airlines found that they were now the core of the transport squadrons. Flying from Ewa Mooring Mast Field in Oahu, Des discovered that the distances between islands in the Pacific were disturbingly long. He asked Col. Claude "Sheriff" Larkin, Commanding Officer of MAG-21, for Temporary Additional Duty orders to Patrol Wing 2 at Pearl Harbor, so he could complete their navigational training. Meanwhile Boyington passed through Oahu, visiting with my parents and their six-month old baby girl, on his way to China to join the American Volunteer Group – The Flying Tigers.

On November 15, 1941, a terrible tragedy struck my parents with a devastating blow. Their little infant, Susan, choked on food she had eaten earlier as she played in her shower tub. Our mother had gone to warm her bottle in the kitchen. In a matter of minutes the child died and Marie was helpless. It would be another generation before the Heimlich maneuver would save lives. The doctors at the emergency room could do nothing to bring the child back. Counselors advised the grief-stricken couple to try and have another child right away... and then the Japanese struck.

Three of the four 1936 aviation cadets: my father, Bob Galer, and Jim Muller, as well as another old friend, Dick Mangrum, who happened to be flight officer for VMSB-

232, were at Ewa Mooring Mast Field on Oahu on December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941, and watched helplessly as their planes were destroyed by the Japanese attack. Friends of many years from MAG-21's VMF-211 at Wake Island were killed or taken prisoners; their whole world was turned upside down.

Marie was evacuated shortly after the blitz. She sailed back to the states aboard the troop transport ship USS *Harris* (APA-2). She berthed with her friend, Eleanor Brown, and her infant son in Eleanor's father cabin. USS *Harris* was converted to a hospital ship to evacuate the wounded requiring extensive medical care back in the states. Moving patients onto and off a ship from boats alongside can be traumatic and painful. The ship's skipper, Captain Otto Forster, came up with the idea of using a salmon board as he had seen used in Seattle to on-and-off-load salmon. Constructed onboard ship, the salmon board sling was adapted with a simple lift device and became known as the "Milles-Harris litter-sling," making it easier for patients to be transported in difficult circumstances as the war went on.

Des' qualification as a navigator was unusual for a pilot, but in the months to come became a key to opening new doors for him in naval aviation. The Japanese attack destroyed all but one of VMJ-252's planes, R3D-2 Bu. No. 1905, a 22-seat military version of the little-known Douglas DC-5, which was being repaired at Pearl Harbor. Des flew that same transport around the islands, Ewa to Maui, to Hilo, to Ford Island, back to Ewa until April 10, 1942. Col. Claude Larkin was desperate for a tough, reliable, long-range transport. The Marine Corps was trying to seed new Marine Air Groups with the existing expertise they had on hand, building new squadrons upon well-trained naval aviators. The build-up in Hawaii and Midway was key to taking the war to the Japanese. At the same time new naval air stations were constructed in a matter of months in dry California valleys and Maryland wetlands.



*LtCol Des Canavan, USMC*

Des and Captain Albert S. Munsch, who had been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his service in the Nicaragua campaign, were sent back stateside on April 12, 1942, to pick-up two R4D-1s for VMJ-252 at the Douglas factory in Long Beach. These were the militarized version of the DC-3, equipped with cargo bay, side-seating or room for evacuating wounded by strapping down stretchers, plus extra gas tanks to make the long non-stop flights that would allow the planes to travel the vast distances of the Pacific. Des had been hoping to be allowed to go. He was teaching celestial navigation to other pilots, but he was anxious to see Marie.

Des and Munsch worked with the engineers at Douglas Aircraft to adapt the R4D-1s with celestial domes for navigational sightings. In this war these transports were going to have to rely heavily upon celestial navigation to find their way. Radio silence was encouraged to reduce the chance of attracting the enemy, known to be just about everywhere in the Pacific. Between working with Douglas on the plane and "working ahead" on his love life, he and Marie were able to conceive during that visit, and my sister Kathleen was underway. By May 1942, the Navy took possession of two R4D-1s: Bu. Nos. 3133 and 3143. Des and Munsch each flew one plane back to Ewa Field just in time for the battle of Midway. It was a 16.2-hour

*Continue on page 35*



Continued from page 34

flight for Des, since one of his crew became disruptive at the half-way point and had to be restrained, wrestled to the deck and tied up for the rest of the trip. Des was pilot and navigator. After the flight, my father decided not to report this man's breakdown, believing that anyone could panic and everyone was entitled to a second chance. I have to abide by his decision, made seventy years ago. A compassionate man with confidence in his own ability to get the job done, he made lists of pros and cons, of tasks and possibilities, good or bad, and then played out the one that seemed the most likely to be successful.

After his first tour of duty in the Pacific, Des was entitled to a little R & R, followed by an assignment stateside. His friends Bob Galer and Dick Mangrum were sent back to the states to recover from their tour of duty on Guadalcanal. Boyington came around the world to regain his Marine Corps commission. And my mother gave birth to Kathleen, their second daughter, in December 1942. Four months later Des was assigned to be Assistant Flight Test Officer at NAS Anacostia, Washington, D.C. In June 1943 he was transferred to the new NAS Patuxent River, MD., as Chief Project Officer, Flight Test, DIF. I haven't been able to ascertain what DIF stood for. Maybe a reader could clarify this early designation at NAS Patuxent River. He served in this capacity until 1 February 1945.

NAS Patuxent River had just been built to house all testing for naval aircraft. Away from the center of government, it had taken a year to construct the half-dozen huge concrete hangars, several two-mile runways, ramps, taxi-ways, and access roads in the middle of agricultural estates, wetlands, and

duck blinds. According to Aleck Loker Jr., who wrote the history of St. Mary's County in addition to working at NAS Patuxent River for 33 years, in an inconceivable environmental assault that could never occur today, the land of St. Mary's County was converted almost overnight for the purpose of creating the finest naval aviation force in the world.

At NAS Patuxent River there was no military housing ready for families. My parents rented the Belvedere Plantation from Aleck Loker and his wife, Margaret Wigginton Loker, her family's summer home.

During his tour as test pilot at Patuxent River, my father had the opportunity to become the first Marine aviator to fly a pure jet aircraft and a helicopter. These events occurred between March 1944 and January 1945.<sup>1</sup> Incidentally, the first two Marine aviators assigned to Flight Test at NAS Anacostia, first William Saunders and then Albert Bohne (Class 81-C), had both died in aircraft crashes while performing flight tests. Bohne died in the crash of the first R5C-1 transferred from the USAAF to the Marines, when it stalled on take-off. Years later, in a letter to Major General Marion E. Carl, my father wrote, "For obvious reasons, it was the custom to assign bachelor Marine officers to Flight Test with additional duties as White House Guides."<sup>2</sup> He continued, "I may have mentioned that I was the first Marine assigned to Flight Test to survive the tour." I had read this little known tidbit

in Marion Carl's autobiography *Pushing the Envelope* long before I came upon a copy of the letter my father wrote Carl. Since my father's death in 2005, I discovered this flurry of communication between the two men that seemingly began because of some erroneous assertions in print and on plaques that Carl was the first Marine Corps pilot to fly the helicopter. Des was absolutely stumped that his own "firsts" were somehow discounted when it was perfectly obvious that Carl didn't arrive to NAS Patuxent River until 9 January 1945. While writing his autobiography with Barrett Tillman, Carl discovered that Des Canavan was the first Marine to solo in the helicopter, though Carl was given the designation as "Marine Helicopter Pilot Number One" for more than forty years, "and in fact believed it a long time myself for having completed 40 hours."<sup>3</sup> These distinctions were confusing to me and to Des. Charlie Quilter, my god-brother – if there is such a thing – tried to clear them up for me, explaining that a syllabus of specific tasks was developed to "qualify" a pilot as having a "designation" permitting him to fly a certain aircraft. Des flew his hours in the helicopter before such a requirement existed.

After completing a comprehensive survey, in March 1963 the Navy published in *Naval Aviation News* a tentative list and history of the early naval aviators who tested the first pure jet airplane manufactured in the

**Historical: Desmond Canavan, U.S. Marine Corps Helicopter Pilot Number One continues on page 57**

1. Des' Log: 30 March 1944: HNS-1:39034 / 0.7hr (E) Lt. Comdr. Miller/ Self Familiarization, Local.  
Des' Log: 3 April 1944: HNS-1:39034/ 0.5 hr. (C) Self/Lt. Comdr. Miller. Instruction of Qualified Pilot.  
Des' Log: 4 April 1944. HNS-1: 39034/ 0.9 hr. (C) Self / Comdr. Miller. Instruction of Qualified Pilot.  
Des' Log: 6 April 1944. HNS-1: 39034/ 1.0hr. (C) Self/ Lt. Comdr. Miller. Instruments.  
Des' Log: 10 April 1944: HNS-1: 39034/ 1.0 hr. (R) Self/ Lt. Comdr. Miller. Instrument flying, local.  
Des' Log: 11 April 1944: HNS-1: 39034/ 0.6 hr. (E) Self/ Lt. Comdr. Miller. Familiarization, local  
Des' Log: 18 July 1944: YP-59-A: 00012/ 0.7 hr. (E) Self. Familiarization. [ First Marine Jet Solo].  
Des' Log: 30 & 31 October 1944: XHOS-1:46446/ 0.8 hr/0.4 hr./ & 0.8 hr (E) Self/Lt. Comdr. Miller. Familiarization.  
Des' Log: 1 November 1944: YP-59-A: 63961/ 0.3 hr. (R) Self. Local Test Flight.  
Des' Log: 2 November 1944: HNS-1: 39046/ 0.6 hr. (R) Self. Local Test Flight. [ First Marine Helicopter Solo]  
Des' Log: 2 November 1944: HNS-1: 39046/ 0.7 hr. (R ) Lt. Comdr. Wood/ Self. Local Test Flight.  
Des' Log: 3 November 1944: HNS-1: 39046/ 0.8 hr. (R ) Self. Local Test Flight.  
Des' Log: 4 November 1944: HNS-1: 39046/ 0.7 hr. (E) Self/ Kinkorski. Familiarization.  
Des' Log: 7 November 1944: HNS-1: 39046/ 1.0 hr. (E ) Self. Familiarization.  
Des' Log: 11 January 1945: HNS-1: 39050/ 1.3 hrs. (R) Self/ Lt. Comdr. Miller. Search.  
Des' Log: 20 January 1945: HNS-1: 39050/ 1.2 hrs. (R) Self. Search.  
2. Des Canavan, Letter of 26 February 1988 to Marion Carl.  
3. Marion Carl, *Pushing the Envelope*. P. 54.



*Continued from page 56*

to do; he's done it numerous times in Iraq. Get on scene, assess the situation and spring into action. Without hesitating, Reed was setting up the litter and ensuring the trail line was good-to-go. It didn't take long before the patient was stable, fully transferred to our litter, and ready for the hoist. About 15 minutes after they hit the deck, Reed, using his Rescue Swimmer's Radio (PRC-149), called for the pick up.

## READY FOR PICK UP

While our guys took charge on deck, I was communicating with Arcadia, informing them of our intentions. Diaz Kincaid called on Hirsch to bring us into a stable hover, this time about 30' above the spot. She executed it perfectly, hovering well clear of any obstacles. We could see the patient on the litter, trail line paid out with Chernenko and Reed standing by. Diaz Kincaid executed another smooth hoist and Reed kept tension on the trail line to prevent any spinning or swaying. Again, just like we practice. The patient was onboard with ease! Instead of hoisting our guys next, we took a few laps around the ship. Hirsch entered an orbit giving Doc Kimball time to secure the patient while Chernenko and Reed cleaned up the deck. Gathering all their gear and trail line stowed, Reed called ready. We rolled final for the last time. Diaz Kincaid showed excellent headwork, hoisting Chernenko first to assist Doc Kimball with the patient. Reed followed up the hoist and

a minute later, "cleared for forward flight" was announced over the ICS.

## HIGHER LEVEL CARE

After we transitioned to forward flight, I made one final call over Maritime 16. I thanked the crew of the Arcadia for their professionalism and hard work. They truly went the extra mile to ensure our safety, directly contributing to an efficient and quick rescue.

Enroute to the Naval Hospital, Chernenko and Doc Kimball continued to monitor the patient's vitals using a Propaq monitor. They made her as comfortable as possible and requested we remain 500' and below for the 60 mile transit. Diaz Kincaid and Reed finished cleaning up the cabin, securing all loose items. As the non flying pilot, I wanted to alert the hospital of the patient's status and give them an updated ETA. Contacting Coast Guard Sector Guam about 30 miles out, we relayed the applicable information. Sure enough, as we approached the hospital pad, Navy EMS was standing by to receive the patient. Hirsch executed a nice approach and once chocked, Chernenko and Doc hopped out with the patient. They executed their jobs to a "T" conducting a thorough brief with the hospital staff and officially transferring the patient.

## RTB

Thirty minutes later, Chernenko and Doc were back on board, strapped in, ready to go. Hirsch, still at the controls, released the parking break and brought us into a hover. With green gauges and still plenty of fuel, she flew us over the cliff line and North over the water. We began the short trek home. Only then did we stop to think about what we had accomplished. Two hours after launching we reached Base, shut down and debriefed the mission, discussing what worked and what could've gone better. Everyone agreed that our crew worked exceptionally well together; the success of the mission relying heavily on crew resource management. CRM typically refers to the aircraft's crew, but for this mission our success was a direct result of several crews working together: the Coast Guard coordinating the initial plan of action, our maintenance crews finishing the TA and topping off the tanks before departure, the SDO who gathered all the information, Arcadia's crew standing alert in emergency gear, our flight crew bustering to the ship and receiving the patient, and finally the Navy EMTs waiting for our arrival to continue treatment. This was a complete team effort resulting in one thing:

## "MISSION SUCCESS!"

## NHA SALUTE TO MARINE AVIATION CENTENNIAL : USMC HELO PILOT NUMBER ONE

*Continued from page 35*

U.S., the Bell P-59. Des' copy of the work was given to him by the author, Adrian O. Van Wyen, with a cover letter of apology for the "tentative" designation. A revised list came out over thirty years later in *United States Naval Aviation 1910-1995: Appendix 30*. The historian working on the project was surprised to learn from his returned questionnaires that the training the test pilots received to fly this radically different aircraft was unanimously minimal. "In contrast to present practice, training consisted of looking at the handbook, cockpit checkout, then go."<sup>4</sup> At this point there was no test pilot school. The requirement that all test pilots had to receive dual instruction in the aircraft before

being allowed to fly solo was not the protocol. As Gary Shattuck explained in his work on early Fleet Cadets, "only the best aviators were allowed to become test pilots. It took consummate skill and nerve pushing the plane to the very limits of design and beyond."<sup>5</sup>

Inclusion in the list was governed by these two quoted rules: "First, qualification as a jet pilot was defined loosely. For this purpose, it was considered simply as the first flight on which complete command of the aircraft was held. Whether the first flight was also the last made in a jet or the beginning of a whole new career of jet flying, it

was accepted as meeting the requirement. Second, only flights in pure jet aircraft<sup>6</sup> were considered, and only those men with whom we could make contact or about whom we could gain specific knowledge appear in the list."<sup>7</sup> The list ultimately compiled named 419 naval aviators, ending December 28, 1948. Carl was number 39, and the third for the Marine Corps. In his biography Carl wrote, "Des Canavan and Al Hollar were the only marines ahead of me."<sup>8</sup>

In a letter to Major General Norman Anderson, another *Golden Eagle* and Pensacola classmate of class 88-C, on 18 January 1987 my father wrote:

*Continue on page 58*

4 Adrian O. Van Wyen, *Naval Aviation News*, March 1963, pp. 6-13 and *United States Naval Aviation 1910-1995: List of Early Naval Jet Pilots*, pp. 744-745.

5 Gary Shattuck, *Fleet Cadets*, p. 58.

6 *Des' Log: October 10, 1944*, Des tested the XFR-1: Bu. No.: 48233. According to [www.joebaugher.com](http://www.joebaugher.com), one of 3 prototypes procured by the Navy. Bu. No: 48232 hit a mountain in Sycamore Canyon near San Diego on October 13, 1944. Bu. No. 48234 had wing failure. on April 5, 1945, the pilot parachuting to safety. The FR-1 Ryan Fireball with its reciprocating engine was considered and excluded as "jet" aircraft. This was the first carrier-borne aircraft to have a tricycle landing gear. It was intended to be a Kamikaze interceptor.

7 *United States Naval Aviation 1910-1995: List of Early Naval Jet Pilots*, p. 746-747.

8 Marion Carl, *Pushing the Envelope*, p.58.



*Continued from page 57*

"The record requires a bit of explanation, however. The first [log] sheet (July 1944) is straightforward and shows 18 July as the date of my first flight in the Bell jet YP-59-A Bu. No. 00012. You will note a second flight on the last log sheet (1 November 1944) of only .3 hours duration. A small matter of an engine fire and a certain urgency to get back on the ground.

"With respect to the helicopter flights, I'll just repeat the statement I made to the editor of the **Yellow Sheet** on 22 September 1986 (unanswered by the way).

"My first flight was on 30 March 1944 in XHNS-1, Bu. No. 39034. I was accompanied by a LCDR Miller who had some previous experience in Pitcairn autogiros but none in helicopters. With the blind leading the blind we made twelve flights between March and November 1944. On 3 November [1944] my flight log shows a solo flight of 0.8 hours in HNS-1 Bu. No. 39046. I made several additional flights after that date until relieved by Marion Carl.

"In summary I can say without fear of successful contradiction that I was both the Corps first jet pilot and helicopter jockey. In years past I thought these flights of dubious distinction at best, but as I approach my 74<sup>th</sup> birthday, a record for posterity does have a certain appeal."

Des may have been mistaken in the date of his first solo since his log book actually showed that he made solo helicopter flights on November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 7<sup>th</sup>, and also accompanied LCDR Wood as a passenger on November 2<sup>nd</sup> for a total of over 3.8 hours that first week of November 1944. All were done after the engine fire in the Bell jet on November 1, 1944.

But Des was probably mistaken as well in thinking that LCDR. John Miller only had experience in autogiros, since the U.S. Coast Guard lists Miller as having completed on December 5, 1943, helicopter training

conducted by LCDR Frank A. Erickson, USCG. It is difficult to know the extent of that training. If Miller did have much more experience in autogiros, giving him a slight edge in grasping the radical differences, his training by Erickson might have been minimal. The only sure way we could know how much helicopter experience Miller accumulated prior to reporting to Patuxent River would be to look at his log. Perhaps there is a

military benefits of ship-based helicopters. The Coast Guard was more eager to see the development of the helicopter, not as a war machine so much as an effective short-range rescue and convoy escort platform, scouting out enemy submarines.

On October 16, 1943, Commander Charles T. Booth, from NAS Patuxent River, who would soon become the Director of Flight Test, accepted the U.S. Navy's first helicopter at Bridgeport, Connecticut, following a 60-minute demonstration acceptance test-flight by LCDR Erickson, making Booth the Navy's helicopter pilot number 1.<sup>9</sup> Captain Vincent Secades, of the Naval Helicopter Association, gave credit to LCDR John Miller as being the Navy's helicopter pilot number 2.<sup>10</sup> This was the same LCDR. Miller with whom Des took his first flights. Following that train of thought, LtCol. Desmond E. Canavan was naval helicopter pilot number 8, and number 1 for the Marine Corps, following the dates of the first solo flights for LCDR J. W. Klopp (number 3), LT W. V. Gough (number 4), LT W. G. Knapp (number 5), LCDR C. R. Wood (number 6), and CDR R. E. Doll (number 7). However,



*CDR Ramsey and CDR Booth (l-r)*

©2012 Nancy Canavan Heslop. All Rights Reserved.

chance that a family member will learn of the revived interest in early helicopter testing and training.

Des' log characterized his early flights in the HNS-1 Bu. No. 39034 as "instruction of a qualified pilot" as he and LCDR. Miller worked to understand this new and promising technology of flight.

To add to the confusion, the history of the helicopter and the Navy was checkered by criticism in 1943 in the U.S. Congress by the Senate Committee chaired by then Senator Harry S. Truman. The Navy, the bête noire of the ex-Army committee chairman, was criticized for ignoring the possible

*United States Naval Aviation 1910-1995: Appendix 31, List of Early Helicopter Pilots*, did not give credit to the men from Flight Test who were among the first to fly the helicopter for the Navy and Marine Corps, or to the Coast Guard pilots, including Lt. Cdr Erickson who initiated its development.<sup>11</sup> On the occasion of the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Naval Aviation, Captain Secades has reopened the inquiry into these early helicopter pilots.

On December 18, 1943, the U.S. Chief of Naval Operations separated the functions of pilot training from Tests and Development in the helicopter program. Effective 1 January 1944, he directed that the helicopter pilot training program be conducted at Floyd Bennett Field under the direction of

*Continue on page 59*

9 [www.navalhelicopterassn.org](http://www.navalhelicopterassn.org), Captain Vincent C. Secades, USN-Retired. *The Naval Helicopter*, P. 7. ©2010.  
10 *Ibid.*, p. 8.  
11 *United States Naval Aviation 1910-1995, Appendix 31: List of Early Helicopter Pilots*, P. 756.





*First Naval Helicopter Pilots together:  
CDR Booth and LtCol Canavan*

*Continued from page 58*

the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations, Air, and that Testing and Development would be at NAS Patuxent River, the Navy's new Test Center in Maryland.<sup>12</sup> The very first life-saving helicopter operation took place on January 3, 1944, when USS *Turner* (DD-648) exploded off the coast of Sandy Hook, NJ, and a helicopter was sent during a blizzard to pick up plasma at Battery Park and deliver it for the survivors. The first use of helicopters for anti-sub patrol was in a mid-Atlantic convoy from the U.S. to England in January 1944.<sup>13</sup>

On a personal level, my parents loved their life and the people of St. Mary's County. Bob Galer, after being awarded the Medal of Honor by President Roosevelt, came to NAS Patuxent River to be godfather for Des and Marie's six-month old daughter, Kathleen. But on a sadder note, the war continued to take old friends as well. Even Greg Boyington was shot down and presumed dead until the end of the war when he turned up as a POW at Ofuna Prison. Des was on Guam when his old friends from MAG-21's VMF-211 and Boyington were released from years of torture and malnutrition.

Once after Des' first open-heart surgery, he asked me to help him to portage an old Chestnut canoe from one lake to another, which we had done many times in the past. He surprised me by showing up with a neighbor's borrowed pick-up truck. He had always driven Saabs, something I think other test pilots would understand. I asked him if he knew how to drive this 4 x 4 and he started to laugh at my foolish question. He told me that he once counted all

the different aircraft he had flown and reckoned that he lost track after counting 113 essentially different aircraft. He figured he could get the hang of the pick-up.

H a v i n g gone through his log for just the year and a half Des was at Flight Test, I counted at least 50 different aircraft. His logs demonstrated how he was able to perform professionally as he always hoped that he might. He flew almost daily all the latest aircraft, assessing their performance characteristics,

such as: stability, control, measured take-offs and landings, rate of climb and roll, basic responsiveness to unanticipated problems, and, of course, emergencies. Des frequently flew two or three times a day, two or more aircraft. He was in a number of crashes, the most deadly as a co-pilot in a Budd RB-1 *Conestoga*, a transport built by a former railcar manufacturer that during a take-off failed to clear the trees at the end of the runway. There were many times when he only flew an aircraft once. And he was fortunate to be a participant in the last Joint Fighter Conference of 16-23 October 1944, where manufacturers from Great Britain, Canada and the United States came together to demonstrate and share their latest and best technologies of fighter aircraft, allowing testing by visiting test pilots from the industry and services. It was an incredibly fertile time for aviation as World War II gave impetus to every technological advancement. Decades later, when he heard my children using the expression "I'm history, man!" their grandfather would laugh to himself and say with a twinkle in his eye, "I'm history!"

The past two years I have been writing my parents' story as a history. It has become a personal journey for me to walk in their shoes and understand my parents in a way that is rare. Time and again my father's logs,



documents, photos, and letters reaffirmed the written history. His colorful letters gave a voice to the human heart, describing his hectic world while separated from the love of his family. Des' life was the serendipitous result of natural curiosity, strong powers of analysis and deduction, lucky timing, good physical condition, and a willingness to work very hard.

It has been an education for me in so many ways to appreciate the sacrifice that men and women suffered for our country; ordinary people who had the training, youth and generosity of spirit to fight for us and our heritage. Time and again they take their deeds to their coffins. Heroes come in all sizes, shapes, colors, sex, and religion and are for all times. It only seems right that we give them a hearing, even from a distance of seventy years. 🌿

**SCAN THE CODE**

to watch the footage on Col  
Desmond Canavan on

YouTube



*Dad and I*

©2012 Nancy Canavan Heslop. All Rights Reserved.

Based on her work with excerpts from *Letters From Des: -The Life of a Marine Corps Naval Aviator and Test Pilot.*

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>13</sup> [www.helis.com/usmc](http://www.helis.com/usmc). Barrett Thomas Beard *Wonderful Flying Machines*. ©1996. Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, MD.