

## Thomas D. McBride Biography

### **Early Years**

B. 1922

As a child, rode in a “French Spad Replica” toy in a memorial day parade, alongside the last of the civil war veterans.

Early Teens : Tom’s father, Ray, who served in the WW-1 signal corp, told Tom stories about Eddie Rickenbacher's exploits, and those of the Red Baron.

Age 15 : Father Ray's involvement with the Aliquippa America Legion put him in a position to help Tom join the CMTC (Civilian Military Training Corp.) . Tom spent his summers training. In addition to Tom’s military training, Tom also cared for a “War Horse” – “Rodney” – that had been trained to work with a six horse team, pulling a 5” cannon.

Age 16 : A barnstormer buzzed the town in a biplane, landed, and gave a short speech about the Army Air Corps. Tom became very interested in aviation.

In 1938, Tom began working at any job he could find to pay for \$8 flying lessons in a Piper Cub. At first he delivered coal for home furnaces. By the time WW-2 started, Tom has accumulated 6 hours of private flying lessons at the nearby Conway Field.

Tom’s first paying job – also at age 16 – is a general laborer “Tool Boy” for J&L Steel in Aliquippa. Tom’s father, Ray, was a general manager at the steel plant and helped him get the job.

By 1941, Tom was “climbing the ladder” in the J&L machine shop with two years as an machinist apprentice.

### **World War 2**

On Dec. 7<sup>th</sup>, Tom was in the local Public Library studying for his exams.

The quiet library suddenly broke out in excited noise as word spread of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Tom (and many others) had never heard of Pearl Harbor, and upon learning that it was in the Pacific, were wondering how the Germans could have reached the pacific. Only later did they learn it was the Japanese government behind the attack.

To become an officer in the military, Tom needed a High School Diploma. Unfortunately he was short on credits for graduation. The Principal reviewed Tom’s CMTC training certificates, his Machinist Apprentice tests, and the term paper Tom was writing at the Library when the strike occurred. The Principle agreed to grant Tom his H.S. diploma based on the sum of this effort.

Tom faced another issue before he could seek Officer’s training. Due to wartime needs, machinists were considered essential employees and could not be released for military service unless a replacement was found. Tom’s father, Ray, looked into the matter and was able to use Tom’s CMTC training and Apprentice status to waive the requirement.

Tom went to the local Army recruiting office but they could not guarantee that he would get a preferred position if he washed out of flight training. Next, Tom went to the Navy, and they agreed to enroll him as an Aviation Cadet, and should he wash out, he could be released back to civilian life (his choice). Tom signed on with the Navy.

Tom was given a physical by the Navy on that day, unfortunately he failed the dental exam. He needed a tooth repaired. Tom quickly found a local dentist and had the repair completed (no charge!) He returned to the Navy office and passed the physical.

Due to aircraft and training shortages, it was several months before Tom was called up.

Tom entered the Westminster College CPT (Civilian Pilot Training) program. As mentioned previously, Tom has been taking flying lessons on his own and had completed 6 hours of training prior to joining the Navy. Most of the other 12 students had some college education and Tom struggled to keep up with his ground schooling. Thanks to his previous lessons, Tom was first in the class to solo.

Unfortunately for Tom, the aircraft malfunctioned during his solo. The aircraft was stuck at full throttle. Tom flew the required path for a solo, then cut the ignition and rolled to a stop with the engine off. The instructor ran up to the aircraft and asked what had happened and said Tom had handled the situation correctly.

Tom obtained his pilot's license, but had another long wait to be called up for service (due to the shortage of aircraft and training). He returned to the J&L machine shop in the interim.

December, 1942 :

Tom is called up for Navy Preflight school in Chapel Hill, NC, followed by additional training in Corpus Christi, TX, and Glenview, IL for his final tests in the N2S Boeing "Yellow Peril" aircraft, including take-off and landings on the USS Wolverine, a mock-up aircraft carrier situated on the Great Lakes.

The Navy showed the recruits many films and photographs of extreme cases of Venereal Disease. There had been a severe issue in training with the men traveling to nearby Chicago and becoming severely ill. The situation became so bad that the Navy began to immediately discharge any cadet with VD – with no treatment.

Tom was always seeking extra practice hours, both due to his love of flying and his newfound ability to "fly for free" in the Navy. By the end of training, he had logged 55 more hours than the next runner-up in his class.

In one incident, while flying with an instructor, the carburetor float became stuck and the engine died. Tom had to land with the engine off and the instructor used a phone to call in a mechanic for the repair. After the repair, they took off and returned to Glenview NAS.

Tom's joy of flying almost got him discharged. One day he was logging extra hours and flying well north of Chicago, when he realized that he was hopelessly lost. There were no radios in the aircraft.

Tom's plan was to land, leave the engine idling (there is no way to start an NSN engine solo), and seek help. If none could be found, he would shut the engine off, go to a phone, and claim the carburetor

failed, as it had weeks earlier, thus avoiding the dreaded “washout list” – two consecutive training incidents would result in separation.

Tom landed next to a highway, placed a rock in front of the tire to keep the plane from rolling away, and flagged down a driver. Fortunately the driver was eager to help and gave Tom a map. Tom was able to return to Glenview a little late, but there was no incident report.

Tom received his Gold Wings and continued training in additional aircraft, such as the SNJ, NR-1, and SNV.

Next up was Daytona Beach, FL where he received training in the SBD Dauntless Dive Bomber. Sadly, Tom lost his friend and roommate, Paul Williams, who was 19 years old. It happened during instrument training. Tom, as a friend of Paul, was asked to accompany the coffin home and did so.

Tom was assigned to Alameda Naval Station, SBD Squadron VB-303. He and several other pilots who trained together in Daytona Beach, FL picked up new SBD Dauntless fighter bombers and flew the to Santa Rosa Island for training, pending an eventual deployment to the Solomon Islands.

Three months later, despite being fully trained and equipped, the squadron was decommissioned and transitioned to VF-84, a new F4U-Corsair squadron operating from North Island NAS, San Diego.

In VF-84, Tom trained with Commanding Officer Roger Hedrick, and Lt. Commander Ike Kepford. Both were regarded as among the finest pilots in the US Navy. Both were aces, having shot down a total of 28 aircraft in the battle of Guadalcanal.

The original plan for VF-84 was to build an Essex class Carrier group of 72 F4U Corsairs, 12 SB2C Helldivers, and 12 TBM Torpedo bombers. After four months of training, the Navy Bureau of Aircraft changed the mix to 36 Corsairs, 36 F6F Hellcats, plus the Helldivers and TBMs. VF-84 was ready to deploy as Air Group 84.

On 2 January, 1945 Tom was assigned to a new Air Group One (VBF-1) flying the F4U Corsair. They were sent to Fallon, NV to train on the new “new” 5” rockets, which could be fired from the Corsair.

19 Jan 1945, Tom relocated once again to Alameda NAS, for additional training.

On 2 Mar 1945, Tom joined the squadron relocation to Hawaii. Just as Tom arrived in Hawaii, he received the news that CV-17, the Bunker Hill, had been devastated by a kamikaze attack. Many of his friends in VF-84, North Island NAS, were serving onboard the Bunker Hill.

A few days after arriving in Honolulu, VBF-1 relocated to Maui for additional training in the use of rockets, gunnery, bombing runs, and landing and take-off exercises (several a day) between Maui and CV-4, the Ranger.

In May of 1945, Tom’s air group – Air Group One – was deployed to CV-20 – The Bennington, in Guam. Tom’s squadron boarded the USS Breton (Escort Carrier) for the trip to Guam, where he was based at Agana NAF. Two weeks later, a rendezvous with the USS Bennington (CV-20) was arranged for Leyte Gulf, in the Philippines. Tom boarded the USS White Plains with his air group and a fresh batch of F4U Corsairs.

On 17 June 1945 Tom boarded the USS Bennington, flagship of Task Force 38.1. The Bennington is on hold, being repaired from typhoon damage.

In one tragic moment, on June 29<sup>th</sup>, during exercises, Tom lost his friend Ensign Pete Parthemouse, whose aircraft inexplicably disintegrated while pulling out of a practice dive. Tom saw parts of his aircraft flutter past his own aircraft, and into the sea. Pete's body was not found.

On 1 July, 1945 From Leyte Gulf, Tom sailed for our attack on the Islands of Japan, drilling and practicing along the way. The first strikes on Japan are scheduled to 10 July.

Tom's first combat mission over Japan (10 July 1945) was quite eventful. He performed a bomb diving run on Atsugi Airfield, about 25 miles west of Tokyo. As per his training, the landing gear were deployed during his bombing run to lower his speed. After releasing his bomb, and pulling out, his wing man radioed him : "Mac, you're on fire." (Tom's nickname is "Mac"). However, Tom's Corsair was not actually on fire, but one of wheels had been shot off by Japanese anti-aircraft fire. Hydraulic oil was spraying out in a mist that resembled smoke. Without hydraulic oil pressure, the remaining landing gear could not be retracted and Tom's aircraft was left behind as his squadron returned to the Bennington.

Tom's aircraft was the last to return to the Bennington that day. The Admiral ordered the Task Force turned into the wind so Tom could land. Tom missed his first attempt – his flaps were locked in the up position -- but successfully landed on the second. His aircraft was stripped of anything useful and was pushed over the side. Tom was ferried over to an escort carrier where he picked up a new Corsair and flew it back to the Bennington.

On another mission, Tom used his Corsair's rockets to great effect on a set of oil tanks at a Hokkaido Island military base. After launching six rockets into a large fuel depot storage tank, it exploded hundreds of feet into the air.

On 17/18 July, Tom's squadron attacked the Battleship Nagato and several cruisers in Tokyo Bay. Although the ships were damaged, none were lost.

On 25 July, Tom fired rockets and machine gunned two "Sugar Dog" ships, near Kure, "Matoyo Wan".

Between missions, Tom was regularly assigned to DCAP missions, maintaining air cover over the Task Force.

The Task Force took heavy anti-aircraft fire during the final months of WW-2 (June, July, August 1945). Tom flew several missions over Japan, attacking military installations and infrastructure, using bombs, rockets, and gunnery. By the end of the war, only about a dozen of the original new 36 Corsairs were still flyable, the rest had been replaced.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of August, Tom attempted to participate in a photo recon mission, but weather turned them back. They did machine gun a dredge operating in a "no go" area.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of August, Tom's mission was altered in flight due to weather and "Easy 3" flew a long mission (5 hours) across Honshu Island to attack shipping on the West coast of the Island. Tom machine gunned and fired rockets into the ship's pilot house.

On the 13<sup>th</sup> of August, Japan was still attempting to negotiate surrender. Several missions were launched, including "Baker 3", Tom's friend, Lt. Jg Moxley, would not return from the attack on three airfields.

On the 15<sup>th</sup> of August, Japan surrendered unconditionally to the United Nations.

On 24 Aug 1945 : Tom flew a mission to locate POW camps and drop candy and notes to them. Despite low flights, most of the Japanese people waved at them. For many years, POWs sent Tom cards or letters to stay in touch. Also on the 27<sup>th</sup>.

On the 29<sup>th</sup>, Tom flew defensive air patrols in support of the initial landings on Japan.

On the 30<sup>th</sup>, Tom flew additional POW drop missions.

In the weeks following, most officers became "Block Captains" – provided a security show of force on the ground. Tom was assigned a block and although he had one minor incident with a Japanese man, otherwise the people were friendly or at least neutral.

On VJ Day, 2 September 1945, VBF-1 led the Tokyo Air Parade – the entire Task Force, plus 600 B-29 bombers, performed a low level (500 ft.) flyover of the Battleship Missouri as the surrender was formalized.

Oct. 6<sup>th</sup> : Return trip to San Francisco, CA.

### **Post WW-2 Military Service**

Tom received a grant to attend school at Ole Miss University, in Mississippi. He obtained a Bachelor's degree in Business and started to work towards his Master's degree. However the Navy relocated him to flight test.

Tom joined the flight test program at Patuxent River. Tom checked out in one of the first US Navy jets, the P80a, at Wright Patterson Army Air Base. He checked out in the jet with (then) Captain Chuck Yeager.

The Navy began testing jets for suitability on aircraft carriers. Tom performed several "tail hook" landings on the USS Roosevelt test program, along with Lt. Col. Marion Carl.

Tom did crash a P80/F80. On an approach to Memphis NAS, his aircraft lost all electrical power. Neither his flaps nor his landing gear were operating properly. He dove for the airfield, and the runway was wet. At high speed, he skidded off the end of the runway and into a number of small trees. Although the aircraft was heavily damaged, Tom was unhurt.

Prior to the creation of the national satellite network, the DoD used radar aircraft to patrol the skies. Tom flew converted B-17's (with radar equipment installed in the bomb bay) in support of the Korean War.

In 1958 Tom joined the WV or “Willy Victor” program, flying Super Constellation aircraft equipped with radar domes and equipment. During the Famosa Island Crises of 1958 Tom’s “Willy Victor” detected Chinese MIGs flying from inland China and vectored the F-86 allied aircraft in to meet them. The US maintained a 20:1 kill ratio between the F-86 Taiwanese fighters vs. the Chinese MIGs, partially thanks to this “Eye in the Sky” tracking and vectoring information.

In peacetime, the Super Connies were also used to track Hurricanes so early warnings could be given to civilian populations, giving them time to “hunker down” and prepare for the coming storm.

Tom final assignment was managing a project to vector aircraft using computers. This was at the Naval Electronics Lab on Point Loma.

In 1961, Tom retired from the US Navy as a Lt. Commander.

### **Civilian Life**

Tom obtained his Real Estate Broker’s license from UCSD. Then he opened three Real Estate offices in the San Diego area – one in Point Loma, one in Pacific Beach, and one in La Jolla, each staffed with about ten agents. Tom had noticed PSA used stewardesses on their aircraft and he put a large focus on hiring female Real Estate agents.

In the early 1970’s, Tom decided he wanted to fly again. He used his BA in Business and Real Estate experience to join the Le Baron Hotel chain with Ken Riley (CEO). Ken often flew between San Diego and Lake Tahoe, and in addition to his duties as Vice President of the hotel chain, Tom also flew the Hotel’s executive aircraft, a Cessna 421 Golden Eagle, between San Diego and Truckee Airport, in North Lake Tahoe.

By the mid-1970’s, the Hotel chain had grown too fast and had to downsize. Several locations had to be sold, plus the aircraft. Tom decided to move on.

Tom next reached out to his old CO, Roger Hedrick. Hedrick’s brother, John, had a construction company in San Gabriel, CA. Tom began a Real Estate development career with J.H. Hedrick Construction company. He was the primary developer for 30 apartment building, 10 condo developments, several medical offices, and storage unit projects in both San Diego and San Gabriel.

Together, Tom and Karen have managed a storefront on 8<sup>th</sup> Street, in National City, working with the Chamber of Commerce and the Mayor’s office, performing multiple upgrades, for over 45 years.

After the JH Hedrick Company closed due to an economic downturn, Tom worked solo, restoring and reselling hotels.

Tom’s final business ventures were in China, attempting to build friendship and communication between the USA and China.