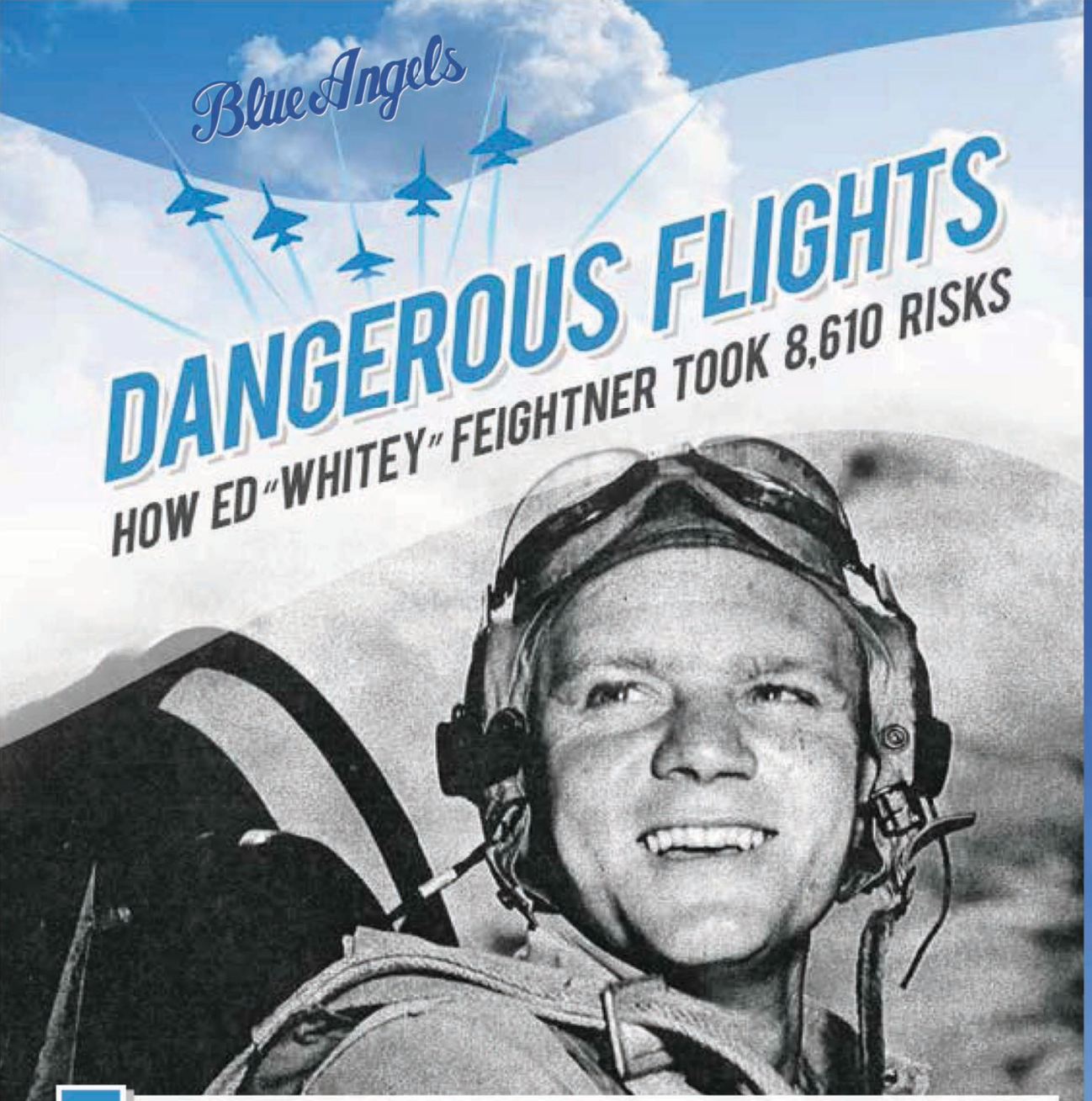
Blue Angels

DANGEROUS FLIGHTS

HOW ED "WHITEY" FEIGHTNER TOOK 8,610 RISKS



Twelve Japanese Mitsubishi "Betty" torpedo bombers were flying an attack course toward the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Enterprise. When they saw the ship's oncoming squadron of F4 Wildcat fighters, the Bettys turned away and instead targeted the U.S.S. Chicago. The American fighters intercepted and shot down some of the Japanese attackers, but the remainder of the enemy squadron still managed to torpedo the Chicago.

In the South Pacific, the Battle of Rennell Island was in its second day on the morning of January 30, 1943.

As the Bettys moved on to threaten a ring of U.S. destroyers, Edward "Whitey" Feightner arrived on the scene in his Wildcat after a delay of engine trouble and immediately joined his squadron in combat. Feightner, who had only been with his Enterprise team for three months, proceeded to shoot down, one, two, then three Japanese bombers in one day.

His brave headlong plunge into battle earned Ed the Distinguished Flying Cross. That risk-taking day was one of many in which Ed chose to fly with danger.

COMBAT IN THE PACIFIC

After enlisting and completing naval aviator training, Ed's first orders were to join the fighter squadron on the U.S.S. Yorktown, but before he arrived, that carrier was sunk at the battle of Midway. He was reassigned to the squadron based at the Naval Air Station in Maui, Hawaii where his commanding officer was the Navy's first fighter ace, "Butch" O'Hare (for whom the Chicago airport is named). He gave Ed the nickname "Whitey" because of Feightner's inability to tan.

A few months later, Ed was assigned to the U.S.S. Enterprise to join the "Grim Reapers" squadron. Ten days out of Pearl Harbor, Whitey shot down his first enemy aircraft at the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands, earning him an Air Medal. Next came the Battle of Rennell Island, where he downed three enemy planes.

Ed was given a new F6 Hellcat when he was transferred to the carrier U.S.S. Bunker Hill and became an ace when he shot down a fifth Japanese plane over Peleliu.

A shoot-down over the island of Truk brought his total to six, and during the battle of Formosa, Ed once again shot down three enemy planes in a single day, raising his combat total to nine.

In most aerial battles, Japanese planes outnumbered American fighters 15-to-1, and Ed's Hellcat was hit by enemy rounds many times. In one dogfight, his bullet-riddled engine caught fire and exploded. In another encounter, the leading edge of his entire left wing was shot off, along with the left wheel. That mangled wing then caught on fire.

Whitey recalls three occasions when, "I closed my eyes and waited for the end. But it never came."

His crippled Hellcat always made it back home to his carrier.

Before Ed flew on a reconnaissance mission over enemy-held islands, the guns were removed from his wings and replaced with cameras. Whenever a Japanese plane got on the tail of his unarmed Hellcat, Ed would go into a nose dive and rev his engine to top speed, drawing his attacker to follow him down.

He had learned that whenever a Japanese Zero fighter dove faster than 300 knots, the sheer force of air pressure made it impossible to move the hinged horizontal "elevator" panels along the back edge of the tail that controls the plane's angle. Whitey pulled up from his dive at the last moment and the Japanese attacker slammed into the water. Years after the war ended, Ed's experiences in those well-engineered Hellcats that flew in spite of punishment by bullets and G-forces would inspire his career in plane development.

"WHITEY" FEIGHTNER IS AN ANGEL

In peacetime, the Navy set its sights on a new adversary – the Air Force.

The two service branches were now in ongoing competition for a greater share of a shrinking defense budget.

In response, Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz ordered the formation of a flight demonstration team to help generate public and political support for the Navy. Ed "Whitey" Feightner was selected to join and fly the lead position on this new team that performed at air shows in propeller-driven Hellcats and Bearcats. They flew without a name for four months before finally selecting one.

Ed explained – "It was back when I was with a squadron attached to the carrier Essex. The night before we left port, we were in New York at a nightclub called The Blue Angel."

After two years as a Blue Angel, Ed was offered a new assignment in which **he would fly with danger once again.**

SOMEONE'S GOT TO DO IT

Ed became a test pilot, joining an elite cadre that author Tom Wolfe's book title praised for having "The Right Stuff." In that book, Wolfe compared that era's 23 percent death rate for pilots in general to the 53 percent casualty rate among test pilots.

On one hand, test pilots got to be first to fly new aircraft with the attraction of sleek designs and the latest technology, often classified. The speed and capabilities of these new planes enabled pilots like Whitey to "do things no one has ever done before," he explained.

On the other hand, these experimental aircraft were using untried aerodynamics, mechanical parts, and electronics. Every plane had hidden flaws that would not be revealed until a test flight, suddenly surprising the pilot with problems that required split-second life or death responses.

Ed remembered how good it felt to fly a rugged Hellcat that could not be broken by the sharpest turn or steepest dive. "It did whatever you wanted. It was so dependable, you could fly it unconsciously without worry," he recalled. Ed knew that building a new plane worthy of that high level of trust would require repeated testing and improvement. If no one gets in the cockpit to discover the weaknesses of a new machine, faulty planes will be produced and deployed in large numbers that kill many rank and file pilots.

One example of Ed's service was demonstrated in the new F7 Cutlass jet fighter. The futuristic design with swept-back wings looked impressive, but the Cutlass engines were prone to explosions and fire, and the forward landing gear often collapsed. In the first version of that plane, Whitey was the only pilot who could launch and land the Cutlass on a carrier.

During a test of a new catapult system conducted on an airfield, one of the Cutlass engines exploded and caught fire on takeoff. In the cockpit, Ed knew he was too low to eject but managed to turn the jet around and land on the runway where firefighters rushed to put out the flames.

More than 25 percent of the Cutlasses were destroyed in accidents, killing four test pilots and 21 Navy pilots.

A FALLING ANGEL

Navy brass wanted to present a positive image of the Cutlass to the public. So they made plans to switch the Blue Angels flight team from their Panther jets to the Cutlass and asked Ed to take command.

Why would Whitey voluntarily fly planes with a high risk for crashes? His explanation was best summarized,

"Somebody's got to do it."

In response, Ed quit on the spot. Had they even looked at any of the scathing reports he had written on Cutlass flaws and failures? That jet could not be trusted in close formation flying.

Ed was eventually persuaded to accept a compromise in which two Cutlasses would be used as solo acts. He would fly a Cutlass, and fellow ace pilot Butch Voris would come back to fly lead position for the primary team.

On a spring day in 1952, as thousands of spectators gathered for the air show at Saufley Field Naval Air Station near Pensacola, they were unaware that The Blue Angels ground crew was dealing with fuel control problems that grounded their mainstay Panther jets. For this show, the two Cutlasses would need to fill the starring roles. Ed began by giving the crowd the impressive roar and flame of a full afterburner takeoff into a steep climb. But then, the unreliable hydraulic control system failed, and once again, Whitey was too low to eject.

His jet clipped trees at the end of the runway, causing the left engine to flame out. The Cutlass had a backup mechanical control system, but due to a design flaw, there was always an 11-second delay before it kicked in. With hydraulic fluid streaming behind the Cutlass in bright flames, Ed was finally able to make a hard turn back to the runway and land. The crowd applauded this unexpected life or death drama.

More in-flight emergencies and near fatal accidents finally purged the Cutlass from The Blue Angels.

> Ed later commented that during those 11 seconds without control, ***"You're just a passenger."***

FEIGHTNER TAKES COMMAND

After serving as a combat pilot, a test pilot, and a Blue Angel, Ed moved into leadership roles in the fourth chapter of his career. During the next two decades, Whitey Feightner commanded the "Red Rippers" fighter squadron, was the air wing commander of Carrier Group Ten, served two tours as captain of the U.S.S. Chikaskia and the U.S.S. Okinawa, and was promoted to the rank of Rear Admiral.

Ed also served in a variety of aircraft development roles, including project officer for the F4 Phantom II, the head of Navy Fighter Design at the Bureau of Naval Weapons, and Director of the Naval Aviation Weapons Systems Analysis Group.

He retired in 1974 after 33 years of service.

THE RESULTS OF RISKS

Now at 96 years of age, Ed is the only surviving member of the original Blue Angels.

In May 2015, more than 70 years since he became an ace fighter pilot, Whitey traveled from his home at Brookdale Mount Vernon in Ohio to the U.S. Capitol to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor for his heroics at the World War II Battle of Rennell Island. But he had done so much more.

The 8,610 flight hours that Feightner logged over his career represent the risks he took on behalf of sailors and pilots whose numbers are far greater.

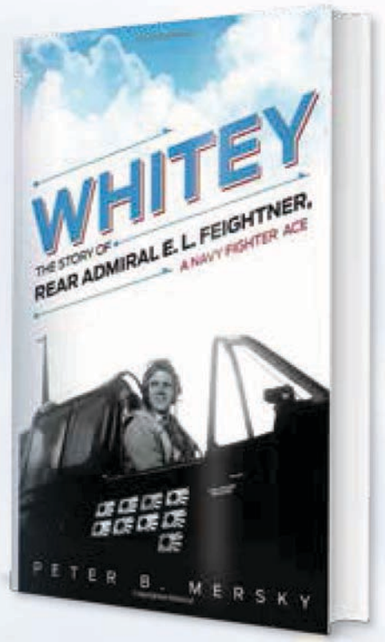
Because he flew full-throttle into danger, how many ships under his squadron's protection were not hit by Japanese torpedoes?

After he tested jets with engines that caught fire or suddenly shut down their controls in mid-air, how many thousands of pilots were not killed because those new planes were scrapped or redesigned?

How many improved jets routinely glided to perfectly uneventful deck landings? How many Navy wives did not become widows? How many children did not lose their fathers? How many Blue Angels air show tragedies did not happen?

Ed took those risks because, "someone had to do it." As a result, there are now thousands of children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of sailors and pilots who came home safely decades ago. Their generations now scattered across the country are Ed's legacy.

They can laugh, love, work, play, and slumber in their beds at night because Ed "Whitey" Feightner chose to fly with danger.



Whitey Feightner's biography is available in hardcover and Kindle editions, having earned a five-Star rating from readers on Amazon.com and a stellar review from astronaut John Glenn.

Author Peter B. Mersky is a retired US Navy Commander and author of dozens of books on military aviation.