

AVIATION WALL OF HONOR



Lieutenant Commander Norman Edward "Boots" Kukuk

Norman Edward "Boots" Kukuk was born on October 8, 1918 in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. The following year, the Kukuk family moved to Marquette, Michigan.

In his early teens, "Boots" was recognized as being a gifted athlete and was playing in hockey teams with boys three and four years older than him. In high school, he was a member of the Wild Geese, a perennial

state championship winner that even beat the Marquette Millionaires, the city hockey team. He was a softball pitcher with the Marquette All Stars that won five U.P. championships.

At Northern Michigan University, he played half back on the football team. In track, he tied a U.P. pole vault record, took medals in the high and low hurdles, and went on to place in the javelin throw in the Big Ten competition in East Lansing.

God gave him the body and the coordination, but God also gave him a father that instilled in him the need for discipline to persevere, to work, to practice, to achieve the pinnacles of success. He signed try out contracts with the Cleveland Barons and the Chicago Black Hawks and that might have been a career turn, had not WWII intervened. Instead, in November 1941, he was sworn into the Navy's flight program. Prior to this, he had taken primary flight training locally under the tutelage of Sig Wilson and then advanced training in the summer of 1940 at the Fontana Flying School at Houghton, Michigan.

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Navy flight training started at Glenview, Illinois, then Dallas, Texas, Corpus Christie, Texas and finally Miami, Florida for advanced combat training and carrier landings. The next stop was Otai, California for night flying and then to the South Pacific.

“Boots”, with his wry sense of humor, says in training they told us to become an Ace you had to destroy five planes. It wasn’t until he had destroyed four of ours that they said, “ENEMY” planes! And being a dutiful son, he never blamed his mother. He could have, after all she finished every letter to her son while in the South Pacific with these words: “Remember, fly low and fly slow.” That was her prescription for survival! Not exactly what they thought at fighter tactical school, but let’s face it, “Boots” is alive today so we don’t want to downgrade the value of motherly love.

His first crash came in a carrier landing when the tail hook missed the arresting cable and he wiped out against the barrier. His second plane, with tail wheel and partial tail rudder shot away by Japanese ground fire, missed the runway and did a few summersaults in a coral ditch before coming to an ignominious halt on Russell Island north of Guadalcanal. The third Wildcat splashed into the Pacific after being hit in the engine from ground fire from the Japanese base at Munda Point. He was picked up by one of our destroyers and deposited back to Henderson Field for another trip.

Having been in the South Pacific for nine months, he was sent back to the U.S. for a 30 day leave, a new squadron, and a new plane, the F6F Hellcat. The squadron was sent to Green Island for aerial assaults in the Japanese stronghold at Rafaul. Returning as an escort to bombers after a strike on Truk, they were ordered to land on an emergency landing strip in a severe thunderstorm. When he hit the runway, he noticed a torpedo bomber coming right at him for a head-on collision. He pushed the rudder as far as it would go to the right and ducked. The bomber’s left wing sheared

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off his canopy, windshield, and left wing before slamming into his wingman's plane. "Boots" jumped out and pulled the pilot out of the other Hellcat while flames engulfed both it and the bomber with ammunition exploding in all directions. Unfortunately, the three men in the bomber and his wingman all died shortly afterward. The next morning, a military funeral was held in a somber continuing rain, a day "Boots" can never forget.

He returned to the U.S. and spent his last nine years in the military instructing fighter tactics to new students at the Naval Air Station in Daytona Beach, Florida.

Following military retirement, he obtained his masters degree in education at Michigan State University and held a number of teaching positions including two superintendent posts downstate before returning to the Upper Peninsula. After becoming Superintendent of Correction Education at the Marquette Branch Prison, he developed a college degree program in conjunction with Northern Michigan University. His pioneer efforts were rewarded by receiving a Distinguished Alumni Award by his Alma Mater.

In 1975, he finally fully retired and with his wife Grace spends his summers at their home on Lake Independence and winters in Sarasota, Florida which allows him to play golf twelve months of the year.

Lt. Cdr. "Boots" Kukuk's military citations include six Air Medals, three Distinguished Flying Crosses, and one Navy Marine Heroism Medal. The latter was presented to him from Admiral Halsey for pulling a pilot from a burning plane. He also received numerous commendations from Capt. Ben Wyatt of the USS Chenango (CVE).

TJ Mudge, Jan. 2004

