

# AVIATION WALL OF HONOR



## **Captain Mark Twain Whittier Bomber Pilot USN**

Mark Whittier, born February 16, 1913, was a native of Marquette, living on Spruce Street with his widowed mother until early in high school when they moved to Winona, Minnesota.

Following graduation at Winona High, he went to the University of Minnesota and graduated there in June 1936. The following year, he became an Apprentice Seaman in the United States

Naval Reserve. Fifteen months later, he was designated a Naval Aviator and shortly afterward reported to Bombing Squadron Two, aboard the USS Lexington in San Diego, California.

In September of 1940, he was appointed an Ensign USNR and subsequently took Naval Air Training at Kingsville, Texas. By February 1942, Whittier had been promoted to Lieutenant (junior grade) and was back on the Lexington again, but at this time in the South Pacific where our depleted (post Pearl Harbor) naval forces were attempting to interdict the continuing Japanese advance toward Australia. The Japanese were riding on a wave of success, starting with the taking of the Philippines, Wake Island, then Guam, Hong Kong, Thailand, North Borneo, Singapore and the entire Netherland East Indies.

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At this point, the Japanese appeared invincible. Our government hungered for some action proving our forces capable of slowing this juggernaut. It needed a victory in the worst way. The aircraft carrier Lexington, with pilots Butch O'Hare and Mark Twain Whittier aboard, provided that spark.

At first command to advance on the Japanese base at Rabaul, they were discovered by a Japanese patrol plane and, not long after, became the target of 18 enemy bombers in two waves. The Lexington fighters truly showed their mettle, shooting down one bomber after another to the cheering of their shipmates. Lt. Butch O'Hare alone accounted for five "Kates" himself and was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor by a grateful Navy. The total victory aboard the "Lady Lex" (as she was affectionately called) was celebrated by calling February 20, 1942 "Butch O'Hare Day".

Realizing that surprise was lost, the Lexington retired and was joined by the USS Yorktown in the Gulf of Papua for the next operation, an attack at the advance Japanese bases at Lae, New Guinea and Salamaua. To reach these targets, the flyers had to cross the Owen Stanley mountain range at points rearing up to 16,000 feet, an elevation not commonly anticipated in torpedo bomber or dive bomber operations. Anoxemia (oxygen lack) often effects the need for clear alert thinking. Whittier's flight leader temporarily dropped out of formation, having failed to notice his number one gas tank had run dry.

Whittier himself described his own problems:

"Flying down to the target from 19,000 feet to 12, then 10, I was in the vertical part of my dive at 250 knots. I had my eye to the cross hairs, focused on the ship (now appearing to be a cruiser or large destroyer), estimated the ship's speed, the angle of evasive turn and punched "the pickle" on the slick. I felt the thousand pound bomb drop off, heaved back tightening gut

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muscles and yelling to keep blood in the head. (Editor's note: They didn't have "G" suits in those days.) I then tried to close the dive flaps – close, close, close – but they wouldn't close! Goggles, windshield and hood were all steamed up and applying more and more power still didn't raise the speed to over 100 knots. I couldn't climb above 500 feet. The choice of local Japs or head hunting natives attending a crash landing didn't seem like attractive options to choose from. In a flash of inspiration, I lowered the wheels, hoping further stress on the hydraulic system might break an air lock and, wonder of wonders, it worked."

The trip back was uneventful and, after landing on the carrier, pilots that followed him described his bomb hit blasting the stern of the cruiser out of the water, propellers in the air and settling on its side in the throes of sinking. Final score: 12 ships sunk, one plane shot down.

And so it was, the first offensive strike by the Navy against the Japanese and a clear victory. Words cannot describe what it did for American morale.

For Whittier it meant being awarded the coveted Navy Cross. Whittier's subsequent naval history follows:

1942 September	Appointed Lieutenant USNR
1944 February	Appointed Lt Commander USNR, Command Composite Sqdn 97
1946 September	Appointed Commander USN Transferred to Staff, Chief Naval Air Training, Pensacola, FL
1947 July	Transferred to General Line School, Newport, RI
1948 June	Transferred to USS Palau (CVE 122) Operations Officer
1950 April	Transferred to NAS Johnsville PA Operations Officer
1952 May	Dpt Command NAAS Iwakuni, Japan
1954 October	Assigned US Naval Intelligence/Language School, Washington, DC
1955 October	Assigned Air Force Office of Intelligence, Washington, DC
1957 June	Appointed Captain USA Assigned US Embassy, Rabat, Morocco, Naval Attache
1961 September	Assigned Chief of Staff, US Naval Base, Subic Bay, Phillipines
1964 October	Assigned as District Intelligence Officer, Washington, DC
1966 July	Assigned as Officer in Charge, NALF, Monterey, CA
1969 July	Retired Active Duty

TJ Mudge, May 2004