



# Walt Ohlrich Jr.

EAA Warbirds of America Member No. 1

BY WALT OHLRICH  
AS TOLD TO PAUL KOSKELA

*[Note: The following is taken from an interview with Walt Ohlrich Jr. at the North American Trainers Association reunion in Muskogee, Oklahoma, July 2003. Walt Ohlrich was inducted into the Virginia Aviation Hall of Fame in November 2006.]*

Walt Ohlrich learned to fly after World War II. His father wrote from overseas, "Buy 'Sonny Boy' a Stearman," so they bought a surplus PT-17 Stearman in July 1945 and stored it until his father came home in December 1945. Walt Ohlrich Sr. was an Air Force pilot who flew P-40s and B-25s. Like many military families, they moved from base to base, and with housing being scarce, Walt often had to sleep in the kitchen.

When Walt's dad returned from the war, they started flying in earnest. They moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma, where Walt soloed at Brown's Airport in July 1946. This was the same month that he joined the Navy's Aviation Midshipman Program.

This program was unique...there's never been another like it. Top brass was concerned with postwar leadership. Their intent was to grab young men out of high school, send them to college, and have them take courses similar to first- and second-year courses in the Naval Academy, then send them to flight training. Total enrollment in this program was 2,900.

Walt was in Aviation Midshipman Class 14-48. After a year and a half at the University of Tulsa, he went to the

Navy pre-flight school at Pensacola for 16 weeks in the summer of 1948. Students were restricted to the base for the entire time. Walt thought it strange that they had to learn to use a sword, "But it was good for stabbing hors d'oeuvres!"

Walt started to fly the SNJ in January 1949. The midshipmen were subjected to tough but effective teaching methods, which he felt were of permanent benefit to him. After completing 170 hours of training in the SNJ and 15 hours of field carrier landing practice, he went to carrier qualify on the USS Cabot in the early summer of 1949.

Walt was No. 2 in a flight of five. He said, "Imagine, five teenagers in high-powered SNJ aircraft heading toward a carrier! The break for carrier work was 32 seconds. We circled, dropped our tail hooks, and put the gear down. I was scared to death, but came right in, cut the power, and dropped like a brick. We landed one SNJ every 30 seconds. After four or five landings, it became the most fun I ever had!"

Next he went to Corpus Christi for advanced training in F6F Hellcats. He said, "The Hellcat was easier to fly and land than the SNJ. I qualified in Hellcats on the USS Saipan and got my Wings in January 1950."

Then came more training. The Navy had acquired 50 F-80Cs from the Air Force, and it sent Walt to the Navy's second jet training class. He flew 21 hours in the F-80C.

"At this time I had 295 flight hours

and 15 carrier landings. That was my Navy flight training in the 1950s. We had a washout rate of 26 percent."

With training over, Walt went to his first squadron at Naval Air Station Jacksonville and flew F8F Bearcats in Fighter Squadron 11. He later transitioned to jets, the McDonnell F2H-1 Banshee. He flew three and a half years with his first two squadrons, including overseas deployments on four different carriers.

During one of his stateside turn-arounds, he became one of the first pilots to eject from a jet. He was on a routine flight from the USS Leyte in a McDonnell F2H-2 Banshee when the starboard engine exploded, tearing off a wing and putting the Banshee into a violent tumble. He struggled to pull the pre-ejection handles, but the canopy didn't budge. He hit the normal canopy electric switch, and the canopy slid back and was torn off. He pulled on the face curtain and one side tore loose! Yanking on the remainder, the seat charge fired and he cleared the plane. As the chute opened, he saw a canopy panel partially torn open by debris! He hit the water hard, but was thankful to be alive. He was rescued several hours later, bruised and battered, and spent three months recovering in a hospital.

When due for shore duty, Walt became a flight instructor in Kingsville, Texas, in T-33s, F-80s, and F9F Panthers, then attended the postgraduate school in Monterey, California, where

he flew SNJs, SNBs, and Bearcats. After catapult training, he became catapult officer on the USS Ranger.

He flew for two different A-4 squadrons in Jacksonville, then did a Pentagon tour, followed by a tour as Navy acceptance test pilot at Douglas, Long Beach, California. While at Douglas, he formed the Warbirds of America organization in 1965.

He was ordered to another A-4 squadron, in Lemoore, California, and went on the 1966 deployment of the USS Intrepid, flying combat missions over Vietnam. He took command of the squadron when he returned in the summer of 1967, and cruised to the Med on the USS Shangri-La. His next assignment was as an attack training officer on the staff at Alameda, where he flew A-4s and A-7s. He was then promoted to captain (right out of flying airplanes!) and wound up as a staff officer. He retired from the Navy in 1978, after 32 years of service.

### **EAA Warbirds of America**

Walt Ohlrich recalled the creation of Warbirds of America:

“The idea for Warbirds of America was born during the National Air Races at Reno in 1964. It was the first time that a large group of people with a common interest in warbirds had gotten together. They compared notes and realized they needed help to find parts, and to get maintenance information and flight training.

“It was decided that a club of some sort was needed to act as a clearing house for aircraft information, and also to enhance safety. Prior to the advent of Warbirds of America there was no active safety program for ex-military aircraft. The accident rate was not good.

“I went back to Long Beach, California, and sat down to put the organization together. It was up and running by the spring of 1965, and incorporated in California in 1966. The first newsletter was published in the summer of 1965. We started to grow and had picked up quite a number of new members by the time we went back to Reno in 1965. Our first decals, which were almost 8 inches across, started to show up on airplanes.



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**1976**

“We went to our first fly-in early the next spring in Watsonville, California, where we had a total of four airplanes . . . one Mustang and three AT-6s. We four sat together and had a good time. We published a newsletter

every three months and things went on from there. In a few years it became part of the EAA, and it's grown to the international organization that is today.

“I've been active in the Warbirds of America, serving as its first president and also on the board for a number of years. I go to Oshkosh occasionally and volunteer to work wherever I can be of service. I'm the safety officer for the North American Trainers Association.

“As for my personal warbirds, I bought an F8F-2 Bearcat, which I raced at Reno every year except one, from 1964 to 1972. I took it to air shows and even did some aerobatics in it. When I moved back east, I stored the Bearcat in California, but finally sold it. I bought an SNJ in 1965, which I still have and fly. I'm also flying the heavier warbirds, such as the Fighter Factory's AD Skyraider and the FG-1D Corsair. I intend to fly the warbirds just as long as I can. It's been a great experience.” 