

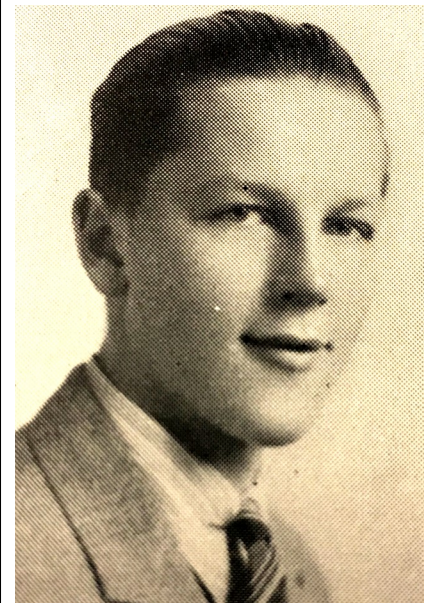
Meet Ensign Eugene G. McGarry, U.S. Naval Aviator, One of Our Cranford 86

By Stuart Rosenthal with Don Sweeney and Steve Glazer

The snowiest Cranford winter in memory evaporated into tears for a young Jacquelin Gearrick in frigid January 1945. Eleven-year old Jacky arrived home from school for lunch and entered the house, perhaps still brisk because of the coal shortage. Jacky was startled, her mom inconsolable. Elizabeth McGarry Gearrick was just informed that son Gene was missing somewhere in the Pacific. Just weeks earlier, Jacky ran down the driveway excited to see brother Gene who was home on a limited pass before Christmas. They enjoyed mom's homemade pies and ice skating together on the nearby frozen river, but it was all too brief. Now, the family would endure several more weeks of uncertainty and more grief when they learned that oldest brother Walt was wounded on two separate occasions also in the Pacific. By May, when winter was long over and Germany had surrendered, another chill descended upon 408 Manor Ave. when Mrs. Gearrick was officially informed that twenty-two year-old Gene would never return home.

Eugene George McGarry was born Aug 18, 1922 to Walter and Elizabeth McGarry in Chicago, IL. Following the death of Walter Sr. from pneumonia when Eugene was very young, Elizabeth remarried and eventually settled into Cranford with older son Walter, Jr. ('Walt') and Eugene ('Gene'). Jacquelin ('Jacky') was born a few years later followed by another brother Warren.

As a boy, Gene attended Roosevelt Elementary School and received communion at St. Michael's church. An unbounded curiosity fed Gene's varied interests which included scouting, flowers, books, the school newspaper and model boats and planes. He was voted into the National Honor Society at Cranford High and graduated in 1939 when he was still only sixteen. He attended Union Junior College (now Union County College) followed by Cooper Union College of Engineering, NYC. According to Jacky, Gene also spent time in Oregon on environmental projects with the Civilian Conservation Corps, a Depression-era work program. Before enlisting in the US Naval Reserve in Oct 1942, seeking entry into their cadet aviation program, Gene was working in nearby Kearny in the engineering department of Western Electric which was supplying half of all military radar electronics.



Eugene as he appeared in the 1939 Cranford High School yearbook.

Eugene McGarry	
"McGee"	
<i>"The wise take the middle way."</i>	
Course: College	Future: Undecided
Aviation Club 2; Science Club 4.	
Pet Hobby: Models	Pet Expression: "Gentlemen!"



St. Peter's Orphan Asylum on Lyons Ave. in Newark NJ where Eugene (8) and Walt (13) McGarry resided for a period after their father Walter Sr. died of pneumonia. Their mother Elizabeth married, moved to Cranford and eventually brought the boys there to live.

Training programs posed an exceedingly rigorous mental, physical and intellectual challenge for aspiring military aviators. Gene had the fortitude and aptitude, having spent part of his early years in a Newark orphanage, skipping a grade, studying engineering and now working at Western Electric. He had inherited the intelligence 'bug' as joked to us recently by his family. But Gene still needed to prove to the Navy he had the 'right stuff.'

Gene was called to appear before the Naval Aviation Cadet Selection Board in New York for intensive psychological and medical examinations lasting several days. After successfully completing the battery of tests and satisfying other prerequisites, Gene was selected and sworn in as a Cadet in the Navy's V-5 program, the officer training branch of naval aviation. He departed Cranford for initial training on Dec 19, 1942].



Pre-flight training at UNC at Chapel Hill. Preparation for pilots to feel comfortable at 360 degrees.

intermediate flight training.

By Fall 1943, Gene was flying mostly with instruments, or 'blind flying.' He would learn how to recover from an engine stall, a flipped plane and a descending spin. But the threat of washout loomed as the pool of cadets narrowed further and the instruction intensified. Gene continued to advanced flight school where he learned dive bombing runs, fighter approaches, live firing and underwater egress. Gene was qualified as a navigator, gunner and radioman. By March 1944, and with over 500 total flight hours, Eugene had merited the coveted naval pilot 'Wings of Gold' and was commissioned an Ensign in the US Naval Reserve. Graduates with top gunnery skills ranked high in their class and qualified for fighter training as a next phase. This elite group included Ensign McGarry.

Conceived before the US entered the war, the Grumman F6F 'Hellcat' was developed in Bethpage, Long Island as a carrier-based



The overpowered 2000 HP 18 cylinder Grumman F6F-5N Hellcat, the most advanced air to air fighter of its time in 1943-1945. With bullet resistant windshields and self sealing fuel tank, it was designed to take a hit and still return home. Note the radar antenna mounted on the right wing. Many were armed with six 1/2" machine guns and twin 20 mm cannons. With a record breaking kill ratio of 19:1 it proved to be the most successful fighter aircraft in naval history.

Cadet McGarry arrived for pre-flight training at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill [in early 1943]. This demanding three-month program was required of all aviation cadets prior to flight school. Led by expert instructors and demanding coaches, it involved intensive physical training and athletics, as well as indoctrination and coursework in basic military and academic subjects. Those who failed were dropped from the program and designated for enlistment. Future President George H.W. Bush, who attended the same pre-flight training just prior to Gene, said the experience "shaped his life."

After passing pre-flight training, Gene arrived for Primary Flight School at Naval Air Station (NAS) Pensacola, FL. He was introduced to flight, acrobatics and night flying. In addition to classroom instruction, Gene learned how to fly with instruments and as part of a formation. Classmates who failed any of the tests were removed. With fewer classmates, Gene progressed to



Gene McGarry posing in the open cockpit of a "Yellow Peril," a double-winged biplane used in training.

fighter to succeed the F4F 'Wildcat.' With greater speed, armament and firepower, the Hellcat vastly improved contests against the Japanese A6M 'Zero,' the most common enemy aircraft encountered by US Navy fighter pilots. By Oct 1943, Hellcat pilots had engaged Japanese Zero fighters over Tarawa in the Gilbert Islands, scoring 30 enemy 'kills' with only one Hellcat lost. By the end of the war, every US Navy pilot in the Pacific designated an 'ace' with five or more kills flew the F6F. Hellcat pilots were credited with 5155 overall kills compared to just 270 losses, for a remarkable 19:1 win-to-loss ratio that has never been matched.

Following graduation from Pensacola in March 1944, Ensign McGarry was introduced to the Hellcat when he arrived at the new NAS Atlantic City. Not too far from home, Ensign McGarry arrived at the premier training facility for Navy fighter pilots. He was taught advanced gunnery, combat tactics and advanced navigation. Ensign McGarry learned how to catapult and land on aircraft carriers, dodge enemy aircraft and initiate a dogfight. The Cranford kid who adored the Iris flower had transformed into a genuine, perhaps cocky fighter pilot.

Gene was known to visit the Cranford skies without warning. According to Jacky, he would buzz low over their Cranford house at 408 Manor Ave. in a Corsair airplane, but discontinued once a neighbor complained to police. The summer heat swelled (it was particularly hot in 1944) and Gene may have been itching for an even greater challenge. He applied and was accepted to a specialized Hellcat 'night fighter' track. On Aug 8, 1944, Ensign McGarry reported to Night Fighter Squadron 110 at Charlestown Naval Auxiliary Air Field near Quonset Point, RI.

The US fleet faced a daunting task early in the war - how to counter Japanese air attacks. Ships were particularly vulnerable at night, often unable to mount a defense or respond with anti-aircraft gunfire unless the enemy could be heard or visibly sighted. The British were having early success with new radar technology for tracking incoming warplanes which provided an early warning and time to launch a counterattack. Now, the US Navy sought to develop an airborne version of radar, intended for bombing, ship detection and air superiority. They believed radar could be affixed to fighter aircraft and hunt enemy aircraft from miles away, under the veil of the night sky.

Ensign McGarry's new unit was among several fighter squadrons conceived from a top secret program begun early in the war. The objective was to develop a night fighter capability and tactics that could protect the US fleet from enemy attack. Working with top engineers from industry and scientists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the Navy sought to modify the new Hellcat with radar equipment and enhanced instruments for creation of a night fighter version that was just as capable during the day. By the end of the war, night fighters were



A young officer-in-training Eugene McGarry during happy times.



While training in Atlantic City, Gene McGarry was known to make periodic strafe passes over his Cranford home at 408 Manor Ave. He would sometimes wave his wings as he passed from his exceptionally loud Corsair 4FU fighter. The visits ended when neighbors complained to Cranford Police.

credited with protecting carriers from nighttime enemy attacks and suppressing lethal Kamikaze attacks.

Ensign McGarry began training as a night fighter pilot in the newly produced F6F-5N Hellcat at so-called 'Charlietown.' McGarry and his night fighter comrades were accustomed to an intense classroom and flying schedule. But night fighter training indoctrinated them in an entirely new form of fighting with inherently greater risks. At night, they practiced strafing or low-altitude attacks on simulated targets like enemy ships. With complete faith and reliance on their instruments, they needed to make split

second decisions when flying in the dark.

The pilots were mastering the skills necessary to effect a new strategy for nighttime interception of an enemy fighter plane. Two Hellcats would take off in the dark, with one role-playing the enemy. From miles away, the pursuit Hellcat would engage radar and lock onto the pretend foe. Relying on nothing but instruments and radar-based information, the aggressor pilot would surge ahead to within 300 yards of the other Hellcat and simulate discharge of six Browning machine guns, each round about the size of a thumb, at a combined rate of 65 shots per second. Night fighter students practiced this scenario repeatedly. Tragedy struck in Charleston while Ensign McGarry was stationed there. On Oct 19, 1944, two young Naval Reserve Ensign students were practicing this dangerous maneuver for several hours. The aggressor pilot radioed 'Splash' which indicated the enemy was targeted and destroyed. But the pilot had misjudged the target's speed and had overtaken it too fast. The planes crashed in mid-air and both pilots died. The collision was the third crash that week at Charlestown.



Eugene McGarry dressed for work. The traditional Navy aviator flight uniform including goggles.

Ensign McGarry remained at Charlestown through Dec 1944. After a brief visit back home, he left San Diego aboard the aircraft carrier USS Bennington the morning of New Year's Day, 1945. A week later, he arrived at Pearl Harbor, greeted by an armada of more carriers and battleships including the USS Nevada, South Dakota, Iowa, Independence and Saratoga.

With nearly 300 flying hours under his belt in the Hellcat, Ensign McGarry arrived at the 'finishing school' for night fighter training. His skills were honed and he was carrier-qualified. Near the end of his first week, he wrote home to his mom and family. It was his final letter.



The arm patch that would have been worn by Gene's night fighter training unit in the Pacific. Note the reference to the night flying bat with the radar antenna on its right wing.

On January, 12th 1945, after two years of intensive training, Ensign Eugene G. McGarry was flying an F6F-5N Hellcat that originated from NAS Barbers Point, a few miles from Pearl Harbor; he was on night strafing maneuvers. Strafing is an armed attack on a target while flying very close to the water. While dropping from the clouds vertically on a particularly dark night, his wing tip clipped the water's surface as he attempted to "pull out" to travel horizontally just feet above the water below. His plane or remains were never recovered. These facts we found in an actual Navy incident report as well as accounts from the diary of fellow night fighter FT Goodson who sailed to Hawaii with Gene. Recommendations were made to future night strafing pilots that would save lives in maneuvers that would follow this deadly night.

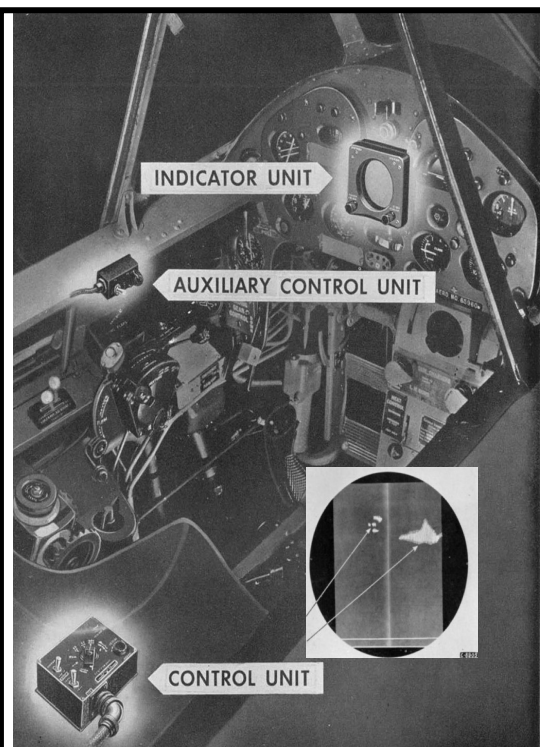
When word circulated in Cranford about the loss of Gene, Mrs. Leonora Sjursen called on his family

to offer comfort and support. Mrs. Sjursen a Gold Star mom herself had also lost her son Paul in the war just 11 months earlier. His profile preceded this article in The Cranford Monthly. A mass was offered in St. Michael's Church in May 1945 and repeated annually by Mrs. Gearrick. Ensign Eugene G. McGarry was forever memorialized at Tablets of the Missing at Honolulu Memorial, Honolulu.

Brother Walt survived his wounds, returned to Cranford, married and named his son after Eugene. Jacky still resides in Cranford. At the recent Memorial Day ceremony, she thanked the Boy Scout who carried the Gold Star Flag in memory of her brother Gene.

We salute Ensign Eugene George McGarry, US Naval Reserve, a great American fighter pilot and one of our Cranford 86 Hometown Heroes. If you have information or pictures about any of our heroes, please contact Don Sweeney at (908) 272-0876 or visit Cranford86.org.

Donations are accepted to help us cover research and printing expenses. For information about sponsoring a Cranford Hero please contact us.



A snapshot of what the Hellcat pilots saw surrounding them in the cockpit of the F6F-5N Hellcat. Note the size of the radar screen. Inset on right, the image on the screen a pilot would actually see.



Eugene McGarry's formal Naval portrait after receiving his gold Naval Aviator wings.



The USS Bennington as it looked in 1945. Inset is how it looked from an approaching aircraft. It gives a perspective of how small a target the pilots had, they only could land on the front half of the carrier and it was done in the black of night.



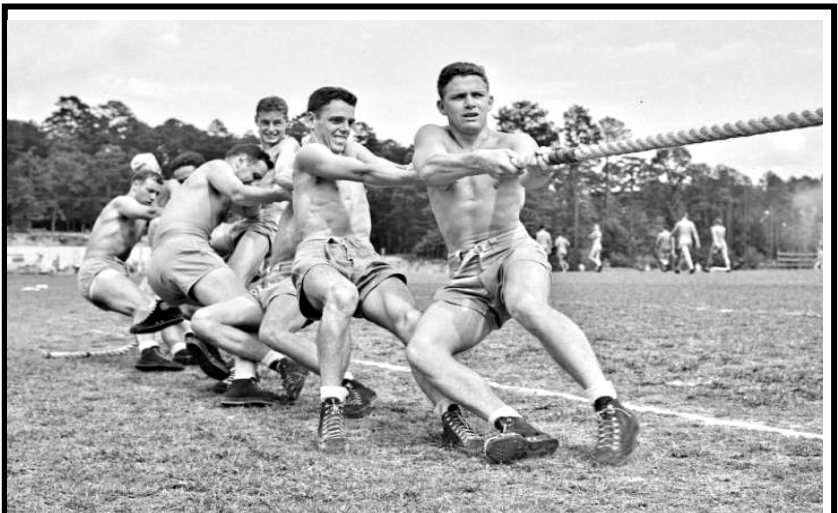
The Mitsubishi 'Zero' aircraft often challenged by US Navy Hellcat pilots. Formerly the king of battle over the South Pacific. With the "Zeke" being faster, more maneuverable and able to climb higher than any allied aircraft at the beginning of the war, it became the motivation of Grumman Aviation Engineering in their designing of the Hellcat F6F.



An F6F Hellcat being tucked below deck on an aircraft carrier by elevator.



The Naval golden wings proudly worn by Eugene McGarry after 2 long years of grueling training. He never wore them in battle, dying in a training exercise off Hawaii weeks before he likely would have entered combat in the So. Pacific."



Pre-flight training at UNC at Chapel Hill. Note the physical condition of the cadets.