

White...from Page 1A



Whitey circa 1995 standing in front of the A-6E Intruder with 12 MK-20 Rockeye, each with 247 smaller bombs inside.

codename for "TOP GUN 2," Whitey said. "As we started working with the studio, they confided in us that, yes, this was the filming of 'TOP GUN: MAVERICK,' and we were bound at that time not to say anything because it wasn't public that it was even coming out.

"When the trailers started getting released, then we were allowed to talk about it a little but were asked not to reveal any of the characters or storylines." Two movie trailers have since been released for "TOP GUN: MAVERICK," and together, they feature a number of scenes showing AV8RSTUFF's substantial contributions to the film.

Appearing in the trailers are AV8RSTUFF patches adorning the titular character's green Nomex flight jacket and the infamous leather jacket originally worn by Maverick's dad, as well as the memorabilia being worn by the other aviators and quite a bit of the historical items seen in the background of many of the scenes.

And AV8RSTUFF's contributions to the production went beyond the mere provision of memorabilia.

"The crew from Paramount Studios really didn't know what they were asking for," Whitey said, "so they asked AV8RSTUFF to consult for them unofficially to ensure authentic items would be sent to them to cover what they needed for accuracy.

"Maverick is not an Air Force pilot, he's a Navy Captain in this movie, so we tailored all the backdrop stuff to be representative of what he would have gone through in his career. We provided a large majority of the background stuff used in the movie, as well as many of the items worn by the characters."

Added Whitey, "Initially, they were asking for a hodge-podge of items to include U.S. Air Force items and Navy SEAL patches. After we figured out what it was for, we gave them the option of using AV8RSTUFF as one of their consultants, advising that, 'If you are wanting authenticity, this is what you need to wear and display.'"

All told, AV8RSTUFF supplied approximately 5,000-plus pieces of memorabilia for the film, and though the company won't appear in the credits, it has received recognition from the studio as an official supplier for "TOP GUN: MAVERICK."

Needless to say, Whitey is extremely excited to watch the sequel to the movie he's seen probably 150 times now, and not simply because his company had a hand in its making. When "TOP GUN" premiered in May of 1986, it was an instant naval and aviation cultural phenomenon.

The high-octane action drama went on to gross \$837 million adjusted for inflation, inspiring along the way a patriotic fervor among the citizenry that aided military recruitment efforts across the country.

One of the areas that got some of the biggest response was Naval Aviation, thanks to Maverick, Goose, Iceman and Hollywood's "need for speed" as fighter pilots flying combat missions over the Pacific waters for the U.S. Navy.

Whitey was one of those young men who saw the film and knew he wanted to fly in the Navy. He was in college when the movie hit theaters, and though he didn't join the Navy until 1991, seeing "TOP GUN" definitely altered his career path.

At the time, Whitey was studying to become an aerospace engineer for a hopeful career as an astronaut. Because of "TOP GUN," he decided to serve his country by choosing Naval Aviation over other branches, such as Army Aviation – his two brothers were Army pilots.

Following college graduation, Whitey put his engineering degree to immediate use by working on the Navy's proposed A-12 Avenger II stealth bomber before the project was scrapped in '91.

Not wanting to stay in a cubicle for decades as an

engineer, he decided it was time to act on his dream of becoming an aviator by signing up for U.S. Naval Flight Officer training, where he graduated No. 1 in his class.

Being the "HONORMAN" guaranteed Whitey the opportunity to train in the jet of his choosing. So, he picked the venerable A-6E Intruder in hopes that the aging aircraft would be replaced with a follow-on attack plane like the Avenger, the aircraft he had spent several years wind-tunnel testing before it was cancelled.

Whitey continued his career as a navigator in the A-6E Intruder, a twin-jet carrier-based medium-attack two-seat bomber aircraft capable of deploying rockets, missiles and bombs.

"Flying from an aircraft carrier during the daytime is like the E-Ticket ride at Disney – it's unbelievable," Whitey said. "You go from zero to 150 mph in 1.7 seconds, and you hope you're doing 150 mph when you get to the end of the ship, or else you're going to get wet!

"You launch, conduct your mission, recover and land. During daytime operations, in clear weather, no radio transmissions are made at the 'boat.' It's all done visually.

"All the returning aircraft are holding overhead the carrier at different altitudes, and as soon as they launch the next wave of 'birds' for the next cycle and get all the aircraft ground equipment gear out of the way, anywhere from 20 to 25 airplanes just start winding down like a corkscrew. You come in for the 'break,' drop the gear and land. Not a word is spoken on the radio."

Once all the aviators are proficient at carrier operations, landings usually occur one after another about every 45 to 50 seconds under extremely high-stress conditions that are hard for most people to fathom, Whitey said.

Not only is the ship bobbing up and down in the waves, but the runway is canted 11 degrees to port and the carrier is moving 20-25 mph through the water, meaning "you have to anticipate where it's going to be so you can land there."

"It's some of the most fun stuff you could ever do," Whitey said. "I was fortunate to have 239 landings on different boats, 195 of which were on the USS Enterprise, the carrier used in the original 'TOP GUN' movie.

"Seventy-five of those landings were at night. Nighttime operations around the boat are extremely challenging and usually scare the living daylights out of you."

After the Intruders were retired in 1997, Whitey was chosen to participate in the Air Force "exchange program," where he flew combat missions in the F-15E Strike Eagle in northern Iraq. The F-15E could perform long-range strikes, ground attacks and air-to-air combat.

Chosen for this program for his air-to-ground background, he excelled in that arena, but the most challenging aspects were the "air-to-air" roles, which he described as incredibly exciting, especially basic fighter maneuvers commonly known as "dogfighting."

In 2000, after his exchange tour was complete, Whitey transferred to the Georgia Air National Guard at Robins Air Force Base and began flying the B-1B Lancer, the USAF's premiere long-range bomber, able to carry 84 x 500-pound bombs internally.

When the B-1's were replaced with the E-8C Joint STARS surveillance aircraft, Whitey transitioned to the "Battle Management" role, commanding forces in theater during flight operations. He remained with the Air National Guard until retiring in 2012, deploying for eight Middle East tours and accumulating over 5,000 flight hours.

Whitey flew in over two dozen aircraft in military training and operations, and he was able to fly for all 20-plus years of his career, becoming the only person in history to have been combat-rated in all three of those attack/fighter planes:

the A-6E, F-15E and B-1B bomber, the latter two being supersonic.

To this day, Whitey is thankful for having received the opportunity to serve his country in a role many could only dream of.

"You don't do this job for glory or the pay – you're not getting rich doing it," Whitey said. "You do it out of the love of your country, the love of your family and community, and for the guy that's right next to you. You'd die for that guy."

"I would take a bullet to save that guy; I would have done whatever it took to save the guy I was flying with. It's a bond known only by a few, such as firefighters, police officers and other first responders who have that same kinship with each other."

Alongside AV8RSTUFF.com – founded in 1998 and owned by Whitey's wife Mechelle – the retired military flyer works for a company called Sigma Defense out of Warner Robins that contracts with the U.S. Department of Defense.

The Whites have been married for 22 years and have two children, Brittany and Hunter. Brittany graduated medical school in May, and Hunter, 16, earned his Eagle Scout rank in November. Both accomplishments bring a huge smile to Whitey's face when mentioned.

As to how the Whites came to reside in the North Georgia Mountains, before Whitey retired from the military, the family would travel in their RV to vacation in the area. They loved it so much that they bought a home in Blairsville in 2008, moving here full time in 2011 and opening a warehouse to operate their business out of Union County.

Having been successful in his military endeavors, he now focuses on his religion, his family, his civic organizations/community, and his friends.

Whitey is very involved locally, serving as an assistant Scoutmaster for BSA Troop 101 under Chris Payne; as past Worshipful Master of Allegheny Masonic Lodge No. 114 and current Grand Tyler of Georgia for Grand Master Johnnie M. Garmon; and as an active member of various veterans' service organizations.

"While I wish I was still going Mach 1 with my hair on fire, Father Time and too many G-forces have taken their toll on this old body, so I had to retire and fly a desk now," Whitey said.

But to this day, anytime someone mentions military aviation to him, they catch that twinkle in his eye and see that fire in his heart come roaring back as if he'd never left the cockpit.

That's why, coupled with his unique military career and the influence of the original "TOP GUN" movie on his path, working on the sequel has meant so much to him, and it was a particularly special moment when he received a commemorative "TOP GUN: MAVERICK" coin as a thank you from Tom Cruise for his contributions to the movie.

AV8RSTUFF's work on "TOP GUN: MAVERICK" has opened the doors for more set-consulting opportunities, including for the new "Magnum P.I." TV show and other projects through NBC, Netflix, Gerber Knives and others.

"Everyone talks about how Hollywood is so anti-military and anti-conservative, but the ones that I've interacted with love the military," Whitey said. "They are as patriotic as those you would find in the historically conservative regions anywhere."

Looking back over his extensive military career and the totality of his life experiences, Whitey has some advice for all who would hear, no matter where they hail from around the nation.

"Get involved in something, whatever that might be, and give it your utmost," Whitey said. "Do your best, be the standard, and always be willing to lend a hand. It will make our country great again!"

Vogel...from Page 1A



The Vogel Tree Lighting and Christmas Program featured a robust turnout this year, especially given that it was largely interrupted the last two years due to weather. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

year. "The last two years we haven't been able to have it out here (due to weather)," Hill said. "We were glad – we thought we'd have to build the crowd back up, and really, it's a lot of people. This is a good crowd. I'm happy."

"I just appreciate the volunteers doing this. Most of them have been doing this for 17 years. We have some new ones this year. They're just so dedicated."

Hill said there were 12 area churches involved in the tree lighting, some outside of Union County.

"There's a lot going on," Park Manager Jack Becker said. "It's nice to have everybody out here again. Honestly, though, the churches are doing an amazing job putting this together for us."

"They do a fantastic job. They pretty much take the lead on all this. We just help set up. They get all the music, they

have about 80 volunteers out here right now."

For his part, country music class-act Justin Terry agreed with Becker, saying that the Vogel Tree Lighting was a terrific event.

"I've been doing it for years," he said. "It's one of my favorite events, and I always look forward to it. Janet's fantastic. It's always a feel-good ceremony, and I especially love that they include Jesus."