

The American Fighter Aces Association
Oral Interviews
The Museum of Flight
Seattle, Washington

**Oscar I. Chenoweth, Adrian O. Van Wyen, and
Hamilton McWhorter**

Interviewed by: Eugene A. Valencia

Interview Date: circa 1960s

Abstract:

This recording contains one-on-one interviews with fighter aces Oscar I. Chenoweth and Hamilton McWhorter and with historian Adrian O. Van Wyen. Chenoweth and McWhorter discuss their military service with the United States Navy during World War II, including their time with Fighting Squadron 17 (VF-17) and Fighting Squadron 9 (VF-9), respectively. Topics discussed include memorable combat missions, aerial victories, and current developments in aerial combat. Van Wyen shares some background about the early years of Naval aviation in the United States and discusses the career of World War I fighter ace David S. Ingalls, considered to be the Navy's first ace.

The interviews are conducted by fellow fighter ace Eugene A. Valencia during a Naval Aviators' reunion at Pensacola, Florida, celebrating the 50th anniversary of Naval aviation.

Biography:

Oscar I. Chenoweth was born July 17, 1917 in Salem, Oregon. He joined the United States Navy in 1939 and graduated from flight training in 1941. After his initial assignment as a flight instructor, he went on to serve with a number of squadrons, including Composite Squadron 21 (VC-21) in the Aleutian Islands, Fighting Squadron 38 (VF-38) in the Solomon Islands, and Fighting Squadron 17 (VF-17) in the South Pacific. Chenoweth remained in the military after the war and retired as a commander in 1954. In his civilian life, he worked for Chance Vought and as a manufacturing representative for a food service company. He passed away in 1968.

Hamilton McWhorter was born on February 8, 1921 in Athens, Georgia. He joined the United States Navy in 1941 and graduated from flight training the following year. McWhorter served with Fighting Squadron (VF-9) aboard the USS *Ranger* during the North Africa invasion and then aboard the USS *Essex* in the Pacific Theater. In 1944, he joined Fighting Squadron 12 (VF-12) aboard the USS *Randolph* and participated in the initial strikes against Tokyo and in the Iwo Jima and Okinawa landings. McWhorter remained in the military after the war, serving aboard several carriers and commanding VF-12. He retired in 1969 as a commander and passed away in 2008.

Adrian O. Van Wyen was an aviation historian who worked for the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations. He wrote a number of books about the history of Naval aviation in the United States.

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Oscar I. Chenoweth, Adrian O. Van Wyen, and Hamilton McWhorter

[START OF INTERVIEW]

00:00:00

[Oscar I. Chenoweth]

[Remembering Tommy Blackburn]

EUGENE A. VALENCIA: ...Don't pay any attention to mine. It'll be replaced by someone else. Well, ladies and gentleman, during the 50th anniversary, we—again, bringing you one of our great Naval aces and, as I recently found out, that he instructed, Opa-locka, Miami, during the time that I was going through as a student. In combat under Tommy Blackburn, one of our very good friends and one of the most well-known fighter skippers in the Pacific, Fighting 17. And we have Mr. Oscar Chenoweth of the Chance Vought Corporation in Dallas, Texas. Ocs, can you bring up anything that we were just talking about in regards to Rabaul, the old days in Opa-locka, and this sort of thing?

OSCAR I. CHENOWETH: Well, very oddly, the group in Opa-locka, the instructors, when I went through as a student, normally all ended up as skippers in squadrons. They spread out from their shore duty in Opa-locka. And there were a number of the squadrons that were skippered by people from Opa-locka, Tom Blackburn probably being the most outstanding of the bunch. The squadron that I was in was called Blackburn's Irregulars, the reason being that it was made up of a group of people who were, I guess you might say, misfits in other squadrons. They either didn't get along with their skippers or they did something wrong or—for the record. But Tom would always go rescue them from the arms of the powers-to-be and say, "Oh, I can handle him."

00:01:43

EAV: He is one man that could certainly do it.

OIC: I think this is the probably the reason. Because they had a bunch of spirited boys, it ended up being a real spirited squadron. And Tom himself was probably the most spirited of the group. I remember Tom was flying down in the Solomons when he kicked off as high as 150 hours a month. You just—you couldn't keep him on the ground.

EAV: He's one of the greatest. There's no doubt about that.

OIC: Well, I think he's probably—very honestly—and I'm passing a few bouquets, but I think of all the people I've known in Naval aviation I'd want to go to war with, I'd just as soon go with Tom. Because when they shot the first gun, Tom was ready to fight from then on.

00:02:25

EAV: I can think of no greater compliment to pay any skipper.

OIC: And Tom has had a very star-studded career all through the years. And I fortunately had Tom as an instructor when I went through Opa-locka as a student. And I stayed there and instructed with him and later was fortunate enough to get in his squadron. How I got there has nothing do with being an irregular, I'm sure.

[*"Ruthless" aircraft designation*]

EAV: I understand your aircraft was called "Ruthless." Can you explain that please, Ocs?

OIC: Well, my first airplane in the South Pacific was an F6F. And I—it was called "Ruthless." And it later was creamed on a few coconut trees. And so later, after getting in VF-17, I tabbed Ruthless the Second on this. And of course, my wife being named Ruth, this meant nothing more than I was wifeless. We had all kinds of fancy monikers on there. One of the boys had "LA City Limits" painted on the tail. And Ruthless was not the—meant to be in the term of being a ruthless fighter, but just happened to be that I was without a wife at the time.

00:03:32

[*Aerial victories and combat missions*]

EAV: Well, I think that's very good and very appreciated. Ocs, can we go into some of the eight planes that you got? Do you have any incidents that were particularly significant in you becoming an ace?

OIC: Well, if you were able to navigate and get home in those days and—which most of us were able to do. We'd find our way back down the Slot to one of the landing fields that we had already taken. The rest of it was just a matter of getting up there and tangling with the Zeros and then coming home. Probably the most significant one in my short career up there was the day that I was able to pick up three credited airplanes. The first two, I shot down. The last one, we got down and started chasing around the water. And he turned a little sharp and dipped his wing in the water and blew up. I was trying to pull through and get a lead on him all the time. And the result was that he just blew up, and I got credit for it.

EAV: Well, ammunition was a bit scarce. You certainly did your job.

OIC: [laughs] Well, I wasn't really attempting to save ammunition. I was—

EAV: How about the other five, Ocs?

OIC: Well, they were all caught on routine missions. I don't think there's anything spectacular about them. And I say "routine." We were sent out as cover for bombers, either for the then-

known Army Air Corps or for own TBF and SBDs, and we'd go in on the strikes with them. And we maintained our cover position fairly well, and when these guys tried to filter through, why, we could—if we could, we'd pull into them.

00:05:04

OIC: Occasionally, after we got them started home and we did have enough fuel left, why, we'd stick around. Because at this time, the Japs having come off the fields, were starting to run low on fuel. The Zeros had less fuel than we had. So we'd try to stick around and try and catch them as they were heading back home themselves. And of course, they didn't have too much fuel to expend staying up there fighting. This was one of the advantages that we had.

[Aerial tactics and thoughts on aircraft]

EAV: Ocs, didn't Tommy's outfit devise some form of tactics based on the Thach—first it was the Thach Weave. I knew I had a “mowing machine” weave that my division used. And I think Tommy—didn't Tommy modify Admiral Thach's weave to some extent?

OIC: I think—yes, this is true. There was a change or a—we made our own modification, which really I think was more based on the fact that the Corsair was a bigger and heavier and faster airplane, and the Thach Weave was developed over the old F4Fs, Wildcats.

EAV: [overlapping] Ocs—pardon me, sir.

OIC: Yeah.

EAV: How did you like the F4U after flying the F6? Was there any appreciable difference or one advantage over the other? Or is it difficult to say?

OIC: Frankly, I liked the Corsair much better. But—

EAV: It was faster, wasn't it?

00:06:17

OIC: Well, yes. It was a better airplane. It was a more stable airplane. If you happened to go on instruments or you were caught after dark or something like that, it was a better airplane to fly. The F6 was an awfully good airplane. Of course, I may be prejudiced, being with Chance Vought now, who built the Corsair.

EAV: Couldn't expect to say anything else, Ocs. Incidentally, what about the Japs? Were they mostly Zeros? Or any Georges or Tonys that were in evidence?

OIC: Well, we had mostly Zeros the time we were up there. And their bombers were Vals. I never was fortunate enough to catch any of those guys. But the Tonys were coming into being during the last days of our stay up there—the squadron’s stay up there. I think probably the most significant thing, so far as the squadron went, was that Tom Blackburn decided, well—on many occasion, we would go up with these bombers. And if there’s a little weather or something, they wouldn’t go through, or if they did, they’d get all spread out.

And as a result—Tom had trained us fairly well. So we stuck wing-on-wing and whoever was the leader of the group going up would fly instruments. The rest of them would tuck right under his wing, and we’d go right on through the weather. And on one—more than one occasion, we’d get up there and have no bombers to protect. And we—we’d have to end up going on a strafing mission or try to catch something in the air.

Well, Tom came along and said, “Well, look. From now on”—he was talking about tactics. “Let’s throw some 500-pound bombs on these Corsairs. And so if the bombers themselves don’t make it, we’ll run the bombing mission and do our own fighting.”

00:07:46

EAV: That’s great.

OIC: And we did. We had two or three sweeps up the other side of—I want to say New Guinea. It’s New Britain up in Rabaul, being on New Britain. We would tuck over the hills and go on up and try to catch some shipping. Use our bombs and we’d expend them over Simpson Harbor and then go on and fight. If the bombers had gotten through and we had these extra bombs, we’d just jettison the doggone things and let them go. But this way, we could make a successful mission out of every flight.

[Developments in aerial combat]

EAV: Ocs, do you think the new fighter pilot will have as much—well, let’s call it fun, as we had in the old days with the slower aircraft? Now he has a missile that he fires at an adversary that he might not even see. Do you think the romance of the fighter pilot is gone?

OIC: Oh, I think the romance is gone, definitely. I stayed in flying till ’54. Worked out a production flight test and got a few—oh, I got about 500 hours in these jets. And it’s not the same flying that we used to do. Dogfighting’s out the window. People try to do it. Some of these kids will kill themselves spinning in. They get out here—these neophytes get out and try to dogfight in a Crusader or an F4H or something like that. And that’s all she wrote.

EAV: Well, we notice that even with our old F4Ds, San Diego with the Air Defense Squadron, the personalized combat is gone. You lock on, initiate your missile, and there it is. It's a—there's just not much more romance or glamour left to it.

00:09:18

OIC: Well, the old days, it was a team effort. By "team effort," I mean the pilots flying together. You always had a wingman. You had a section leader. You—at least four planes flew together in a division. Today there's a team effort, but then this is a ground controller or a shipboard controller that's sending one plane loaded with missiles out. And they—very seldom do they actually make attacks in formation. I had a very good wingman during the days of VF-17. His name was Jim Dixon. I haven't seen him for years. But each gun having six cannon in it, or 50-caliber in those days—I'm not sure of that. I guess they were 50s, yeah. And every time I'd close on some guy and start pressing my trigger, why, it was automatic. I had 12 guns going because he was right under my wing. And all I had to do was take aim and he'd be flying on me and we'd be—we'd have 12 going instead of my six. Because he'd—soon as I'd open fire, he'd open fire. And he always held a very good wing position regardless of what I did, with my sloppy flying and so on.

[Fighting 17 (VF-17) combat record]

EAV: [laughs] I know better than that. Say, Ocs, before we get back to the group—you being one of the top Navy aces, with 10 aircraft—I understand the—Tommy's squadron actually compiled an amazing total of 154-and-some-odd aircraft in five weeks. That must have been a violent session.

00:10:33

OIC: Well, Gene, I'd like to take that with a little tongue in cheek. I think we always remember the better side of all these things. But I think that's fairly close. I know that in a five-week period, we flew most—24 hours. And to the best of my knowledge, we lost in the neighborhood—if this figure is correct—we lost in the neighborhood ourselves of somewhere around 12 to 15 pilots ourselves. But—as against 154.

EAV: Ocs, were they lost actually—pilots and aircraft lost? Did you ever recover any of the 12?

OIC: No, I believe those I'm quoting are losses. I'd have to dig through the record books, Gene, actually. As I say, you remember all the good sides of these things. You always remember your best golf score and never think about the bad shot.

[Discussion of upcoming trip to Japan]

EAV: Something that I'd like to suggest, I talked to Saito [likely Fred Saito, co-author of Japanese ace Sakai Saburō's biography] the other day. He's the top Japanese ace with 80. And he well remembers the Japanese—or the Corsairs and Hellcats. We're going over to Japan as guests of the Emperor's in October. And I'd sure like to reach down and have some of the gull-wing boys go over with us. I'm sure we could exchange some very interesting tales. And his respect for your group would certainly be instrumental in the historical factors.

Ocs, I do, for the many students that you have trained as fighter pilots out of Opa-locka, want to thank you for the time. And again, we'll get back to you. And we hope we can round up a group of the VF-17 boys for a real ready room session. And till that—pardon me, Ocs.

00:12:11

OIC: Well, I just wanted to add one thing, Gene. I wanted to ask a question. Is this Saito the man that wrote the book, *Samurai*?

EAV: Saburō is the one I'm thinking of. Saito wrote it with Martin Caidin, right.

OIC: Oh, well, that *Samurai* is a fantastic book, undoubtedly a complete documentary of his work. I read it a couple of years ago, and I was real interested in it.

EAV: Well, Martin Caidin's going to make the trip with us. And he's setting up all the ground rules. I noticed last night, we were walking down the street, he has a new book out, *Golden Wings*. I just talked to him the other day, and he didn't mention this. I was quite interested. And he is a very fine documentarian and certainly interested in our Japanese go. I hope we can shake you loose from Vought to go with us.

OIC: Maybe I can find some reason to get over there on business.

EAV: Well, we'll get back to you in a few minutes, Ocs.

OIC: I'd love to.

[recording stops and starts again 00:12:58]

00:12:59

[Adrian O. Van Wyen]

[Introduction to the reunion]

EAV: Ladies and gentleman, we are extremely fortunate to have Mr. A. O. Van Wyen, who is the aviation historian for the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations. A well-known gentleman and also one who is very respected throughout the aviation fraternity. Mr. Van Wyen is here. And I

think he'll give us a little folklore of the 50th anniversary celebration and the subsequent aces reunion. Many of the aces—Joe Foss, Marion Carl, Dave McCampbell—he knows will be here today. And, Van, I'd like to turn this over to you at this time, sir.

ADRIAN O. VAN WYEN: Yes, we're down here to take part in the Naval Aviator's reunion at Pensacola and celebrating the 50th anniversary of Naval aviation. And we're all having a wonderful time. We're meeting people we haven't seen in a number of years. As a matter of fact, I have overhead very many people say, "I haven't seen you since World War I." [laughs]

But they're all enjoying themselves very much and, of course, enjoying the hospitality of the station and the people of the town. I'm also very happy to be able to get together with the aces of the two wars and Korea and to meet some of the men I've known.

[History of Naval aviation and background on Navy ace David S. Ingalls]

EAV: Well, Van, you know, it was inspiring when you mentioned such people as, well, Admiral Ingalls [David S. Ingalls], who, as I understand it, when he started flying, not in—before World War I—actually, the Naval Air arm consisted of nothing more than college or university flying clubs. And it progressed to a point, as I understand it, that they were finally admitted through the Appropriation Act—or I should say, acknowledged—of 1916 when Mr. Franklin D. Roosevelt, then Under Secretary of the Navy, made this recognition possible. Is this true, Van? Do you have anything on that?

00:15:14

AOVW: That's right. You're referring to the Yale unit, I believe.

EAV: Yale and Princeton units, yes.

AOVW: Yes, we had a number of college clubs, I think they called them. As a matter of fact, the first Yale unit was organized as the Aerial Coastal Patrol, which was an organization sponsored by Admiral Perry. And—excuse me, not Admiral Perry. It was Admiral Dewey. And—

EAV: Well, this is interesting.

AOVW: And they bought their own airplanes, paid for their own instruction, and were accomplished pilots by the time they came into the Navy. As a matter of fact, as civilians, they participated in one of the minor fleet exercises off Sandy Hook.

EAV: Well, Van, I didn't realize that. Also, I understand Mr. Ingalls, or Admiral Ingalls, when the clubs were acknowledged, was only 16 years of age and acknowledged to be one of the finest

of the group, pilot-wise. But—and he had to wait for another two years before he could receive his commission in the Navy. Do you recall this, Van?

AOVW: Well, I think he was older than 16 because he was attending Yale University at the time. But as I remember it, he was not old enough to accept the commission. And after he had qualified as a pilot, he had to wait a short time to get his commission. All of those men, you see, began their training at Huntington, Long Island and then went down to West Palm Beach, where they continued their training. And by that time, the Navy sent one of their pilots down to act as chief instructor, Lieutenant Edward O. McDonnell, who later I believe reached the rank of Vice Admiral.

00:17:07

AOVW: And he was naval aviator number 18. While there, they all enlisted in the Naval Reserve Flying Corps. I believe they were seaman and were subsequently commissioned and sent—many of them were sent overseas. And Ingalls was in that group. And while flying with the RAF—as a matter of fact, all of our pilots took some combat training with the RAF prior to their participation in combat. And it was while flying with that unit that Ingalls got his five victories.

EAV: Yes. I understand that he was actually doing double duty until—was it—let's see. He flew from April, as I recall, April 1916 until July—early July, at which time, evidently, they gave up and just assigned him on temporary duty to the 213th, as I recall.

AOVW: I think that's what it was.

EAV: Excuse my memory. I'm no historian.

AOVW: Well, it's either 215 or 213. I can't recall which. But I think you're right. And he was flying a Nieuport, I believe, at the time.

EAV: Camel.

AOVW: Was it a Camel?

EAV: Yes, sir.

AOVW: At any rate, he was our only ace in World War I. But there were a number of men who are credited with shooting down aircraft.

00:18:46

[Thoughts on the formation of the American Fighter Aces Association]

EAV: Van, I—the people that we will see shortly—Dave McCampbell, Marion Carl, Joe Foss—I'm sure that we will have enough of a documentary to certainly inspire today's youth,

that here we have people that have—are fighting, have fought to—against such tyranny that we are now faced with and still—well, as an example, we have four governors. We have 72 ex-members of Congress. We have 14 senators that have been aces. And I think once we get this group together, that it will produce a very inspiring array of fighter aces. Do you have any comment on this, Van?

AOVW: Well, I think it's a wonderful organization. It—of course, the men in the organization are going to have a lot of fun out of it, keeping their memories alive and perhaps improving on their stories as the years go by.

EAV: Yes, sir.

AOVW: But aside from that, they—there's a very inspirational thing about an organization of this kind because it sets up a group of people that others must recognize and look up to. And I think it's a very wonderful thing to have an organization like this. I don't know how long you're going to keep adding new members.

EAV: Well, that was a point we just mentioned, Van. We talked to Oscar Chenoweth. Of course, the day of the personalized air-to-air dogfight combat is just about gone. And as we mentioned, here we have an aircraft with a weapons system, that one can well destroy an adversary without even seeing him. So, in one way, we feel sorry for today's neophyte or fledgling. And to answer your question, let's hope we do not have to have any more new members. What do you say, Van?

00:20:51

AOVW: I think that's a good idea.

EAV: Well, Van, until we get back—and we're certainly—are looking forward to getting with you in a few hours when we get the group together. I'd like to say goodbye for now.

AOVW: All right. Fine. Thank you.

[recording stops and starts again 00:21:04]

[Hamilton McWhorter]

[Significant combat missions]

EAV: I asked—well, in fact, three of the top German aces, Hartmann [Erich Hartmann] with 352 confirmed kills, Barkhorn [Gerhard Barkhorn] with 301 kills, Krupinski [Walter Krupinski] with 197 kills, who they thought—along with General Galland [Adolf Galland], of course—who the top ace was in Germany. They referred to Marseille [Hans-Joachim Marseille], also to

Lützow [Günther Lützow], too. Marseille had over 100 confirmed victories. Lützow relegated to a task by Göring because of his outspokenness for the fighter when Hitler diminished the value of the fighter to a ground-pounding job.

It was indicative that some of the top people are not necessarily considered or “reverend” as the top ace. Well, it’s my pleasure this time to introduce one of the greatest all-around fighter pilots, in my estimation, in the American Navy, Commander Hamilton McWhorter III. Well, Ham was my roommate during our first cruise in Fighting Squadron 9 and all around one of the finest Naval officers and fighter pilots that I have known. Mac, I’m going to open this by asking what you thought was one of the most significant actions that you were in during your combat in the Pacific.

HAMILTON MCWHORTER III: Thank you, Gene. Will be a little difficult to point out any one. As he indicated, in the combat area there, the—you only had the one chance usually. If you didn’t make the best of your opportunities, you didn’t get a second go-round.

EAV: Mac, I’d like to bring out this one point. I remember—I think it was, oh, on the Marcus go that we were in—it was the first time any of us had seen a Jap aircraft. I believe it was a Betty. We were so defensive-minded that we were all scared of the tail gun or concerned with the tail gun. As I recall, we had about two divisions on either side. And when you went down, you threw caution to the wind. And I think we counted your projectiles when we got back, one or two shells, you knocked this Betty down. And this was the first time we tagged “One Slug, One Shot” McWhorter on you. Do you remember that?

00:23:46

HM: Sure do, Gene. Well, there again, the teamwork aspect worked in. Mike Hadden was leading the division at that time, as you recall. And he chose to distract the tail gunner for us while we made the—a very flat side run. As you recall, the Betty was only about five feet off the water at the time. In fact, he was a little shook, as I recall. He actually bounced off the water once before we got to him.

[Rabaul raid with Fighting 12 (VF-12)]

EAV: Mac, after you left 9—well, I would also like to say this. Commander McWhorter is married to one of the loveliest Navy brides in the Navy, Louise. And throughout our tour in the Pacific, one of the things I remember about my roommate is that never a day went by that he did not write a letter. And he was an inspirational—inspiration to those married types aboard ship. And Louise I’m sure was an inspiration to the wives, for sure. And, Mac, I wanted to bring that out. I’ve—I’ll never forget that. Mac, when you left 9 for the second tour, you went to 12. This is

where you completed your tally to be one of the top aces with 11. Do you recall any particular incidents that you might recall that were exceptionally exciting?

00:25:06

HM: Yes, I think possibly the most exciting was the Rabaul raid back in November of—

EAV: November 11, '43.

HM: Right. As you recall, we escorted the torpedo planes and the dive bombers in for the strike on Rabaul. And after the strike was over, the—most of the ships had gotten out of the harbor—or steaming out of the harbor when we got there. But after the strike was over, the runs has been completed, and on the way back we flew by the entrance to the harbor there. We looked over—Bud Gehoe [William “Bud” Gehoe] was my wingman at the time—and we saw quite a few aircraft milling around right over the harbor.

We didn't know exactly what the ratio of friendly to Japs was at that time, so we decided to enter the fun. So we're charging in. It turned out to be about 15 or 20 F6Fs and at least 30 to 40 Jap Zeros. And I don't know who I saved at the time. I kind of went barreling in, ran right in behind a Jap that was really tearing an F6F up. He was right on the F6F's tail. All I had to do was just squeeze the trigger and—

EAV: As usual.

HW: ...and I saved somebody there. I never did find out who it was. But it was a wild and wooly dogfight. One of the old-timey ones, you might say.

[Developments in aerial combat]

EAV: Well, Mac, that brings up an interesting point here with the staff Training Command. With today's aircraft and weapons system, where a pilot will go out and probably destroy an adversary that he'll never see, do you think the days that we enjoyed—actually, let's call it romance or fun—is gone for the new pilot of today?

HW: Well, I'm afraid so. With the new type of aircraft with a much—with incredibly higher speeds than what we were accustomed to, it's even more important than ever that you take advantage of this one chance you're going to get. Now it is a one-shot affair completely.

00:27:45

EAV: Well, Commander McWhorter, Mac, we want to thank you very much. We hope to get the group of Fighting 9 together when they check in and as they check in. So I—we won't say goodbye but just we'll see you in a very short time. Thanks again, Big Mac.

HW: Thank you, Gene.

00:28:06

[END OF INTERVIEW]