

David Melbourne Wollesen @ Watsonville NAAS, 1943 & 1944

It was the fall of 1943 when “Wally,” David Melbourne Wollesen, Aviation Machinist’s Mate 1st Class Petty Officer (AMM 1/C) arrived at Watsonville Naval Auxiliary Air Station.

Wally started out working in aviation at Lockheed Aircraft in Burbank, California in the latter part of 1939, and worked on Lockheed 414 Hudson bombers and P-38 Lightning fighters. He worked on engines and hydraulic systems and was responsible of the final inspection and approval of P-38 landing gear systems on one of the production lines. One of the problems the P-38 had was that the nose gear doors would often not retract fully. The problem was that the tolerance limits on the mechanical linkage was off a little and some combinations of parts resulted in not only the landing gear doors not closing properly, but there was no way a normal mechanic could fix it either! Wally found that if you took apart one of the hydraulic cylinders and milled a little bit of material off of a “stop block,” then everything worked fine. It was bureaucratically “illegal” but it properly fixed the problem. Because his production line put out almost twice as many P-38s in a week as an adjacent line, Wally was promoted into a position in the experimental department at Lockheed, what was or would later become the “Skunk Works.”

On October 23, 1942, even though he was classified as “4F” and thus exempt from the draft as well as being employed with a “Defense job” at Lockheed that was critical for the war effort, Wally joined the Navy. He joined up as an Aviation Machinists Mate (AMM) 2nd Class Petty Officer because of his experience at Lockheed and his CAA (Civil Aeronautics Administration) A&E ticket, (Airframe and Engine) with Instructor’s license. After initial indoctrination and assignment at San Pedro, California, he was assigned to CASU 11 (Carrier Aircraft Surface Unit) and shipped out to Henderson Field, Guadalcanal. The first airfield used Marston Matting (pierces steel sheets interlocked together). The Marston Matting made a huge racket when an airplane touched down and landed, with a visible wave rippling through the matting as the airplane rolled out. Occasionally an SBD equipped with the little solid rubber tailwheel (used for aircraft carrier operations) would land, and the tail wheel would sometimes catch on the Marston Matting and rip a bunch of it up as well as damage the airplane. A larger pneumatic tail wheel on the SBDs was much preferred for land bases, as it didn’t catch on the matting.

The Navy occupied one side of Henderson Field and the Army Air Corps the other side. There were some P-38s there that had frequent landing gear door problems. Wally’s Commanding Officer sent him over to the other side of the field to help, and he instructed the Army Air Corps mechanics how to permanently fix the landing gear door problem. So, in return for this favor, the Army guys agreed to take some Navy beer along with the Army beer on board a B-17 that was “being checked out for high altitude operation.” Go up to 20,000 feet or so in the tropics, fly around for awhile and the beer gets cold. There was no ice or refrigerators at Henderson Field, so this is the way the GIs got cold beer. To achieve operational efficiency, they also verified that the B-17 was fit to fly again.

In addition to aircraft maintenance at Henderson Field, Wally also crewed as Gunner on SBD Dauntless dive-bombers. The longest mission he remembers was one from Henderson Field to the big Japanese airbase at Rabaul, they came back with not much more than fumes in the fuel tanks. There was a control stick that could be used from the back seat. The pilot taught Wally how to land the SBD so that if he ever became disabled, Wally could fly the airplane home and land it. Although letting the gunner land the SBD was not an "approved" operation, that's what they did and it was to the benefit of the Pilot, the Gunner and the airplane too. Wally's Pilot let him land on every other mission.



David M. Wollesen, SBD Dauntless Gunner

Unfortunately, Wally contracted Malaria, and spent some time at MOB3 Hospital, Guadalcanal and then he was shipped back to the Port of San Francisco on the Dutch freighter, Brastagi. And then he was at Oakland Naval Hospital from July 1943 until September 1943.

In September 1943, after being released from Oakland Naval Hospital, Wally was assigned to Naval Auxiliary Air Station Monterey as an experienced instructor for dive bombing training. Navy pilots trained in SBD Dauntlesses and TBM Avengers flying out of Monterey.

As soon as NAAS Watsonville construction was completed and commissioned in October 1943, Wally was transferred there. When he first arrived at Watsonville, the concrete was still "green" and airport operations had not yet begun. The tie-down rings on the parking ramp had still not been installed. The purpose of NAAS Watsonville was twofold, for training dive-bomber pilots and for coastal defense. He arrived on October 26, 1943 with 6 officers and 189 men of CASU 19 under the leadership of Lt. Louis Bilker; being transferred from NAAS Monterey. Shortly after this time, VB-18 with 36 SBD Dauntless dive bombers arrived for temporary duty. Several weeks later, VF-28 with 24 F6F Hellcats arrived for temporary duty.



David M. Wollesen in Downtown Watsonville, c.a. 1943

Later the airplanes stationed at Watsonville were SNJ Texan advanced trainers, SBD Dauntless dive bombers, TBM Avenger torpedo bombers, and F6F-3 Hellcat fighters. Wally was plane captain of about a half dozen of the Hellcats, and would go out each morning to “fire up” each of his Hellcats to check them out and warm them up before flight. The SBDs had hand cranked “inertia” starters to get them started. These early Hellcats had the “shotgun” starters; there was a small access door on the lower right side just behind the cowling for the two cartridges. As a pilot, you really wanted to get the engine started on the first cartridge, so you’d have the second “just in case.”



F6F-3 Hellcats on the Ramp at Watsonville Naval Auxiliary Air Station, 1943

During Christmas Vacation in 1943, Wally's son, Don, came up from Los Angeles on the Southern Pacific train to Watsonville. Don spent a week at the airbase with his dad. The parachute riggers made a small version of the Navy working uniform; bell-bottoms, chambray shirt and sailor hat for the young man. Son Donnie was about 6 years old at the time, and slept in the barracks with the enlisted men. Little Donnie would sit on daddy Wally's lap to fire up the Hellcats in the morning. Don remembers the ground crew calling the Hellcats "easys," probably from the "E" designation painted on the side of the airplanes (E64 in the picture below), like "Easy 64." The other thing Don remembers is that the Watsonville Hellcats had the front cowl rings painted in solid colors in contrast with the dark blue of the rest of the airplanes; the cowl ring colors he remembers were red, yellow and lime green. He remembers the F6F Hellcat fighters, SNJ Texan advanced trainers, SBD Dauntless Dive Bombers, and one big SB2C Helldiver Dive Bomber. There were also TBM Avenger Torpedo bombers at Watsonville.



Don Wollesen, Age 6, In F6F Hellcat, NAAS Watsonville, Winter 1943

One interesting sidelight was the "boat whistle" for the Watsonville control tower. The new Commanding Officer, Commander John Lewis, wanted a good, loud whistle installed in the airport control tower to be used for emergency situations. So the skipper and Wally drove up to Terminal Island in San Francisco bay where there was a salvage yard with lots of miscellaneous stuff. They got a large, steam powered whistle that was intended for a large ship. Of course there was no good source of steam at Watsonville, so Wally conjured up a system that had used a brass canister (originally intended for shipboard use) that had a capacity of about 10 gallons and kind of heavy, and that in turn was filled from four tanks of compressed nitrogen. Wally installed this system with a poppet valve between the tank and the whistle. A small line was routed from the nitrogen bottles on the ground floor up to the top of the control tower where the canister, valve and boat whistle was. The whistle was mounted at the top of the Watsonville control tower so when it went off, everybody on

base (as well as some of the folks in town) could hear the thing. The Commanding Officer's office was on the ground floor, so a rope was rigged from the whistle valve at the top, and then down into the C.O.'s office so he could pull on the rope in case of emergencies at the base. This would alert the emergency crew for situations, like an airplane landing wheels up on the runway. You'd only get about 3 good toots out of the whistle before the nitrogen supply was depleted, but that's all that was needed.

A lot of activity at Watsonville in 1943 and 1944 was dive-bomber training. There was a large pneumatic tire placed off shore floating in the bay. The tire was painted white and served as a target for dive bombing practice. The SBD Dauntless pilots would carry small cast iron smoke bombs that would provide marker evidence when they hit the water near the target. Sometimes Wally would ride in the Gunner's seat during this training. There was one incident where the Pilot peeled off for the dive run-in and during the break-over, he hit his face on the instrument panel and was knocked out. About half way down the bombing run, Wally realized something wasn't right when he saw a bit of blood streaming back on the inside of the canopy. So he took control of the SBD from the back seat, pulled the Dauntless out at very low altitude and flew back to the base to land. The Pilot was still unconscious as Wally parked the airplane. It was a good thing that Wally had made landings on every other mission while at Guadalcanal.



David M. Wollesen Changing a Tire on a TBM Avenger at Watsonville NAAS c.a. 1944. F6F-3 Hellcats are in the Background

Another assignment Wally had was scoring practice bombing "hits" out at the big white tire bombing target floating in the bay. Wally would sit in the back seat of an

SNJ with a score pad, and when the SBD Dauntless Pilots would drop a practice smoke bomb, Wally would note the airplane number and note where the smoke bomb hit relative to the target. The SNJ would circle the target at a thousand feet or so altitude, and the SBDs would dive from 10,000 feet or so and release the bomb at several thousand feet and then pull out and away from the target. Along with the bomb score paperwork, were a set of "flight skins" which resulted in an increase of 50% of your base pay. It took 4 hours of flight time each 30 days in order to actually get the pay premium. Wally gave son Donnie one of the cast iron smoke bombs (without the smoke cartridge!) as a souvenir to take home with him back to Los Angeles.



A TBM Avenger out for Training from NAAS Watsonville, c.a. 1943

Later in 1944, Wally's C.O. from Henderson Field Guadalcanal got orders to form up another unit, CASU-19, and head out for a South Pacific assignment. Since Wally had contacted Malaria, he was officially not supposed to return to the tropics. But Wally got orders anyway to return to the South Pacific because his old C.O. needed to have a few experienced men in that combat theatre. Wally returned from WWII in the South Pacific in late 1945 after the Japanese surrender and was discharged October 16, 1945.



David M. Wollesen, Pilot for U.S. Steel Corp.

After WWII, Wally went on to work as an Aviation Mechanic for Slick Airways and the Flying Tiger Airline, both air freight services; he worked out of Burbank California and spent one year at Point Barrow, AK. He worked to get his Commercial Pilot's license and then an Airline Transport license. Wally flew co-pilot and pilot on Douglas DC-3s, DC-4s, and Curtiss C-46 Commandos. He got a job working as a co-Pilot and then Pilot for U.S. Steel out of White Plains NY and Birmingham, Alabama; he flew Lockheed Lodestars, and Learstars, four turbo-prop DeHavilland's, and finally Grumman Gulfstreams for U.S. Steel. Wally retired from flying for U.S. Steel about 30 years ago. He passed on 15 November 2008 at the age 92 years in Temple City, CA.

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