

JOHN MICHAEL ETCHEMENDY, JR.

THE WAR YEARS

Raymond J. Uhalde



Cover Photo: Colonel John Michael Etchemendy, Jr., September 18, 1962.

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By

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1

A Brief Beginning

Every story must start somewhere and I choose this beginning. My uncle, Otto John (pronounced 'Ocho' in Basque), was born January 27, 1917 in the French Hotel on main street in Gardnerville, Nevada, a small town situated in the heart of the beautiful Carson Valley. His parents, and my grandparents, John Etchemendy, Sr. and Jeanne Trounday, had been married exactly one year and two days upon the birth of their first child. They were 30 and 33 years old, respectively, and had been living and working on a ranch in Wellington before recently moving to Gardnerville. Seven months



Figure 1: Pete Borda, French Hotel token, good for 25 cents in trade

after John's birth, Anita Louise Borda, my Tanta (aunt) and John's future bride, was born in the same hotel and in the same room. Her parents, Peter Borda and Marie Ernaut, were the hotel's proprietors.

The French Hotel was built in 1899 as the Club Bar and Hotel. Around 1912, Pete Borda purchased the property and renamed it the French Hotel. Soon after, he added a fronton or handball court with high walls and bleachers like those in his native Bidarray, France.ⁱ Pete died in 1919

at the young age of 33 and his wife continued to operate the hotel until selling it to her brother-in-law, John Baptist Borda, in 1929.

Shortly after Otto John's birth, Aitachi and Amatchi moved next door to the East Fork Hotelⁱⁱ, buying into a partnership with Martin Antchagno to operate the hotel. He said they left ranch work and bought the East Fork because "My wife she like hotel business."



Figure 2: East Fork Hotel, 2013

The East Fork Hotel

The East Fork was built in 1893 by George and Charlie Brown, two brothers who came to Genoa with a travelling circus. The Brown Brothers also owned a brickyard that supplied bricks for many Carson Valley buildings. At the turn of the century, the hotel was advertised as having "Excellent accommodations and an excellent livery stable connected." One of four eventual Basque hotels in town, including the Overland, French, and Pyrenees, the East Fork Hotel provided boarding rooms and meals for Basque shepherds. The two-story, 3500 square foot building was purchased in 1921 by Raymond and Gorgonia Borda, and also served as their family home. Raymond, who died in 1950, was Anita's uncle (and my great uncle on my paternal grandmother's side). Gorgonia operated the hotel until her death in 1980. The hotel was demolished in 2014.

After his partner's death in 1918, Aitachi bought out his widow's share. (Also that year he bought 1500 head of sheep.) That year, Amatchi gave birth to twin boys Leon and "Baby Louie"ⁱⁱⁱ, but sadly, Louie died at birth. William was born in 1921, the year that Aitachi tried unsuccessfully to buy the entire East Fork property and land from its original owner Charlie Brown. Brown instead sold to Raymond and Gorgonia Borda.

As Aitachi told my mother in a tape-recorded interview,^{iv} he and Amatchi had one night to move out when he heard that the owners of the Overland Hotel down the street were in a dispute and one partner wanted to sell his share. The next day, Aitachi bought the disgruntled partner's share in the Overland Hotel and moved his growing family into their new home and enterprise. His partnership with Mateo lasted one and a half years when Aitachi bought him out as well, mainly because Mateo didn't want anything to do with "bootlegging" during those "dry years" (1920-1933). Aitachi, however, felt he "had to raise a family."

Aitachi and Amatchi indeed did raise their family in the Overland over the next 30 years. The parents lived in room Number One at the head of the

stairs. The girls (Josie was born in 1923 and Mayie in 1927) lived in a nearby room, while the boys shared a room at the opposite end of the hall, where a window allowed them to climb out and lie on the roof of the adjoining firehouse during summer nights. All the children

were educated at Douglas County elementary and high schools. All excelled in the classroom and in athletics. John, Jr. blazed the trail to the University of Nevada for his brothers and Mayie. Josie would later attend Reno Business College.

Amatchi passed away of a heart condition at the Overland in 1949. Aitachi then traveled to the Basque Country with Mayie for several months to visit family. Upon their return, she helped him operate the Overland until she married in 1951.^v Then in 1953, Aitachi leased the operation of the bar and hotel business to John Souansaras. After 51 years in the hotel business, Aitachi finally sold the Overland Bar and Hotel^{vi} to Eusebio Cenoz in 1973. He remained, however, a resident of room Number One until he moved to my mother's Reno townhouse in 1979.



Figure 3: The Overland Bar and Hotel with adjoining firehouse, ca 1924



Figure 4: Amatchi holding baby Josephine with Johnny, Billy and Leon at the Overland, 1924

The Overland Hotel

The sturdy brick building at 1451 Main Street was erected in 1894 and opened as the Gardnerville Meat Market. It was gutted by fire in 1919 and rebuilt by Sam Imelli, a butcher. Imelli died in 1920 and his son took over the butcher shop and the hotel to his partners.

University Of Nevada

John, Jr. enrolled at the University of Nevada in the fall of 1935. He was 18 years old and could already speak and write both Basque and Spanish. He joined the Alpha Tau Omega fraternity where he would serve as house manager for three years and president for two years.^{vii} He majored in mining engineering and education while minoring in military Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC). He lettered in basketball, track, and tennis while also playing interfraternity baseball and handball. During his fifth year at the university, he was an assistant professor of military science and tactics, and an assistant to the director of physical education.

While Otto John played many sports, he seems to have excelled at basketball. In January 1939, for example, he led the Wolf Pack in



scoring with 14 points to defeat San Jose State.^{viii} The following year, he and "Big John" Radovich were the veteran starters all year.^{ix} "Little John," as the newspaper called him, was the team's second leading scorer, averaging 8.3 points per game.^x



Throughout his collegiate years, he augmented his varsity sports activities with intramural athletics. In January 1940, for

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Figure 5

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final intercollegiate athletic competition, Otto John represented the Wolf Pack in the Far Western Conference tennis tournament on May 3, 1940, losing in the first round with his doubles partner Charles Mapes, Jr.^{xiii}

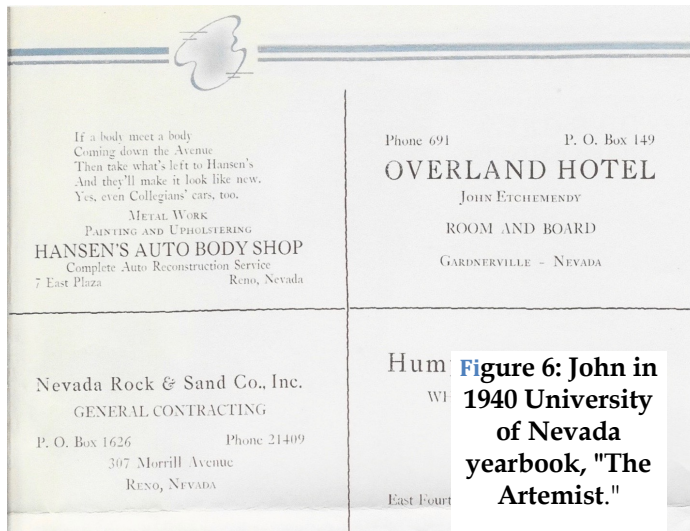


Figure 6: John in 1940 University of Nevada yearbook, "The Artemist."

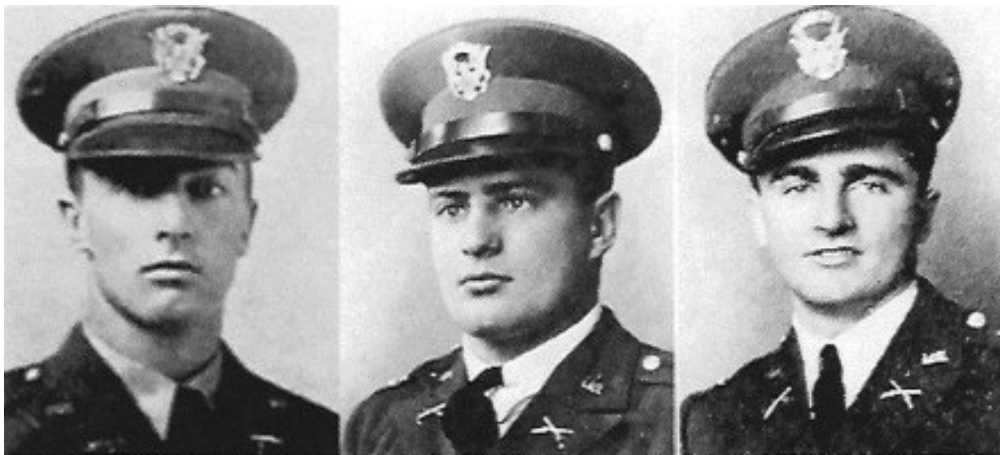
example, he won handball singles representing his fraternity.^{xi} Then April interfraternity baseball game, he struck out six and allowed only hits, pitching his baseball team to victory.^{xii} In was likely his

Figure 7: Aitachi was a University of Nevada booster! The Overland Hotel's advertisement in the 1940 university yearbook, "The Artemisia."

Johnny's military career began even before his time at the university was completed. In May 1939, after graduating from military ROTC with a reserve commission in the U.S. Army infantry,

he spent two weeks on active duty training at Fort Douglas, Utah.^{xiv} One year later he enlisted as a flying cadet, just eight and one-half units short of a degree.^{xv} He reported on May 15, 1940, along with five fellow university classmates, to Lindbergh Field in San Diego to begin flying instruction for the next three months.^{xvi}

Figure 8: John, Leon and Bill in their ROTC uniforms.



3

Flight Training: 1940

John reported to the Ryan School of Aeronautics at Lindbergh Field in San Diego, CA. The school was a contract flying school privately operated for the U.S. Army Air Corps. The airfield was named after Charles Lindbergh, who flew solo across the Atlantic in 1927 in the Spirit of Saint Louis, a plane designed and built by Ryan Aeronautics in San Diego.

The first class of flying cadets at Ryan had begun training just 10 months before John and his classmates arrived at primary flying school. The training program lasted three months. Cadets received 225 hours of technical aviation study in the classroom and logged 65 hours of flying time in Ryan PT-16 military trainers, half of it solo.^{xvii} Previous classes of cadets had trained in old army bi-planes. Otto John was given the rank of cadet first sergeant for his flight class.^{xviii}



Figure 9: 1940 Ryan PT-16 trainer.

Ryan School of Aeronautics

T. Claude Ryan was a pioneer in the aviation business. His company designed and built the Spirit of Saint Louis in 1927 for Charles Lindbergh. In 1938, many in the military felt the U.S. might become involved in a war in Europe. The Army needed to greatly increase the number of military pilots. Army General Hap Arnold selected Claude Ryan and eight other commercial flight schools to set up flight training schools for military pilots. The first class commenced in July 1939 with 39 cadets. Ryan opened three schools and they trained 14,000 pilots before closing in 1944. Four cadets from the San Diego school flew the Jimmy Doolittle raid on Japan in 1942, and Ryan graduate Captain Chuck Yeager flew an X-1 rocket plane past Mach I to break the sound barrier at Edwards Air Force Base in 1947.



Figure 10: Cadet Captain John M. Etchemendy, Randolph Field, 1940

On July 30, Otto John and his five former University of Nevada colleagues were transferred to Randolph Field, near San Antonio, Texas to commence 10 weeks of basic flight training. Of 265 cadet pilots, John was made cadet captain for Company D.^{xix} His was only the eighth class to have been trained under a rapidly expanding air corps program that envisioned 7000 additional pilots annually.

The air corps' giant flight training school at Randolph was known as the "West Point of the Air." The cadets flew their basic trainer planes at 150 miles an hour cruising speed, logging 75 flying hours including night takeoffs and landings.

The flying cadets also got their first taste of instrument flying at Randolph.

The last leg of John's initial military pilot training took place at nearby Kelly Field. Here the cadets received advanced flight instruction, including day and night navigation, and flights of several hundred miles in distance. The cadets learned to fly in formation as they progressed from three to six to twelve plane formations.^{xx} Again, John was selected as cadet captain for his class.

Finally, on December 20, 1940, John graduated, receiving his coveted military pilot wings and a reserve commission as a second lieutenant, this time in the U.S. Army Air Corps. And guess who showed up at Second Lieutenant Etchemendy's graduation? Leon, then a sophomore at the university, traveled from Reno to witness his brother's impressive achievement.^{xxi}

It is very apparent that, even though John was just approaching his 24th birthday, he was a natural leader and was recognized as such at every step in his career to date. He had been house manager and president of his fraternity, a three-year letterman, an assistant professor, first sergeant of his first flight class, and cadet captain of his final two flight classes. Now this is stepping up to responsibility!

4

Flight Instructor: 1941-1947

John's air corps career began immediately after graduation with a posting to Barksdale Field, Louisiana where he was to serve in the advanced flying school as a single engine flight instructor.

Otto John's stay at Barksdale Field was abbreviated when the single engine section was transferred^{xxiii} in May 1941 to Craig Field in Selma, Alabama.^{xxiii}

At the Army Air Corps Advanced Flying School he would progress from flight commander to commanding officer of squadron number 9 to group commander. While at Barksdale and Craig Fields, he flew over 800 hours, mostly piloting the AT-6 Texan. The AT-6 was an advanced trainer aircraft known as the "pilot maker" because of its important role in preparing pilots for combat during World War II.^{xxiv}



Figure 11: An AT6 Texan advanced trainer, 1940



Figure 12: AT-12 Guardsman at the Planes of Fame Museum in Chino, CA, 2016

John's time at Craig Field was marked by an eventful two-month period. On the morning of November 19, 1941 while approaching the airstrip for a landing in an AT-12 Guardsman, a model he had flown more than 72 hours, John had his first aircraft accident. In his own words: *"I was gliding about 95 miles an hour. The left wing dropped and I dropped on the left landing gear. I gave it the throttle and it did not catch until the left wing had touched the runway. The ship started to the right with the left wing tip just on the ground. The ship did not ground loop."*^{xxv} John was not injured while the plane's left wing and stabilizer were damaged, but repairable. The accident investigation committee determined pilot error stating, "The pilot failed to maintain sufficient air speed

when approaching the field for a landing."^{xxvi} Eighteen days later, on December 7, 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, initiating the United States' entry into World War II.

Then on January 10, 1942 at 5:15 pm, while landing a brand new BT-13A Valiant at nearby Gunter Field, Otto John had his second accident. He was in the next to last position of an eight-plane formation when "the leader of the formation retarded the throttle and turned into the echelon" causing an accumulation of errors by the other pilots and leaving John no opportunity to avoid a collision. His left wing clipped another plane causing repairable damage to both planes. Fortunately, no one was injured.^{xxvii}



Figure 13: BT-13 Valiant.

In August 1942, recently promoted Captain Etchemendy was transferred to the Southeast Air Corps Training Center at Maxwell Field in nearby Montgomery, Alabama. There he would train new pilots as commander of the 83rd School Squadron, and then as group commander until March 1943. While stationed at Maxwell, John was assigned to ferry a P-40 Warhawk fighter from Manchester, New Hampshire to Yuma, Arizona as a member of a four-plane formation. After a first stop in Boston, the flight group approached Mitchel Field, New York on the evening of January 24. In his own words: "*We went into a regular column for a landing. I was the number three man for landing and lowered my wheels and discovered the engine would not throttle back below 1800 RPM. I then decided that a low flat approach would be necessary for it to stay on the runway. I thereupon turned in for my landing approach, lowered full flaps, and made a low dragging approach to the end of the runway. I misjudged my altitude to such an extent that I saw a tree ahead of me. I immediately pulled up and a second or two after hit a power line with the right wing. The ship caught fire at this point and the crash followed at the edge of the runway. I was slightly injured. The ship was completely demolished.*"^{xxviii} The accident report noted that the same mechanical problems had been experienced in Boston and had not

been corrected before recurring at Mitchel Field. Moreover, the report recommended corrections to the runway lighting at Mitchel Field. While John had flown the P-40 about 15 hours prior to the accident, the report also recommended: "Pilots get plenty of transition ... on the type of aircraft they are going to ferry." The plane was completely demolished.



Figure 14: Wreckage of Otto John's P-40 Warhawk, Mitchel Field, January 1940

Also while at Maxwell Field, John was detached to the Accelerated Service Test Unit at Wright Field, Dayton, Ohio for his first experience as a test pilot flying P51, P-38, and P39K aircraft. This duty involved service testing civilian equipment for consideration by the Air Corps. In March 1943, Otto John was transferred to Randolph Field, Texas to begin his longest tour of duty to date, a three-year assignment that would extend beyond the end of World War II. At his new station he became squadron commander, then group commander, and assistant director of flying. He was promoted to the

rank of major in August 1943.

On January 31, 1944, Major John Etchemendy returned to his hometown of Gardnerville to wed his childhood friend Anita Borda at St. Gall's Church.^{xxix} Tanta Anita had left Gardnerville in 1934 after the death of her mother to live with relatives in Los Angeles, California. She attended Catholic High School and Los Angeles High School, graduating in 1936. She relocated to Reno where she was employed as a cosmetologist for several years.^{xxx} After a honeymoon on the Northern California coast, the newlyweds made their first home together at Randolph Field, Texas. Daughter Renee Drenda was born that same year.

In November 1945 he was appointed group commander and director of flying at the Central Instructors School at Randolph Field. In March 1946, the couple moved their home to Barksdale Field, Louisiana where John served as assistant director of the Central Instructors School and subsequently as assistant training and operations officer, flight safety officer, and assistant to the Commandant. During this stint he also completed a course in personnel management.^{xxxi}

By 1946, he had accumulated over 2200 hours total pilot time with a senior pilot rating while flying all manner of fighter, bomber, and transport aircraft.^{xxxii} In June of that year, John was nominated by President Truman and appointed a First Lieutenant in the Regular Army, one of 9800 chosen from more than 100,000 applicants to be regular U.S. Army officers.^{xxxiii} He continued to retain his temporary commission as a Major.

Around this time, John applied for assignment as Military Attaché to Guatemala, emphasizing among other factors for



ARMY MAJOR AND BRIDE

Pictured above are Major and Mrs. John Etchemendy following their marriage at St. Gall's church in Gardnerville this week. The bride is the former Miss Anita Borda, daughter of the late Mr. and Mrs. Peter Borda of Gardnerville while the bridegroom's parents are Mr. and Mrs. John Etchemendy also of Gardnerville. Officiating was the Rev. George Eagleton and standing with the couple were Miss Josephine Monaghan and Henry Rosenbrock Jr. Following a wedding trip to the coast, Major and Mrs. Etchemendy will reside near Randolph Field, Tex., where he is an instructor in the army air corps. (Ella Barnett Rush photo).

Figure 15

consideration, his command of the Spanish language; his comfort with Spanish customs and culture; and his instruction of foreign flying students from Mexico, China, Brazil and Bolivia. His draft application is an excellent summary of his career up to that time.^{xxxiv} Apparently he either did not complete the application process or was not selected for the position because John and Anita remained in Louisiana for several more months. Yvonne Marie was born in Shreveport in January 1947. In the spring, the family visited Aitachi and Amatchi in Gardnerville, and the Borda sisters in Reno, showing off their two young daughters Renee and Yvonne.^{xxxv}

5

Okinawa: 1947-1949

Otto John soon got his wish to go abroad. He received orders to transfer July 3, 1947 to Hamilton Field near San Francisco, California to await further assignment overseas. He shipped out on the hospital ship Hope about a week later, bound for Naha, Okinawa. Tannta Anita returned to Reno to live out John's tour of duty.

John assumed command of the 26th Fighter Squadron, Jet-Propelled, a unit that had only recently been reactivated. The 26th Squadron was assigned to the 51st Fighter Group (later, 51st Fighter-Interceptor Group). The squadron flew the new F-80 aircraft with a mission of defending the airways over the Ryukyu Islands, a chain of Japanese islands.^{xxxvi} (The descendant unit, the 26th Weapons Squadron, is currently stationed at Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada.)



Figure 16: 26th Fighter Squadron insignia at Naha, Okinawa

The 26th Squadron was one of the first units to fly jet aircraft overseas. When John arrived in Okinawa, the squadron began flying the Lockheed P-80 Shooting Star. Designed with straight wings, the aircraft was the U.S. Air Corps' first successful turbojet-powered combat



Figure 17: P-80/F-80 Shooting Star

aircraft. Those who flew the F-80 in the late-1940s helped usher in the "jet-age" in the U.S. Air Force^{xxxvii} (which became a separate branch of service in September 1947). While stationed at Naha Airfield, Major Etchemendy is reported to have set a speed record in 1948.^{xxxviii}

Flying jets, however, is obviously dangerous. During the three years from 1947 through 1949, at least 18 F-80 aircraft from the 51st Fighter-Interceptor Group either crashed (10) or were damaged enough to be written off (8).^{xxxix} Five of those crashes were from John's 26th Fighter Squadron. The number of aircraft crashes for the 51st Group increased from three in 1947 to eleven in 1950 as flying

activity increased on Okinawa.

Otto John returned to the States in the fall of 1949. He was assigned to the 3525th Pilot Training Wing based at Williams Air Force Base near Chandler, Arizona.^{xi} Here the Air Force provided advanced, jet fighter instruction using T-33 jet trainer derivatives of the F-80 Shooting Star.^{xli} This was a perfect assignment for John. Anita and daughters Renee and Yvonne joined him.

But their stay in the suburbs of Phoenix was brief, thanks to North Korea's invasion across the 38th parallel on June 25, 1950. Less than one month later, Major Etchemendy had orders to report to Camp Stoneman, California in Contra Costa County on the eastern shore of San Francisco Bay.^{xlii} Camp Stoneman was a staging area for the military during World War II and now for the Korean War. The family moved, and Denise was born in El Cerrito, CA on July 16.

6

Korea: 1950-1952

Before debarking for Korea, Major Etchemendy spent approximately six weeks of temporary duty at Nellis Air Force Base, Las Vegas, Nevada for combat crew training. On September 22, recently promoted Lt. Colonel Etchemendy was ordered to Fairfield-Suisun AFB, California for airlift to Japan.^{xliii} He was assigned to Headquarters Fifth Air Force, commanded by Major General Earle Partridge, whose primary mission had been defense of the Japanese home islands and the Korean Peninsula. John arrived in Japan on or about October 8 and moved on to Korea soon thereafter where he rejoined his old 51st Fighter-Interceptor Wing (FIW).^{xliv} He was 33 years old.

When the war started in late June, the 51st FIW was still based on Okinawa and still equipped with F-80 Shooting Star jet planes.



Figure 18: Logo of the 51st Fighter Interceptor Group, Motto: Deftly and Swiftly

The wing was attached to the Fifth Air Force in September 1950 and quickly entered combat with only two squadrons as part of its combat group, the 16th and the 25th Fighter Squadrons. (The 26th, Otto John's old squadron, remained at Naha Air Base to continue providing air defense of Okinawa and the Ryukyu Islands.)

The slimmed-down 51st FIW entered combat service flying their straight-winged F-80Cs on September 22, when it moved to Itazuke Air Base, Japan, to support the successful breakout of the Eighth U.S. Army from the Pusan perimeter.^{xlv} The 51st FIW moved to Kimpo Air Base, South Korea in October only to retreat to Japan in December 1950. Finally, in May 1951, the entire 51st FIW moved to Suwon

The F-80C Jet
The F-80Cs were powered by a 4,600 lb. thrust Allison turbojet engine. They were armed with six .50 caliber nose machine guns and typically carried fuel tanks, two 1,000 lb. bombs, and eight underwing rockets.

Air Base, southwest of Seoul, for the duration of the war.

Lt. Colonel Etchemendy became the deputy commander in October of the 51st Fighter-Interceptor Group (FIG), and its 16th and 25th Fighter-Interceptor Squadrons (FIS). Their primary mission would become the bombing and strafing of Communist supply points and communication lines in the north.^{xlvi} With that mission, however, came the requirement to clear the airspace of enemy fighters. On November 8, Lieutenant Russell J. Brown of the 16th

A "Brief" Conflict: The Fall of 1950

After the victorious Inchon landing by United Nations forces on September 15, and the recapture of Seoul ten days later, the North Korean Army retreated toward the Yalu River and the Manchurian border. The Eighth Army broke out of the Pusan perimeter and pressed hard to the north. The enemy surrendered by the thousands. General Douglas MacArthur, Commander of UN Forces, who had been quite surprised by North Korea's invasion of South Korea, moved his forces boldly across the 38th parallel in hot pursuit. On September 27 he declared, "All effective escape routes are closed and the fate of North Korean forces caught in this pocket is sealed." Yet the war was not quite over, even as MacArthur was informing the Joint Chiefs of Staff the following day, "There is no indication at present of entry into North Korea by major Soviet or Chinese Communist forces." But in a move that stunned MacArthur, allied intelligence experts, and the American public, half a million Chinese troops crossed the Yalu River and attacked UN forces on the night of November 26 across most of the front lines in the north. The war just got longer.

FIS/51st FIG became the first pilot in history to score a jet-versus-jet aerial victory, flying his F-80C against a MiG-15 over northern Korea.^{xlvii}

Meanwhile, the US 7th Infantry Division was landing early in November along the beaches of Iwon, on Korea's northeast coast, with a mission to attack north up to the Yalu River on the Chinese border. Among the landing party was thirty-year old Captain William Etchemendy, who was a company commander in the 7th Division's 3rd Battalion/ 31st Regiment.^{xlviii} His unit would soon become part of a hastily cobbled-together 31st Regimental Combat Team (RCT). The amphibious landing was a component of General MacArthur's greater offensive planned for UN

forces to close out the war before Christmas.^{xlix}

However, late in the night of November 27, in temperatures that reached thirty-five degrees below zero, the 3,000 man 31st Regimental Combat Team, hastily assembled on the east side of the Chosin Reservoir (about 40 miles from the Chinese border), was assaulted by a force of 20,000 Chinese soldiers blowing horns, spraying burp guns, and throwing grenades. They fought a savage battle, often hand-to-hand, lasting four days and five nights. After several enemy assaults, and UN attempts to rescue and resupply failed, the RCT began a withdrawal under withering fire. The only U.S. survivors were those 323 men^l who were able to walk or crawl the four miles across the frozen reservoir to American lines. Otto Billy was one of those heroes, having been wounded three times during the relentless battle.

We don't know whether John flew any missions in support of his brother Bill at Chosin. We do know that U.S. fighter-bombers logged 736 sorties in the Chosin area over a three-week period,^{li} but most were probably in support of the more publicized Marine units trapped on the west side of the reservoir. Ironically, the Army's RCT had been specifically assembled and positioned to protect the east flank of the First Marine Division at Chosin Reservoir.

On January 3, 1951, the 51st FIW also met the enemy up close and personal when they were forced to vacate air force operations at Kimpo field and retreat to Japan. Chinese troops then overran Seoul, the South Korean capital, the next morning.^{lii}

During the following spring, Lt. Colonel Etchemendy demonstrated his own brand of heroism and selflessness. In April 1951, John jumped into the water from a fleet landing craft to rescue two Navy sailors who had fallen into Pusan Harbor. Personnel at the pier credited John with saving the life of one sailor and possibly that of another one.^{liii} He was subsequently awarded the Silver Star rescue medal for his valor.^{liv}



Figure 19: U.S. troops arrive dockside at Pusan Harbor, 1951.

Of course Otto John's main responsibilities were not at sea, but in the air as a jet pilot. In August, he led eight of his fighter group pilots in their F-80 Shooting Stars on a mission blasting two railroad



Figure 20

bridges and fifteen enemy warehouses in the vicinity of Kangjong, North Korea, a hamlet about 50 miles north of Seoul. The Reno Gazette called it a "bridge busting" mission.^{lv}

Then in October 1951, Lt. Colonel Etchemendy led the 51st fighter group on three highly effective raids in a 24-hour period. The fighter group

destroyed 76 trucks, 24 boxcars, one underwater bridge, a T-34 tank, 35 supply barges, 21 stacks of supplies, a railroad tunnel, 19

warehouses, and two automatic gun positions.^{lvi} Relying on 500-pound bombs and 50 caliber machine guns, the group's pilots also cut railroad lines in the north in four places and inflicted more than 100 enemy casualties. The raiding action took place in the Sun-dong, Yongwon-ni, and Chasan areas of North Korea. John personally led a flight that blew up 29 trucks, seven on the first pass. He was quoted as saying, "One of the bombs exploded directly in the center of an underwater bridge. When the air had cleared of smoke the bridge was gone." Etchemendy's fighter group was credited with executing one of the most effective supply raids of the Korean War.

The October raids were likely among the last Otto John flew in his F-80C straight-wing jet plane. The Chinese were flying the Soviet-built MiG-15 swept-wing jet that was clearly superior to the F-80C in use at the time. UN forces needed a better fighter plane and in November 1951 the 51st FIW received forty swept-wing F-86Es at Suwon airbase. Their first official combat sorties occurred December



Figure 21: 51st FIW F-86E Sabre jet flight line

1 over Chongju and Sinaju, just south of the Yalu River.^{lvii} John acknowledged in an interview that the MiGs were better than our craft under some circumstances; but in other circumstances, the F-86 Saber jets were superior. “Our aerial strength lies in our pilots and their ability to fight together as a team,” said John in an interview upon his return to Reno. Spoken like a true teacher and leader of combat pilot teams. Indeed, John’s 51st fighter group scored 50 MiG “kills” in their new Sabre jets during his last two months in Korea.^{lviii}

Another challenge for the 51st FIW was the rules of engagement imposed on UN pilots – they were prohibited from bombing and strafing north of the Yalu River. Moreover, the Chinese maintained three huge modern airfields on their side of the Yalu River that UN forces couldn’t bomb. The MiGs stayed close to the Yalu, only a few miles from their bases, ducking back and forth to safety along MiG Alley, while the 51st had to fly 500 miles round trip from Suwon air base to engage the enemy. John’s group not only fought MiGs but also endured anti-aircraft fire that was both heavy and extremely accurate. He told the press, “It’s at least as bad as the Air Force hit anywhere during World War II.” Despite it, “UN fighter pilots daily go out looking for a scrap,” he said.^{lix}

John’s 16 months in Korea came to an end in January 1952. During his tour of duty he flew 50 missions with his fighter group. The 51st FIW’s record in Korea was impressive. Wing pilots flew more than 45,000 sorties and shot down 312 MiGs; this produced 14 air aces including the top ace of the war, Captain Joseph C. McConnell. The ratio of aerial victories to losses was 10 to 1. Unfortunately, the wing lost 32 pilots to enemy action; nine that became prisoners of war were later repatriated. During John’s last three months with the 51st, his wing commander was Colonel Francis S. Grabeski, an air ace during both World War II and the Korean War. During John’s tour, his group commanders were Colonels Cellini, Dregne, Thacker, and Jones.^{lx}

Lt. Colonel Etchemendy’s wartime service was recognized with the distinguished flying cross, four Korean campaign stars, an air medal, a bronze star, and a Korean citation to go along with his previously awarded rescue medal. He was newly assigned to the Air

Force plans and training staff at the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., where he was promoted to Colonel in 1955.

First, however, he returned to Reno and Gardnerville to reunite with his family. The Reno Gazette-Journal ran a story about the "Team of Nevada Brothers Compiles Service Records."^{lxi} Aitachi hosted a grand dinner in February for John, Anita, and their three daughters at the Overland Hotel.^{lxii} Brother Leon and Ruby attended, as he was then an ROTC instructor at Reno High School. Brother Bill was not there as he was still stationed in Japan, on the staff of General Mathew B. Ridgway, who had succeeded MacArthur in April 1951 as Commander of UN forces.

John would subsequently be awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, Legion of Merit, Bronze Star, four Korean Campaign Stars, Korean citation, and the Army Commendation Medal with two oak leaf clusters. He would cap his career by returning to the site of his basic flight training, Randolph/Lackland Air Force Base, as commander of the Air Force Basic Military Training School with 20,000 students.^{lxiii} He would retire from the military in 1971.

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Postscript

While stationed at Randolph AFB, Texas, Otto John performed a great kindness for his sister Josephine, and for me. On November 19, 1967, he flew his jet to Columbus Air Force Base, Georgia. The next day he swore me in as a Second Lieutenant in the U.S. Army at the Officers Candidate School (OCS), Fort Benning, Georgia. I had enlisted in October the year before, gone through basic and advanced infantry training at Fort Ord, California, and then completed 12 weeks of OCS instruction at Fort Benning.



Figure 22: Otto John commissioning Ray Uhalde at Ft. Benning, November 20, 1967.

During my last weeks at OCS, Otto called me and asked what type of unit I would like to be assigned to after being commissioned. I said, Special Forces. Upon graduation, I had orders to report to the U.S. Army Airborne School at Fort Benning, followed by assignment to the 8th Special Forces Group at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. I shipped out to the Panama Canal Zone and joined the 7th Special Forces Group as an intelligence officer in January 1969. I was granted an early out discharge after 35 months of service to attend the fall semester of college in August 1969.

After thinking about these events for many years, I have concluded with little doubt that Otto John influenced my assignments, including the fact that I never received orders to Vietnam. We never spoke of it. And my mother never said a word about it to me; but I know. God bless Otto John!

ENDNOTES

ⁱ From An Interview With Frank Yparraguirre: A Contribution to a Survey of Life in Carson Valley, From First Settlement to the 1950s, Appendix: Raymond "Lemon" Borda discusses French Hotel, June 21, 1984, Interviewer: R.T. King.

Downloaded from:

http://www.onlinenevada.org/sites/default/files/Frank_Yparraguirre_Complete_Document.pdf.

ⁱⁱ The East Fork history was downloaded from The Record-Courier, October 20, 2014 and the Historical Marker.

ⁱⁱⁱ As reflected on his tombstone in the Garden City Cemetery, Gardnerville, NV.

^{iv} The quotations and other information in this paragraph are taken from interviews with Aitachi recorded by my mother, Josephine Uhalde, in 1978-1980.

^v Reno Gazette Journal, April 17, 1951, page 6.

^{vi} Downloaded from: <http://mainstreetgardnerville.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/brochure-for-web.pdf>

^{vii} Otto John's university record is taken from a draft "Application for assignment as Military Air Attaché to Guatemala," 1946.

^{viii} Reno Gazette-Journal, January 30, 1939, page 11.

^{ix} Reno Gazette-Journal, January 26, 1940, page 14.

^x Reno Gazette-Journal, February 28, 1940, page 9.

^{xi} Reno Gazette-Journal, January 13, 1940, page 9.

^{xii} Reno Gazette-Journal, April 4, 1940, page 13.

^{xiii} Reno Gazette-Journal, May 6, 1940, page 11.

Charles Mapes, Jr. went on to build a 12-story hotel-casino in Reno that attracted the rich and famous during the 1950s and 1960s. It is reported to have been the first to feature gambling, dining, entertainment, and luxury accommodations under one roof. His hotel closed in 1982. Mapes died at the age of 78, in San Diego.

^{xiv} My father's military service ended at Fort Douglas where he was discharged from the Army in June 1945.

^{xv} "Application", op. cit.

^{xvi} Reno Gazette-Journal, May 6, 1940, page 3.

^{xvii} Downloaded from:

<file:///Users/RayUhalde/Documents/Genealogy/Etchemendy%20Family/Otto%20John/Ryan%20School%20Of%20Aeronautics.html> and Reno Gazette Journal, July 30, 1940, page 12.

^{xviii} "Application," op.cit.

^{xix} Reno Gazette-Journal, September 21, 1940. Page 3.

^{xx} Reno Gazette-Journal, October 8, 1949, page 12.

^{xxi} Reno Gazette-Journal, December 17, 1940, page 12.

^{xxii} "Application," op.cit. page 2.

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- xxiii Duty assignments through July 8, 1947 are taken from AAF Officers' Qualification Record; a certified true copy dated May 28, 1947.
- xxiv Downloaded from: http://historyflight.com/nw/aircraft_at6texan.php.
- xxv <http://www.aviationarchaeology.com/src/AARmonthly/Nov1941.htm> and Technical Report of Aircraft Accident Classification Committee, November 25, 1941, 16 pages.
- xxvi Ibid.
- xxvii <http://www.aviationarchaeology.com/src/AARmonthly/Jan1942.htm> and Technical Report of Aircraft Accident Classification Committee, January 20, 1942, 16 pages.
- xxviii Technical Report of Aircraft Accident Classification Committee, February 25, 1943, 41 pages.
- xxix Reno Gazette-Journal, February 2, 1944, page 8.
- xxx "Application," op. cit., page 3.
- xxxi Ibid,
- xxxii Ibid.
- xxxiii Reno Gazette-Journal, June 29, 1946, page 14.
- xxxiv "Application for assignment as Military Air Attaché to Guatemala, "1946.
- xxxv Reno Gazette-Journal, May 12, 1947, page 13.
- xxxvi Downloaded from: http://www.cbi-history.com/part_i.html.
- xxxvii Downloaded from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lockheed_P-80_Shooting_Star.
- xxxviii Reno-Gazette-Journal, December 2, 1995, page 15.
- xxxix Forgotten Jets: Amateur Aircraft Research, Lockheed P-80 Shooting Star Series. Managed by Nathan Decker, 2006-current. Data for this paragraph downloaded from: <http://www.millionmonkeytheater.com/P-80.html>.
- xl "Special Orders Number 142;" 20 July 1950.
- xli Downloaded from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Air_Training_Command and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Williams_Air_Force_Base.
- xlii "Special Orders Number 142;" 20 July 1950.
- xliii "Special Orders Number 83;" 22 September 1950.
- xliv A U.S. Air Force group requires at least 400 personnel, while a wing requires at least 1000. A fighter wing is normally composed of dependent wings: an operations combat group of typically three flying squadrons and an operations support squadron and a maintenance group with aircraft, equipment, and component maintenance squadrons and a maintenance support squadron. Officers in the grade of OF-5 or colonel usually command the combat group. Wing commanders are usually colonels, though sometimes are commanded by a Brigadier General. When combat forces began to fight the war in Korea, the USAF units did so in various organizational forms. In some cases, the combat

arm of the wing, plus a portion of the wing's supporting personal, deployed to the Korean theater, leaving the rest of the wing to operate the home base.

^{xlv} Robert F. Dorr and Warren Thompson, The Korean Air War, Motorbooks International, Osceola, WI, 1994, page 31; also for sidebar on F-80C armaments.

^{xlvi} Reno Gazette-Journal, February 22, 1952, page 14.

^{xlvii} Dorr and Thompson, *op. cit.*, page 38.

^{xlviii} Roy E. Appleman, East of Chosin, Texas A&M University Press, College Station, Texas, 1987, page 8.

^{xlix} H.W. Brands, The General vs. the President, Doubleday, New York, NY, chapters 25 and 26. Quotations in sidebar are from pages 163 and 171. Also see Appleman, *op. cit.*, page xii.

^l Appleman, *op.cit.* page 291.

^{li} Dorr and Thompson, *op. cit.*, page 42.

^{lii} *Ibid*, page 59.

^{liii} Reno Gazette, Journal, April 14, 1951, page 12.

^{liv} Reno Gazette-Journal, February 22, 1952, page 14.

^{lv} Reno Gazette-Journal, August 13, 1951, page 14.

^{lvi} The account of this raid is taken from Reno Gazette-Journal, October 15, 1951, page 5.

^{lvii} Warren Thompson, F-86 Sabre Aces of the 51st Fighter Wing, Osprey Publishing, New York, NY, page 13.

^{lviii} *Ibid*, page 21.

^{lix} Reno Gazette-Journal, February 22, 1952, page 14.

^{lx} Downloaded from: <http://www.flyingfiendsinkoreanwar.com/51st%20FIW.htm>.

^{lxi} *Ibid*.

^{lxii} Reno Gazette-Journal, February 23, 1952, page 5.

^{lxiii} Downloaded from: http://96.0.7.134/Lackland/BMT_CC.html.