

A narrative of Donald L Whitman

Donald L. (Don) Whitman was a man that was many things to many people. He was an officer and a gentleman, husband, father, grandfather, teacher, scholar, Distinguished Naval Aviator, and leader who treated everyone equally with honesty, and integrity.

Born on August 17, 1926 in Los Angeles California, raised in LA and Lancaster, Ca. by his aunt and uncle in the high Mojave Desert, where Chuck Yeager broke the sound barrier in 1947, here his interest in flying started.

In 1945 Whitman graduated high school in Los Angeles and soon enlisted in the Navy during WWII. He was assigned as a crewman on a PBY seaplane out of Jacksonville. In 1947 he entered the Navy's V-5 college program where qualified enlisted men could become Naval Aviators. He attended the University of South Carolina for a year and was transferred back home to LA where he attended the University of Southern California to finish his AS.

In 1948 Whitman was transferred to Pensacola, Fl. for primary flight training where he earned his wings and met the love of his life Naomi (Noni) Howard. The Navy would not let him get married at the time but they ran off to Mississippi and were married by a justice of the peace.

The early 1950's Whitman served in various squadrons during the Korean War. He was commissioned as an officer and served as a flight instructor at NAS Whiting field in Milton, Florida. The next few years he qualified and transitioned to jets along with a tour in Hawaii as officer in charge of guided missile group one. In 1960 he was transferred to Monterey Ca., where he attended the U.S. Naval Post Graduate School and earned a B.A. in math.

Stationed at the USN missile testing range at nearby Pt. Mugu he was on the cutting edge of guided missile and fixed winged drone technology. During the Mercury manned space flight program he was part of the west coast CAPCOM ground crew.

The next chapter in Whitman's Navy career had him transitioning to the Navy's fastest fighter interceptor of the time, the F-8 Crusader. He served three tours during the Vietnam War, first with VF-162 The Hunters as Operations Officer off the USS Oriskany, earning seven air medals and one Distinguished Flying Cross, our country's highest award for aerial heroism. His next squadron was VF-194 The Legendary Red Lightning as Executive Officer aboard the USS Ticonderoga earning five more air medals and a second DFC. On March 31, 1967 Commander Whitman "unofficially" shot down a MIG 17 witnessed by three other naval aviators but was denied the official kill by President Lyndon Johnson because the pilot was a Soviet Lt. Col. ace. Commander Whitman flew 292 missions over North Vietnam believed to be the most by any Navy fighter pilot.

After distinguishing himself in Vietnam he was given his own squadron, VF-62 the Boomerangs out of NAS Cecil Field in Jacksonville, FL. flying off the USS Shangri-la patrolling the Mediterranean as the spearhead of US military power during the cold war.

Whitman's next assignment was a transfer to Washington D.C. at the Pentagon as Fighter Aircraft Program Coordinator where he oversaw procurement, testing, and training while acting as a direct liaison to high officials. He was instrumental in the creation of the fighter pilot tactical training school "TOP GUN", earning a Distinguished Service Medal and a promotion to Captain. Being considered a foremost authority on fighter aircraft he "unofficially" test flew a soviet MIG-21 that was acquired via defection.

While stationed in Washington D.C. he also attended the Industrial College of the Armed Forces and George Washington University working towards an M.S. in Government Administration.

In 1973 it was back to Pensacola, Capt. Whitman was offered the job as Commanding Officer at NAS Saufley Field where he oversaw fixed wing aircraft training. In September of 1975 after thirty years of service to our country Capt. Donald L. Whitman retired from the United States Navy.

In the fall of 1975 Whitman enrolled into the University of West Florida to finish the M.A. he had started at George Washington, he completed his Masters of Political Science at UWF a year later. While there he wrote his thesis "Alienation and the American Voter", taught as an adjunct and discovered the need and resources within the states university system to create a center for state and local government. Soon there were other similar fledgling centers at other universities in the state following Whitman's model. These centers were a resource available for applied research, training, and technical assistance for state, local, public, and government administrators and business. Hence, The Center for State and Local Government at the University of West Florida's political science department was born. Don Whitman was hired by the university as its director and the center flourished. Whitman's expertise and opinion was sought after by media, government and business.

Over the next twelve years the Center for State and Local Government was a key resource and asset of UWF. There were many studies, surveys, and training workshops that were done for the community. The center under Don Whitman's leadership and professional guidance was a self sufficient, living, and working, enterprise and the center thrived as it provided a needed service to the community.

In 1982 Don Whitman was diagnosed with Non - Hodgkin's Lymphoma, at the time a type of cancer that was rare but not for Vietnam vet's. In an interview by Navy doctors they asked if there was anything that may have caused the cancer. He said, "Hell, I was in the Navy for thirty years". He battled the disease and continued to work at the center until his death in April of 1989.

After his passing the University directed by then President Morris Marx in a ceremony honored him by renaming the center which he had founded and directed.

"The Whitman Center for State and Local Government"

Years later the Whitman Centers name was changed to The Whitman Center for Public Service and continued to serve UWF and the community yet the university dissolved it in 1998.

Don Whitman was a rare breed who was larger than life, he was utterly honest, unselfish, a man of integrity and class, if you ever met him you would realize those qualities in about two seconds. He was always there for family, friends, and students. He was a trusted consultant to professionals and politicians all over, always giving all an unbiased assessment of the facts.

Since the demise of the Whitman Center, the University of West Florida has made an effort to honor the legacy of Don Whitman with the creation of the Whitman Scholar and Whitman Fellow awards. With these awards the qualities and ideals that Don Whitman lived and worked by will not just be known by others but will be put back into action. The award winners have a great opportunity to help their community.

Don Whitman's story is of a great American, one of a modest self made man, who served his country, community, and made a difference. The work he did thereafter is a testimony to not just him but also the university.

The Whitman family wishes to express its thanks and gratitude to The University of West Florida for this honor and understands the perpetuity that the Scholar and Fellow will create in honor of Don Whitman.

So congratulations to the award recipients, know that Don Whitman would be pleased in your hard work, yet take heed one of his favorite sayings.

"If you can't take a joke, you shouldn't join up!"

Narrative presented by Mark Whitman, Son