



John S. Thach, Admiral, USN

Date of Designation: 4 January 1930

Dates of Active Duty: 2 June 1927 - 1 May 1967

Duty Assignment Chronology

John Smith Thach was born in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, on April 19, 1905, son of James H. and Jo Bocage (Smith) Thach. He attended the Fordyce High School before his appointment to the U. S. Naval Academy, Annapolis, MD., from his native state in 1923. As a Midshipman he participated in football and wrestling. Graduated and commissioned Ensign on June 2, 1927, he subsequently attained the rank of Rear Admiral, to date from November 1, 1955, was promoted to Vice Admiral, to date from January 6, 1960 and to Admiral, to date from March 25, 1965.

Graduated from the Naval Academy in 1927, he remained there during the summer for the short course in aviation and on July 14, was assigned to the battleship *Mississippi*, then operating with Battleship Division FOUR of the Battle Fleet. On June 7, 1928, he was transferred to the USS *California*, Flagship of the Battle Fleet, and served on board until detached in March 1929 for flight training at the Naval Air Station, Pensacola, FL., where he was designated Naval Aviator on January 4, 1930. In March of that year he reported for duty with Fighting Squadron ONE, the famous "High Hat" Squadron. This squadron was well known for demonstrating formation flying skill by taking off in a nine-plane formation with the wing tips or each plane tied by a manila line to the next plane in formation. After performing various maneuvers, this formation was able to land and taxi off the field with all planes still tied together.

Continuing duty involving flying, he soon became recognized as one of the Navy's aerial gunnery experts, repeatedly shooting "E" scores in each type of combat aircraft assigned. In July 1932 he reported for duty in the experimen-

tal division of the Naval Air Base, Hampton Roads, VA. As a test pilot of new experimental aircraft, he flew rough water tests of seaplanes and carrier arresting gear, tests of land plane types. In June 1934 he was assigned to Patrol Squadron NINE, based on the USS *Wright*. While in that assignment he was ordered by the Navy Department to a special test project in command of the Navy's large experimental seaplane, the XP2H-1. This four-engined giant, completed in 1932, was at that time the largest airplane ever constructed in the United States. It was the second largest in the world (the German DO-X being slightly heavier). He flew this experimental plane on a non-stop twenty-five hour test flight from Norfolk, VA., to the Panama Canal on January 15-16, 1935. For this feat, he received a "Well Done" from the Chief of Naval Operations.

In June 1936 he joined Scouting Squadron SIX-B, attached to the USS *Cincinnati*, and a year later reported for duty with Patrol Squadron FIVE-F, based at the Fleet Air Base, Coco Solo, Canal Zone. In June 1939 he was ordered to Fighting Squadron THREE as Gunnery Officer. "For exceptional skill and technique in aerial gunnery and bombing; efficient and meticulous operation of the squadron gunnery department; marked ability to train other pilots in fighting plane tactics and gunnery..." during the period 1939-1940, he received a Letter of Commendation. He was commanding that squadron when the United States entered World War II in December 1941.

He evolved the theory that a two-plane fighter formation would be superior in combat to the old established three-plane formation and developed special offensive and defensive tactics for them. In the South Pacific, Admiral (then Lieutenant Commander) Thach got a chance to put his new theory into practice. His Fighter Squadron THREE rose from the carrier *Lexington* to meet twenty Jap planes, and knocked down nineteen. The "Thatch-trained" Butch O'Hare in this battle shot down six bombers in six minutes.

The tactics he taught the men of his squadron worked so well he was sent back to Pearl Harbor to teach young Army Air Force, as well as Navy pilots what had become known in the Pacific as the "Thach Weave." From Pearl Harbor he went to the Navy's Operational Training Command to indoctrinate new pilots with his war-proven tactics, and from Jacksonville he was sent to the Fast Carrier Task Force as Air Operations Officer, first under Admiral Mitscher, then under Admiral McCain. He developed the system of blanketing enemy airfields with a continuous patrol of carrier-based fighters that prevented the land-based planes from taking off, and systematically destroyed them on the ground. It was he who planned and directed, under Admiral McCain, the Navy's final offensive blows against the Jap homeland. Under his skillful planning, the planes of Admiral McCain's Task Force THIRTY-EIGHT were destroying hundreds of aircraft a day. In recognition of Admiral Thach's brilliant work, he was invited by Admiral Halsey to come aboard the USS *Missouri* to witness the Surrender ceremony. Returning to the United States soon after the Japanese surrender, he served the two succeeding years as Director of Training, on the Staff of the Chief of Naval Air Training, and two years as Special

Assistant to the Chief of Naval Air Training. He remained at Pensacola until June 1950, when he assumed command of the USS *Sicily*. Ten days later, war broke out in Korea. The *Sicily* departed within few days for the Far East and was the first carrier to arrive in Korean waters to augment the USS *Valley Forge*, which was the only carrier in the Far East at the outbreak of Korean hostilities. During the fourteen months Admiral Thach had command of the *Sicily* the aircraft of this ship provided close air support of ground forces during many crucial battles, including the Inchon landing and the fight to the sea at Hungnam from the Chosin Reservoir area.

In August 1951 he reported as Chief of Staff and Aide to Commander Carrier Division SEVENTEEN and in December of that year came to Washington, D. C., to serve as Naval Aide to the Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Air. He commanded the USS *Franklin D. Roosevelt* (CVA-42) from May 1953 to April 1954, after which he was in command of Naval Air Bases in the Sixth Naval District, with headquarters at the Naval Air Station, Jacksonville, FL. In September 1955 he became Senior Naval Member, Weapons Systems Evaluation Group, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, Research and Development, Washington, D. C.

He was Commander Carrier Division SIXTEEN from November 1957 until December 1959, then had duty until March 1, 1960 in the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, Navy Department. Following an assignment in command of the Anti-Submarine Defense Force, Pacific (redesignated Anti-Submarine Force, Pacific and later Anti-Submarine Warfare Force, Pacific), he reported on July 8, 1963 as Deputy Chief of Naval Operations (Air), Navy Department. On March 25, 1965 he became Commander in Chief, U. S. Naval Forces, Europe and served as such until relieved of active duty pending his retirement, effective May 1, 1967.

Admiral Thach and his wife, the former Madalyn Jones, had two sons, John Smith Thach, Jr. and William Leland Thatch.

Admiral Thach participated in twelve major engagements or campaigns. During World War II, he operated from the USS *Saratoga*, USS *Lexington*, USS *Yorktown*, USS *Enterprise*, USS *Hornet*, USS *Wasp*, and USS *Shangri-La*. He has been awarded the following:

Distinguished Service Medal: "For exceptionally meritorious service in a duty of great responsibility as Commander of a Carrier Fighting Squadron, which he commanded for the first six months of the war. By his distinguished leadership and thorough training of his pilots in combat tactics and gunnery, he brought his squadron to the high state of efficiency which enabled it to play a major part in the destruction of nineteen out of twenty enemy bombers which attacked an aircraft carrier on February 20, 1942, and to contribute in great measure to the success of the air attack on Salamaua and Lae, New Guinea, on March 10, 1942. After analyzing the air combat reports of the Coral Sea Battle he evolved a system of fighting plane combat teams which he taught not only to his own pilots but to all fighting squadrons in the Hawaiian area. These tactics were used on June 4, 1942 by Lieutenant

Commander Thach in leading an air combat against twenty Japanese "Zero" fighters with a four-plane division of fighter planes from his squadron during the successful attacks by carrier air groups against Japanese carriers north of Midway Island, resulting in the destruction of six of the enemy fighters and the driving off of the others, with the loss of only one of his four planes. This success was due entirely to the use of the fighter tactics developed by Lieutenant Commander Thatch, and contributed greatly to the success of our forces in this battle

Navy Cross: (Feb. 20, 1942) - Led his squadron against enemy barbers attempting to attack the *Lexington* in the Coral Sea, resulting in the shoot-down of 19 out of the 20 enemy bombers in the attack.

Gold Star in lieu of second Navy Cross: Action in Battle of Midway. Led fighter escort in attack against enemy fleet. Engaged enemy fighter patrols, fought through defensive screen, Out numbered by at least 7 to 1, shot down six Zero fighters, drove others away and remained over enemy carriers as protection for torpedo planes and dive bombers during their attack and retirement.

Silver Star Medal: As Operations Officer, Fast Carrier Task Force off Formosa, planned successful attacks on enemy airfields and successfully directed defensive air operations against numerous large scale enemy air attacks when mobility was denied by the necessity to protect two crippled cruisers being towed at a speed of three knots until they were out of range of enemy air attacks.

Legion of Merit: As Air Operations Officer, Fast Carrier Task Force planned and directed 1,000 plane air attacks against over 100 enemy airfields in the Philippines. Designed method of "blanket attack" wherein enemy aircraft were pinned down continuously on all air-fields and could not move against American transports and troops invading the Philippines.

Bronze Star Medal: planned attacks on Japanese homeland from Okinawa to Hokkaido. Designed successful Task Force fighter defense against Japanese Kamikaze attack. Last two months of war not one carrier was hit.

Gold Star in lieu of a second Legion of Merit: "For exceptionally meritorious conduct...as Commanding Officer of the USS *Sicily* in operation against the enemy in Korea from August 3, 1950 to January 15, 1951. With outstanding ability, energy and high technical skill, he operated his ship and its embarked air group as a unit of the United Nations Naval Forces, furnishing invaluable support to our fighting forces in Korea by the destruction of enemy air opposition, troop concentrations and the interception of the enemy lines of communications, supplies and bases. During this period the ship maintained a superior performance in every phase of operations and the immediate and effective response to calls for extra effort reflect the highest caliber of leadership...."