



## **Descriptive Summary:**

*Title:* The Cecil E. Harris Collection

*Repository:* Northern State University Archive & Special Collections, Beulah Williams Library

*Creator:* Gerald L. Krueger, Kenneth A. Schroeder, and Rebecca Harris

*Dates:* 1942-2014; Military records 1942-1960s; Correspondence, biographies, and newsarticles 1990s-2010s

*Extent:* 1 linear foot

## **Administrative Information**

*Acquisitions Information:* The materials in this collection were donated by Kenneth A. Schroeder and Gerald L. Krueger with the blessing of Rebecca Harris, daughter of Cecil E. Harris

*Processing Information:* This collection has been processed by Rachel Senese.

*Access Restrictions:* none

*Copyright Notice:* Literary rights and copyrights, when applicable, have been assigned to Beulah Williams Library.

*Preferred Citation:* Item, Folder Name, Series, The Cecil E. Harris Collection, University Archive & Special Collections, Beulah Williams Library, Northern State University.

# Biographical Note

## Early Years

The town of Cresbard is a small farming community that owes its beginnings to the growth of the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway, which drew people to the fertile lands of northeastern South Dakota. It was in this landlocked, agricultural town that Cecil E. Harris, a highly-decorated naval veteran and hero, got his humble beginnings.

Born in 1916, Harris was raised on a farm and attended Cresbard High School just as the nation was entering the Great Depression. Despite the difficult times, Harris graduated from high school in 1943 and chose to continue his academic career at Northern State Teachers College in Aberdeen, S.D., approximately 40 miles from his home.

## WWII

After one year of college, Harris taught school in Onaka, S.D. for three years and subsequently returned to NSTC. In 1939, with war raging in Europe, he volunteered for a civilian pilot training course. On March 26, 1941, while still in college, he enlisted in the U.S. Naval Reserve V5 Program. Pearl Harbor was attacked on December 7, 1941 and the U.S. entered WWII. Cecil Harris and his cadet class were speedily graduated, commissioned, and designated as US Naval Aviators in February 1942.

Although Harris served for a time in North Africa and Guadalcanal towards the beginning of WWII, his most notable action took place while serving aboard the U.S.S. Intrepid in the South Pacific. Harris flew as a fighter pilot in Fighting Squadron 18 from July to November 1944 in which the squadron flew 4,711 sorties (3,071 included actual combat) and recorded 177 kills. Harris flew an F6F Hellcat during his time on the Intrepid, partaking in many sorties and 44 combat missions against enemy fighter planes and bombers yet never once returned with even a scratch.

The reputation that Harris earned aboard the Intrepid was one of respect and admiration. He was considered quiet and humble; a man who chose to lead by example rather than words. Lieutenant Harold Thune, father of Senator John Thune, flew with Harris while serving aboard the Intrepid. Thune cites Harris' dedication and commitment to excellence as two of the reasons why Harris was successful in his naval career, as well as a natural gift that enabled him to be an extraordinary aviator. Harris also brought in experience from his action earlier in the war and developed tactics that, though occasionally appearing risky, resulted in success after success from the squadron. Thune describes Harris as, "aggressive, relentless, persistent, determined, and enterprising in his pursuit of the enemy," someone supervisors could trust to get the job done right.

Both Thune and Lieutenant Allen A. Ehrke, another pilot who flew with Harris, point out that when Harris was in the air he was the one in charge. Even pilots of higher rank relented command to Harris; they had to accept the fact that if success and victory were desired, Harris was the one to rely on. Even though he was ranked tenth in seniority in the squadron, he ranked third as flight officer because of his exceptional flying skills and leadership. The ultimate mission of the carrier was to fight, destroy, and win, and Harris was good at all three.

During his days on the Intrepid, Harris tackled and overcame many situations in the air that earned him numerable medals, honors, and awards. One act of heroism that stands out above the rest was Harris' actions on Oct. 12-14, 1944. Over the span of these three days, Fighting Squadron aided in an assault on Northern Formosa (modern day Taiwan) in preparation for an attack on the Philippines. In a battle of dive bombing and aerial dogfighting, Harris shot down

four enemy planes on October 12, earning himself the Silver Star, and three more planes on October 14, for which he received the Distinguished Flying Cross.

By the time the Intrepid was forced out of action in November 1944, Harris had earned 24 confirmed kills. This number makes him the second ranking U.S. Navy ace of WWII. There were three days of combat in which Harris had four kills, and the number of kills in which Harris either assisted or was not credited are countless. Harris is also the most highly decorated U.S. Naval Reserve pilot. His awards and honors include the Navy Cross, Silver Star with second gold star, Distinguished Flying Cross with second and third gold star, and the Air Medal and two gold stars.

### **End of WWI and Home**

Harris and the rest of Fighting Squadron 18 returned to the United States after the disabling of the Intrepid and prepared for more combat. However, Japan surrendered before they were to see any more action and the squadron was released from active duty in October 1945.

A hero's welcome greeted Harris upon his return to the quiet town of Cresbard, far from the fast-paced and chaotic combat life that Harris had known for many years. He went right on with his life, though, graduating from NSTC in 1946 and returning to his hometown to teach. For the next five years Harris served as a teacher, coach, and mentor, rarely discussing his experiences during the war unless it could be used to illustrate something he was trying to teach. No doubt his time as a leader aboard the Intrepid helped him attain many of the skills necessary to being an effective instructor.

### **Later Military Career**

People who knew Harris during his time did not know the decorated war veteran. Just as during the war, Harris did not boast of his achievements or adventures. Instead, he kept these memories and honors to himself and went on with life as usual until he was called back into active service in 1951 for the Korean Police Action. Harris then chose to pursue a career in the Navy until his retirement in 1967 with the rank of Captain. He died in 1981 in Washington, D.C., and is buried at Arlington National Cemetery. His widow, Eva Gabriel Harries, lives a vigorous life at age 90 and tends a small horse farm with her daughter in Virginia.

### **Recognitions Posthumously**

Already one of the Navy's most decorated veterans, Harris continues to receive honors posthumously. He was the first reserve pilot in the Carrier Hall of Fame in 1987 and was entered into the South Dakota Hall of Fame in 1994. In 2000, Harris was the recipient of the Northern State University Foundation's Distinguished Alumni Award. He was inducted into the South Dakota Aviation Hall of Fame's south Dakota Combat Aircrew Memorial in 2009 and a section of South Dakota's Highway 20 between U.S. highway 83 and 281 (passing by his hometown of Cresbard) was designated the Cecil E. Harris Captain US Navy Memorial Highway. A replica of his F6F fighter is enshrined in the USS Intrepid Air and Space Museum in New York City.

(Biography taken from within the collection)

## **Scope and Content**

This small collection is arranged into one series, *Recognition of Cecil E. Harris*. The files within this collection document the efforts of Gerald Krueger and Kenneth Schroeder to give recognition to Captain Cecil E. Harris. This collection is left in its original order. The formats within this collection include copies of his military records for applications, various applications to multiple organizations, correspondence about Cecil Harris, news articles, photographs, and biographies. This collection is entirely in English.

## Series Descriptions:

Series Title: Recognition of Cecil E. Harris

Boxes: 1

Dates: 1942-2014

## Detailed Description of the Collection

|      | Box #1  |
|------|---|
| FF1  | Aberdeen Newspapers   |
| FF2  | Argus Leader Newspapers   |
| FF3  | Binder of Newspaper clips-copies  |
| FF4  | Biographies and narratives  |
| FF5  | Bound publications  |
| FF6  | Congressional Medal of Honor  |
| FF7  | Congressional Medal of Honor part 2   |
| FF8  | “Contributions of Northern State Teachers College to World War II Effort” by Stacy L. Olson |
| FF9  | Copies of Military Documents  |
| FF10 | Correspondence  |
| FF11 | Correspondence with Thomas Wright   |
| FF12 | Correspondence with Thomas Wright Photographs   |
| FF13 | Faulk County Newspapers   |
| FF14 | Hall of Honor Nomination and Statue Fundraising   |
| FF15 | History of Air Group Eighteen   |
| FF16 | Honors and Memorials  |
| FF17 | Honors and Memorials 2  |
| FF18 | Medal of Honor Application  |
| FF19 | Misc. Newspaper Clippings   |
| FF20 | Photographs   |
| FF21 | Photograph Prints   |
| FF22 | Rapid City Newspapers   |
| FF23 | Scrapbook   |
| FF24 | USA Today Weekend Newspapers  |