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Combat Zone

Memories of a naval aviator

MONTANA NITTE John Leslie was just a “pimple-faced kid” when he joined the Navy on July 3, 1942 – his 18th birthday. He had begged his father, a coal miner, for permission to join the burgeoning US war effort a year earlier, to no avail.

“When I showed up to enlist, I was the first high school graduate who had been in there for some time,” recalls the Jamestown resident, now 84. “They had just made a new ruling that high school graduates could go through Navy flight training, whereas before they had needed college.”

Leslie, who had never flown in a plane, was soon learning

the ins and outs of the Piper Cub, training at civilian and military posts in Montana, Oregon and California before transferring to Norman, Oklahoma for training aboard the 220-horsepower Stearman Bi-Wing.

Norman was known as E Base – E for elimination. Pilots in training practiced aerobatics, formation flying and emergency landings on a demanding schedule that washed out seven in 10 prospects.

The next stop was Florida, where Leslie piloted the 450-horsepower SNV in six- and 12-plane formations before shifting to Barin Field, which cadets called “Bloody Barin.”

