

# The Fiercest Wildcats on St. Simons Island

Although nineteenth century St. Simons was known to be home to a panther or two, the most famous wildcats in Island history were planes not panthers. In the beginning of World War II, the U.S. Navy began purchasing and taking over airports and airfields all over the nation for training purposes. One such airport was McKinnon Field on St. Simons Island, which the U.S. Navy bought in July 1942. The newly-coined Naval Air Station (NAS) St. Simons was tasked with training pilots to fly Grumman F4F Wildcats.

The Wildcat was the Navy's leading fighter aircraft at the beginning of World War II. These planes were known for their durability and firepower. Later models also featured a unique folding wing design, known as the STO-Wing, which limited the space each plane would occupy on an aircraft carrier and thus nearly doubled the fighter complement.

The Pacific was where the Wildcat had the greatest impact. All of its characteristics, as well as tactics of mutual defense, served the plane well against its faster and more nimble adversary, the Japanese Zero. Wildcats flew valiantly in air battles at Coral Sea, Midway and Guadalcanal in 1942, where eight pilots received the Medal of Honor.



As the development of naval aviation technology progressed throughout the war, the isolated coastal location of NAS St. Simons made it a candidate to become another type of naval training facility, one more secret and perhaps even more vitally important. Eventually, most of the Wildcats flew away except for a few that were left at the Station to act as target planes to be detected by trainees on that new technology: RADAR.

This month's images show Grumman Wildcats in flight, as well as the second issue of *The Wildcat*, the base newsletter for NAS St. Simons while it was a fighter pilot training facility. The main article introduces the new commanding officer, Commander William D. Thomas. After graduating from Annapolis, Thomas had served on three Navy vessels during World War I, before transferring to naval aviation. He had retired in 1938, but returned to active duty a year later as aide to Rear Admiral John H. Towers, the Aeronautics Bureau Chief, until 1942. Known locally for his outgoing personality, Thomas remained at NAS St. Simons until October 1945.



Our monthly images on this page are from the vast archives of the Coastal Georgia Historical Society. The Society's mission includes the "administration, restoration and maintenance of historic facilities and resources ... preserved as a living part of the historical and cultural foundations of our coastal community." Society facilities include the St. Simons Lighthouse and Museum, the A.W. Jones Heritage Center, and the Historic Coast Guard Station. To learn more about the Society, its diverse programs, and the benefits of Society membership, please call 912.634.7090 or visit [coastalgeorgiahistory.org](http://coastalgeorgiahistory.org).