

The Untouchables Provided Life for Top Gun

By Will Myers

Edward Henry O'Hare Sr. was born September 5, 1893, in St. Louis, Missouri. He was known by friends and family as EJ but preferred the name Edgar in his adult life. EJ was only one generation removed from Ireland. He grew up in Soulard located south of downtown St. Louis. He married in the summer of 1912 to Selma at the ripe old age of 19; she was 22 and thought that EJ was the same age at the time they married. These young lovebirds didn't come from money. EJ found himself working two jobs: putting most of his effort into his father's small time restaurant and as a grocer at the Soulard Produce Market which his father-in-law ran. Two years later Selma became pregnant and gave birth to Edward Henry O'Hare Jr. After working a full day, EJ came by the apartment for a few minutes with wife and son at night, then headed off to St. Louis University to earn credits in the School of Commerce and Finance. EJ was fiercely determined to make a better life for his soon to be growing family. EJ and Selma welcomed two more daughters: Patsy (1919) and Marilyn (1924).

By 1917, EJ completed his academic studies at St. Louis University. In the early 1920s one did not need an LL.B. to practice law, or to succeed in business. The practice of law in Missouri did however require passing the bar exam, which EJ accomplished and attained his license as an attorney-at-law. A man of high energy, as well as farsighted and success-oriented, EJ was quick to visualize potential. EJ was a businessman and a trial attorney. He started a trucking company that flourished all the while he practiced law in the downtown Wainwright building in St. Louis.

EJ had barely settled into the law profession before the high commissioner of the International Greyhound Racing Association walked in his office. He requested EJ's assistance in drawing up an application to patent a mechanical rabbit that would entice dogs into running races at dog tracks. EJ eagerly helped secure the patent. The commissioner passed away shortly thereafter in 1927, and EJ successfully negotiated with his widow for the rights to the patent. EJ soon opened two dog kennels—one across the river in Illinois and the other 320 miles away in Chicago. A rival kennel in Chicago quickly noticed EJ's success and merged with his Chicago project. This merger led to EJ encountering another successful high-energy entrepreneur in Chicago. A man primarily in the liquor business, but who also dabbled in dog track racing...and murder.

The Prohibition era was a defining period in American history, during which the manufacture, sale, and distribution of alcoholic beverages were banned under the 18th Amendment. This created a massive demand for illegal alcohol, which was supplied by organized crime syndicates across the country. Al Capone rose to prominence during this time as the head of the Chicago Outfit, an organization that controlled much of the bootlegging trade in the city.

Through that kennel merger, EJ became associated with Chicago's most notorious gangster. Capone's criminal activities were largely centered on bootlegging, gambling, and murder. EJ became known as a key figure in this illicit gambling trade, working his way up within the organized crime world. Capone managed to maintain a veneer of respectability in the eyes of many in Chicago. His bribery of politicians, police officers, and other public officials helped him evade prosecution for years. By the mid-1920s, Capone was untouchable—at least, that was the perception.

Six years older than Capone, EJ was not intimidated by the force the mobster could bring. EJ could match Capone's force with the application of patent rights to the mechanical rabbit, and later with the personal talent he demonstrated as a counselor and business manager. The full extent of the connection between the two men was known only to them, but it's possible to piece together their complex relationship. The Capone outfit had needs of business and financial expertise, plus managerial skills—all of which EJ possessed. In between 1925-1931, EJ operated the dog tracks located in Chicago, Boston, and Miami. In the dog racing business it was not unusual for 20,000 people to show up on an evening and for over \$125,000 to change hands. It usually only took one month to pay the annual expenses, and then the rest of the season was pure profit.

In 1930, EJ decided his time in the organized crime outfit had run its course. EJ teamed up with Frank Wilson, an IRS agent who had been investigating Capone for two years on tax evasion. Wilson needed inside help in order to arrest the mob leader. EJ had a reputation for thoroughness and attention to detail, qualities that made him well-suited for investigating Capone's vast financial dealings. Capone's criminal operations generated millions of dollars, but he was notoriously careful to avoid leaving a paper trail that could be used against him. However, EJ was able to work undercover with federal authorities to uncover discrepancies in Capone's financial records and show that Capone had not been paying taxes on large sums of money.

The information that EJ and Wilson pieced together proved to be the breakthrough the authorities needed to finally charge Capone with tax evasion. The government's case was strong, and Capone was indicted on June of 1931. The following October, Capone was found guilty of five counts of income tax evasion and sentenced to 11 years in federal prison, along with a fine of \$50,000. This

conviction was a monumental victory for law enforcement, as it marked the first successful prosecution of a major figure in organized crime using tax laws.

EJ O'Hare's role in Capone's conviction cannot be overstated. Although EJ was not the only person involved, his contributions were crucial in assembling the case that led to Capone's conviction.

Tragically, on November 8, 1939, EJ died under mysterious circumstances.

Leaving his office at Sportsman's Park, EJ's black Lincoln Zephyr was approached by two men in another black Lincoln Zephyr. At the Ogden Avenue intersection near the Chicago airport, the two men who were dressed in black coats and black hats, brandished sawed-off shotguns and fired on EJ. The two men were never apprehended. Al Capone was released from Alcatraz a week later.

Noted earlier, EJ and Selma gave birth to a son, Edward H. O'Hare Jr. in 1914. In time, his son would come to be known as Eddie, Edward, and, later, Ed. It would be at the age of twenty when he would be called Butch. If ever a name did not fit a person, Butch O'Hare would be known by all to be the opposite of "sharp, bitter, and angry." His early life was marked by a strong sense of discipline and ambition, likely influenced by his father's career, but most of the discipline early on came from the mother because EJ worked two jobs and went to school. Butch and EJ had a strong bond though. They spent as much time allowed together whether it was their nightly wrestling battles on the floor of the living room or competitive fishing on the weekends.

EJ and Selma noticed a personality trait coming out in Butch around the age of 13 in which he was becoming lazy. He started becoming a bit “pudgy” and schemed to dodge his daily chores. EJ had had enough. With his wife’s permission, they enrolled him in Western Military Academy where he graduated at the age of 18. At Western, Butch became very interested in playing football. The game helped refocus Butch and taught him the importance of teamwork. He wasn’t a standout athlete, but his middle linebacker position introduced the skill of being aware of his surroundings that he would later hone.

Butch O’Hare attended the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland, where he graduated in 1937. It was at the academy that Butch demonstrated a remarkable aptitude for aviation, which would shape the course of his career.

After graduating from the Naval Academy, Butch joined the United States Navy, receiving further training as a pilot. His passion for flying led him to the Naval Air Station in Pensacola, Florida, where he trained as a fighter pilot. During this time, Butch proved to be an exceptional pilot, excelling in both the technical and tactical aspects of flying. By 1940, he had earned his wings and was assigned to the USS *Lexington*, the newest U.S. Navy aircraft carrier.

The USS *Lexington* was one of the largest and most advanced aircraft carriers in the world at the time, and it was a key part of the Pacific Fleet during the early years of World War II. As a pilot aboard the *Lexington*, Butch participated in several training exercises, and it soon became clear that he was a skilled and daring aviator with an uncanny ability to make split-second decisions under pressure.

The United States entered World War II after the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. As the U.S. Navy mobilized for war, Butch's unit was reassigned to the Pacific Theater, where they would play a critical role in the early naval battles of the conflict. The Navy was engaged in a fierce struggle with the Imperial Japanese Navy, which had expanded rapidly in the Pacific.

On May 7, 1942, Butch became a national hero during the Battle of the Coral Sea, one of the first major naval battles between American and Japanese forces. The battle was notable for the use of aircraft carriers and naval aviation tactics, as both sides sought to neutralize each other's fleets.

Butch's heroic actions occurred when he was flying a Grumman F4F Wildcat, a carrier-based fighter aircraft, while serving as part of the air defense for the USS *Lexington*. The Japanese Navy had launched a surprise air raid against the U.S. fleet, and Butch found himself single-handedly in the path of a large formation of Japanese bombers. In a moment of extraordinary bravery and skill, Butch, acting quickly and decisively, engaged the enemy bombers despite being vastly outnumbered, 9 to 1.

With remarkable courage, Butch managed to shoot down five Japanese bombers in quick succession, a feat that not only protected his ship and crew but also significantly weakened the Japanese offensive. His actions prevented a potential disaster for the U.S. Navy, and his victory was instrumental in the eventual American success in the battle. Butch's five kills in a single engagement made him an instant hero.

For his actions during the Battle of the Coral Sea, Butch was awarded the Medal of Honor. He became the first naval aviator to receive the Medal of Honor during

World War II. His heroism was widely publicized in the American media, and he quickly became a symbol of American resolve and bravery. He was even invited to Washington, D.C., where he met with President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who personally congratulated him.

Tragically, Butch O'Hare's promising career was cut short during a later mission. After his heroics in the Battle of the Coral Sea, he was transferred to a new assignment, where he was tasked with flying a new fighter aircraft, the F6F Hellcat, in combat. On November 26, 1943, Butch was piloting a Hellcat on a mission over the Pacific Ocean when his plane encountered difficulties. Butch was last seen flying toward a formation of Japanese aircraft, and despite an extensive search, he was never found. His disappearance remains a mystery, and his body was never recovered. Butch O'Hare was declared missing in action and later presumed dead. He was 29 years old.

Butch O'Hare is remembered in popular culture and historical accounts of World War II as one of the most outstanding naval aviators in U.S. history. His heroism during the Battle of the Coral Sea remains one of the most inspiring examples of courage in military history. His name will live on in the hearts and minds of future generations who continue to be inspired by his extraordinary bravery. In recognition of his heroism, O'Hare International Airport in Chicago was named in his honor in 1949.