

GEORGE HUNTER NEESE

AVIATION MACHINIST'S MATE THIRD CLASS U.S. NAVY

WORLD WAR II
1825 - 1945

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George Neese's mother Helen with members of local Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 458 in November 1959, honoring her son for Veterans Day. *Morgantown Dominion-Post*, 7 Nov 1959

George Hunter Neese was born on November 15, 1924, in Morgantown, West Virginia, to Paul and Helen Neese. George's father, who was born in Henderson, Pennsylvania, moved to Morgantown for work as a coal miner—following in the footsteps of his own father. At the age of 18, Paul gained employment with the New England Fuel and Transportation Company in Grant Town, West Virginia, 20 miles southwest of Morgantown. In 1919, Paul married fellow Pennsylvanian Helen Cronin.

By the time George was born, he already had two older siblings: Charles, age five, and Sarah, age three. In 1929, the family followed the coal seams to

East Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, but the relocation didn't last long. The Great Depression ravaged the coal mining industry along with the rest of the U.S. economy. The family returned to Morgantown where Paul found employment with the Christopher Coal Company. Both Paul and his eldest son Charles listed their employment as mining in 1941, while George's sister Sarah contributed to the household income as a nurse. But the Great Depression continued to take its toll: according to the 1940 census, Paul only worked 20 weeks in 1939. This undoubtedly heaped strain on a family that eventually grew to a total of 11 children during the 1930s and 1940s.

Young George Hunter Neese attended St. Francis de Sales Catholic School in Morgantown from fourth to twelfth grade and was just 16 when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Fired by patriotism, George did not finish his final year of high school—choosing instead to enlist in the United States Navy in November 1942 at just 17 years of age. Since George was so young, his father took him to the Navy recruitment center and signed for him. The young man's reason for enlisting was noted on his paperwork as "to serve his country."

George began basic training at Naval Station Great Lakes, Illinois, on February 22, 1943, and graduated on July 16. This extended period on the shores of Lake Michigan brought him up to speed as an aviation machinist mate (AVMM), whose duties were to maintain and repair engines, propellers, fuel systems, brakes, and other mechanical needs of the navy planes to which he was assigned. The young seaman, who had perhaps never traveled beyond West Virginia and Pennsylvania prior to his stint at the boot camp near Chicago, was then transferred to Naval Air Technical Training Center Memphis on July 19 to train for two weeks in aviation radar operations.

On August 2, 1943, the day of his graduation, he was ordered to Naval Air Gunnery School in Jacksonville, Florida. Neese trained for a month as an aerial gunner. After passing a physical fitness test, potential gunners familiarized themselves with .30 and .50 caliber Browning aircraft machine guns, including how to maintain, assemble, and disassemble them in case of malfunction. Gunners were also trained in recognizing different aircraft with speed and accuracy, as well as in signaling using Morse Code and flag signals. George finished gunnery school on September 11, 1943, and was then sent to Naval Air Station Vero Beach, Florida, where he underwent still more gunnery practice—this time in the air. George logged flight hours as a gunner in a lumbering SB2A-4 Buccaneer. The Navy saw the Buccaneer as "overweight, underpowered, and lacking maneuverability," but still found it useful as a training aircraft.

On November 4, 1943—a full year after he marched into the Morgantown

recruitment office with his father—Neese was assigned to Composite Squadron 81 (VC-81). After endless months, in which he logged thousands of training hours, George represented a serious investment of naval aviation resources. Now he needed to prove his worth to his squadron mates.

VC-81 was activated on December 22, 1943, at Naval Air Station Seattle, Washington. The "composite" purpose of this carrier-based squadron was to carry out a veritable smorgasbord of missions, including all-weather and night patrols, attack and defense, antiship and antisubmarine patrols, and reconnaissance. The original crew included 26 pilots, a personnel officer, an air combat intelligence officer (ACI), and 181 enlisted men. VC-81 had originally trained for service in the Atlantic, but by January 3, 1944, the needs of the Navy dictated they be sent to the Pacific theater.

George's first months with VC-81 were not without issue. On February 21, 1944, George was cited for "improper performance of duty," which resulted in him receiving the punishment of ten extra watches. The next incident occurred on March 13 when he was cited as being "Absent over Leave" (AOL) after failing to report back on time from liberty. Following a "captain's mast"—a form of nonjudicial punishment that can be invoked by a commanding officer—George was docked \$15 pay per month for three months (nearly one-fifth of his \$78 monthly wages). After these two incidents, George was never officially in trouble again.

After further training, which included carrier landing qualification, VC-81 was ordered aboard the carrier USS *Natoma Bay* (CVE-62) on September 14, 1944.

Neese was assigned to a TBM-1c Avenger, destined to become the most widely produced naval aircraft of all time by the end of the war. The Avenger was served by a crew of three: a pilot, a turret gunner, and radioman/bombardier/ventral gunner. One .30 caliber machine gun was mounted in the nose, a .50 caliber gun was mounted right next to the turret gunner's head in a rear-facing electrically powered turret, and a single .30 caliber hand-fired machine gun was mounted ventrally (under the tail) which was used to defend against enemy fighters attacking from below and to the rear. This gun was fired by the radioman/bombardier while standing up and bending over in the belly of the tail section, though he usually sat on a folding bench facing forward to operate the radio and to sight in bombing runs. It had folding wings for carrier operation, a maximum speed of 267 mph, and a range of 1,130 miles. Finally, the Avenger possessed a bomb bay large enough for one Bliss-Leavitt Mark 13 torpedo, a single 2,000-pound bomb, or four 500-pound bombs, depending on the needs of a given mission.

GEORGE HUNTER NEESE



Note the turrets—Neese’s position—in the rear of these TBM Avengers from USS *Natoma Bay* (CVE-62). NARA

Neese was assigned to the turret gunner position of his TBM, along with pilot Ensign (later Lieutenant) Robert Francis Voltz and Radioman (ARM1c) Michael Dennis Sweeney. Neese’s first combat actions took place in the Philippines throughout October 1944, leading up to what would become one of the largest naval battles in history. The Battle of Leyte Gulf (October 23–26, 1944) involved over 200,000 naval personnel and shattered much of what remained of the Japanese Imperial Navy, but it began more mundanely for VC-81 with bombing strikes on land targets. On October 18, VC-81 launched a bombing run directed at an airfield located on Negros Island, but due to poor visibility the strike was a failure and only resulted in the loss of a few Japanese vehicles. A second strike by squadron, launched the following day on Panay Island, met with greater success. “VC-81 planes accounted for four warehouses, at least six luggers, an 800-ton vessel, oil tanks, and a runway.”

The missions of October 20–24 consisted of silencing anti-aircraft batteries and destroying infrastructure on different unnamed islands, but on the morning of October 25, VC-81 was ordered to load their TBMs with torpedoes and stand by for further orders. Probably unbeknownst to Neese and his fellow aviators at the time, a tiny, outgunned force of American destroyers was locked in a life-and-death struggle with a reported sortie by two Japanese battleships, eight cruisers, and 12 destroyers, driving hard for scantily protected American carriers. The American destroyer escorts, part of a task force nicknamed “Taffy 3,” were putting up a valiant and bloody fight to slow the Japanese advance and were in desperate need of support.

Low cloud cover prevented much coordination between airstrikes, and the fleeing American carriers—which were close enough to receive enemy fire—launched piecemeal strikes to slow the enemy. Rather than massed assaults that would maximize pilot survival, the torpedo bombers of *Natoma Bay* and other carriers had to attack in small groups of four and five. Several VC-81 planes were hit by heavy anti-aircraft fire from the enemy warships, their crews sustaining grisly wounds. As the Japanese battlewagons closed in, VC-81’s commanding officer called his pilots together and said, “I don’t think I have to tell you men what to do. Lay your bombs on target, or you may not have a home to come back to. Good luck.”

Ensign Voltz, with Sweeney and Neese aboard, teamed up with another VC-81 pilot and three bombers from another carrier to make an attack run on a *Nagato*-class battleship with two cruisers in escort. Voltz’s torpedo churned through the wake of the battleship, which dodged hard to port, but slammed into one of the Japanese cruisers roughly amidships. Later attack runs noted the cruiser to be sinking. While turning back for the *Natoma Bay*, however, a 40 mm round hit outboard of the TBM’s starboard wheel well, gouging a huge hole that damaged the plane’s hydraulics. Luckily for Neese and Sweeney, Voltz was able to land the plane on their carrier without injury to his crew.

Against all odds, the Japanese battleships and cruisers were driven off. The resulting portion of the Battle of Leyte Gulf known as “the Battle off Samar” has since been canonized in U.S. Navy history, but there was little time for celebration on the *Natoma Bay*. Over the next few days, VC-81 remained heavily engaged into early November when Japanese naval and air forces were largely routed from the area of operations. Neese was awarded the Navy Commendation medal for “distinguishing himself by excellent service in aerial combat while engaging strong enemy forces.”

Following the operation, VC-81 received some much-needed rest on Pityliu Island, beginning on November 3, 1944. Light training kept them in fighting trim. On November 27, the squadron was ordered back to the *Natoma Bay*. The flyers supported the retaking of Mindoro in the Philippines, however most missions for VC-81 were Combat Air Patrols (CAP) keeping kamikazes at bay—a deadly new Japanese innovation. The TBM Avengers were ill-suited for this task. Neese thus saw comparatively little flight time as 1944 drew to a close. That would change during the Battle of Lingayen Gulf—as would George Hunter Neese’s luck.

A massive amphibious invasion of the largest Philippine island Luzon was in the works for January 1945. “S-Day,” the actual troop landings, would not take place until January 9, but naval bombardments and aerial attacks began to soften up Japanese targets ashore on January 6. VC-81 had a role to play, sinking enemy ships and blowing up ammunition dumps. It was after one such bombing strike that George Neese’s war ended.

Voltz, Sweeney, and Neese were returning from an overland bombing run when a Japanese Zero fighter plane descended on them from dead ahead. While other TBMs fought off attacks from additional enemy fighters and even downed one, Neese and his crew were cornered by their aggressive “Zeke.” Its first burst of machine gun fire severely damaged Voltz’s flight controls and shot away part of the TBM’s tail, sending the plane into a death spiral. Voltz miraculously regained control at 1,800 feet, but the Zeke was still in hot pursuit as Voltz pushed out over the ocean, seeking the safety of the carriers.

Neese’s rear machine gun chattered hotly, repelling more attacks by the enemy and forcing the Zeke to fire at long range, but more enemy fighters joined the hunt. Finally, Japanese bullets found their mark, riddling the rear turret—and George Neese’s head and body, killing him instantly. Sweeney was also hit in his more sheltered radioman position, but not so badly that he couldn’t move Neese out of the turret position, enough to attempt operating the rear gun himself. To Sweeney’s dismay, the firing mechanism was wrecked. The TBM was virtually defenseless.

Riddled with 400 bullet holes and with few working instruments, Voltz limped the plane back to the safety of the carriers but had to perform a water landing with broken flaps. The hard impact broke Sweeney’s shoulder and knocked him out. Voltz barely had time to inflate their life raft and drag in the semiconscious radioman before their crippled torpedo bomber slipped beneath the waves, bearing George Hunter Neese’s body into the deep.

For his gallant defense of their plane, which probably saved the lives of Sweeney and Voltz, Neese was posthumously awarded the Air Medal. The commendation cited his “aggressive fighting spirit and valiant devotion to duty.” He is memorialized at the Manila American Cemetery and Memorial in the Philippines. His name is included on the Monongalia County Honor Roll memorial, located outside the Monongalia County Courthouse in downtown Morgantown. Though Neese’s body was never recovered, his mother requested a National Cemetery marker for her son in 1963, which is placed among those of his comrades-in-arms in Grafton National Cemetery.



SOURCES FULL BIBLIOGRAPHY TO BE INCLUDED IN FINAL VERSION

SOURCES

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Full bibliographies will be included in the final draft of each biography, available later in the summer of 2024.

The West Virginia National Cemeteries Project is a program of the West Virginia Humanities Council, funded in part by the Veterans Legacy Grant Program of the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs and initiated in 2021. All biographies produced as part of this program are composed by West Virginia high school students, who conduct original research on veterans interred at the Grafton National Cemetery or the West Virginia National Cemetery, both of which are located in Grafton, Taylor County, West Virginia.

As home to one of the nation's first National Cemeteries—founded shortly after the Civil War—the community of Grafton has longstanding traditions of honoring America's veterans, including the longest continuously celebrated Memorial Day parade in the United States. The Grafton National Cemetery, located in the heart of the city and founded in 1867, is typically the endpoint of each year's parade. Since the Grafton National Cemetery began to run short of space during the 1960s, the West Virginia National Cemetery was dedicated in 1987, just a few miles outside of Grafton.

The West Virginia Humanities Council is proud to thank the following organizations for their participation in the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project: West Virginia Archives and History, the West Virginia University history department, Taylor County Historical and Genealogical Society, Taylor County Public Library, Grafton High School, and University High School.

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