

of the trainer family was an awesome 21,342. Today, over 350 T-6 Texans remain in airworthy condition. Most of the former “hacks” are based in North America and are a reminder of the importance of simplicity in training and function. If you have never seen one, visit almost any Air show, there’s sure to be one, sometimes even a flight of four in a fly-by. Or visit [www.giftflight.com](http://www.giftflight.com) to schedule your own ride with Fighter Command.



North American AT-6 Texan

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## **For The Freeman Family, Flying Is In Their Blood Several have had distinguished careers in the Navy and aviation**

By Peter Bacque

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The golden wings are dull from long and arduous duty.

But they gleam with pride.

When Matthew Freeman won his wings of gold as a naval aviator, the metal insignia he donned was the one his father, Gary, had worn as a Navy pilot.

And those well-worn wings were the very ones his grandfather, retired Rear Adm. Dewitt L. Freeman of Louisa, pinned on when he was a young Navy pilot in 1944.

Witt Freeman’s daughter, Susan Freeman O’Donnell of Virginia Beach, also wore a set of her father’s wings when she graduated from Navy flight training.

“They passed down through all three of us,” said Matt Freeman, a 26-year-old Naval Academy graduate who went into the Marine Corps. “I have a lot to live up to.”

The golden insignia is a warfare qualification awarded to naval aviators in the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard. It consists of a fouled anchor, the traditional symbol of the naval service, on a shield and centered on a pair of wings.



Gary Freeman pins gold naval aviator wings on his son, Matthew Freeman. Grandfather, Rear Admiral Dewitt Freeman looks on. R. Adm. Freeman won the original wings in November 1944 and passed them on to his son Gary in 1978. The original wings were 61 years old when pinned onto the third generation naval aviator.

“They’re not as shiny as everyone else’s,” Matt Freeman said in a phone interview from Cherry Point, NC, “but they definitely have character.”

The flying Freemans have had distinguished careers in the Navy and in aviation.

A much-admired military leader, Witt Freeman, 82, was one of the service’s early jet pilots. He went on to command the aircraft carrier Saratoga before capping his career by making admiral.

In civilian retirement, he led the push to build the Louisa County Airport, named now in his honor.

Gary, 53, graduated from the Naval Academy before becoming a naval test pilot. Today, he’s a world record-holding senior experimental test pilot with corporate jet manufacturer Gulfstream Aerospace Corp. in Savannah, Georgia.

O’Donnell, 49, went into the Navy from Florida State University, becoming one of the first women to qualify as naval aviator. She is now a pilot with American Airlines and flies internationally.

“It’s a testament to the example of my dad that we all felt like following in his footsteps,” she said.

Becoming a pilot qualified to land on an aircraft carrier is one of the most notoriously difficult accomplishments in flight. As a result, stacking up three generations of naval aviators in a row from one family – with a pair of siblings to boot – is notably rare.

The Naval Historical Center in Washington doesn’t keep track of how many families can boast of having three generations of naval aviators, according to center spokesman Jack Green.



(L to R) Lt. JG Gary Freeman, Susan Freeman, and their father Rear Admiral Dewitt L. Freeman. Susan was an ROTC student at the University of Florida. Upon graduation, she went through naval flight training and became a naval aviator.

“For some families, it’s the family business,” he said.

But “Women have not been flying [in the Navy] all that long, so a brother-sister team would be that much rarer,” Green pointed out.

“There haven’t been many opportunities to have three generations of naval aviators” in a family, said Lt. Sean Robertson with the Naval Air Training Command in Corpus Christi, Texas. “It’s not an easy thing to do. Flying is very demanding.”

Witt Freeman says he views it as a compliment that his daughter, son and grandson all decided to take up the dangerous challenge of military flying. But he gives credit for the children’s success to his late wife, Mary, who “practically raised them single-handedly while I was on those many long deployments.”

Still, said Matt Freeman, “If I succeed in being half the man and half the officer my dad and grandfather are, I’ll be a happy man. Honestly, the proudest moment of my life was when my father and grandfather were on stage the day I got my wings.”

Witt Freeman reflects that pride back on his grandson and his children.

Despite all his long life with its official honors and high responsibilities, the family patriarch says, “Those kids, that’s what it’s all about.”

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*Photos courtesy of the Freeman family.*

