THE AUTHOR, A VOLUNTEER AT THE AIR FORCE FLIGHT TEST MUSEUM, DESCRIBES WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO RESCUE AND THEN RESTORE A RARE DOUGLAS SKYKNIGHT — A NEARLY FORGOTTEN HOT (AND COLD) WAR JET

SAVING WILLIE THE WHALE

BY WILLIAM J. SIMONE

All the hard work paid off when the completed Skyknight project was rolled out on the Edwards ramp.

First flight of the XF3D-1 took place on 23 March 1948 with test pilot Russell Thaw

Everything tucked up, the XF3D-1 airborne at Muroc. The prototype had been trucked to Muroc from the Douglas facility at El Segundo. It was immediately obvious that the aircraft was underpowered.

Over the last seven-years the dedicated Air Force Flight Test Museum volunteers, led by Mike Glenn, have been busy restoring aircraft to be displayed when the museum moves to the Edwards AFB Main Gate, thus allowing public access. They donate their time for a full week once a month. And they are nearly mostly all Navy vets!

One recently-restored aircraft is a rare Douglas F3D-2Q Skyknight. Affectionately called "Willie the Whale" by Marine pilots and considered an "old man's airplane" by all services. The F3D also was lovingly known as the "Drut" — turd spelled backwards!

As with many early military jets, the Skyknight suffered from being underpowered, however it easy to fly and smoothly responsive to the controls. Despite its shortcomings, it racked up an impressive record in the Korean War.

This article will present a brief look into its development, operational record, and the restoration of one of the few surviving F3Ds. This is not an in depth study of the aircraft, which is well beyond the scope of this article, but rather to give the reader a summary only of this oft-forgotten aircraft.

BRIEF HISTORY OF F3D DEVELOPMENT

The history of the F3D Skyknight can be traced back to late 1945, when Navy representatives began discussions with aircraft manufacturers about requirements for a jet-powered carrier-based radar-equipped night fighter