



Aviation Artist: Michael O'Neal

Painter and Historian

By Natalie B. David

Michael O'Neal is a historian. In addition to writing and research, he translates his passion and interest of World War I aviation into visuals, depicting his subjects with paint on canvas.

A member of the League of WWI Aviation Historians since the age of 16, it can be said that O'Neal's art is the culmination of a life's work. At age 17 O'Neal began to chronicle biographies of New Jersey's World War I pilots. He expected the numbers never to climb higher than 40; to date he has written more than 747 biographies of these courageous aviators from his home state.

"Over the years I had accumulated a list of aircrew that went from what I thought was going to be 40, to 359, to the number that it is now, which is 747," says O'Neal. "When I read their stories, look up their military records and track down their

families, in some cases, the stories for these paintings come out of that experience."

One of the most crucial moments for O'Neal, as pilot, historian and painter, was a meeting with one of his subjects, a World War I pilot with the 213 Aero Squadron named Phillip Kissam. O'Neal was 18, Kissam 83.

"What I found interesting was that even though we were 65 years apart in age, the one thing that we had in common that was similar, despite the fact that I was flying in modern times and he had been flying in World War I, was that the experience and the beauty of flying and the enjoyment that we got out of it was exactly the same," says O'Neal. "So we had plenty to talk about.

Just before O'Neal's solo flight, Kissam bestowed his World War I pilot's wings to the young aviator, a pivotal piece that he uses today in his speeches and presentations

on his World War I aviation research. The painter also pays tribute to Kissam in his painting "Dear Old SPAD," named for Kissam's comments upon seeing old photographs of his wartime airplane.

O'Neal paints as a memorial to the men, like Kissam, who put their lives on the line in the first Great War. "My motivation for painting is to try and put on canvas the images of some of these stories that have special meaning for me, being a New Jersey guy. And," adds O'Neal, "I know for a fact will never get painted by anybody else because there's simply no commercial need for it."

Though a commercial need for O'Neal's depictions may escape him, his paintings have been commended and lauded by the aviation community. O'Neal's work has appeared several times on the cover of *Over The Front*, the journal of the League



of WWI Aviation Historians, as well as within the pages of Falconer, World War I Aero, Aviation History, and Aviation Week & Space Technology. He has also won numerous awards, including the ASAA “James V. Roy Award” Best of Show, the ASAA Merit Award, the Simuffite Horizons of Flight Best of Show, the EAA Air Venture “Par Excellence” Award, as well as the Thornton Hooper Award (League of WWI Aviation Historians, Best Artwork) three times and the ASAA Gold Founders Award, twice.

Most recently, his 2008 painting, “Valentine’s Day,” which also graced the spring 2008 cover of *Over the Front*, was selected to be one of 57 pieces shown at the American Society of Aviation Artists annual International Aviation Art exhibition, to be held this year through September at the Museum of Flight in Seattle, Washington.

“A lot of the stuff that you see painted is all Red Baron and all the aces and that stuff, but the guys who were doing the rest of the heavy lifting over there were not well known,” says O’Neal of his artwork, eschewing his accolades. “I feel like I have a certain responsibility to make sure that what these guys did is not forgotten.”

Shortly after O’Neal took up painting,

he discovered the American Society of Aviation Artists. O’Neal attended the annual seminar on aviation painting and learned the tricks of the trade, following in the footsteps of aviation-artist greats Keith



Ferris, Jo Kotula and Paul Rendel. He currently serves as Treasurer of the society.

“That organization has been the single most critical player in me learning how to express this stuff in paint,” says O’Neal. “Without them I’d be painting stick figure airplanes without much historical accuracy or artistic value. To me that’s the most important thing.”

A man out of time, O’Neal learns an added realism for his artwork up in the

skies, flying his 1930 Fleet 7. The antique, open cockpit bi-plane allows O’Neal a similar vantage point to that of his subjects, and leaves him similarly susceptible to the elements.

“I get to see the same perspective that these guys in World War I saw. I’m not fighting people, obviously, but I’m flying the same altitudes” says O’Neal of piloting the Fleet 7. “You get up there with a pair of goggles on and a leather helmet and you get this big old biplane with the win and the wires, the wind on your face, the deafening roar of the engine in front of you. You have all of that, which these guys also had in World War I.”

Such a perspective influences O’Neal’s approach to his craft—from how to paint airframes of the era to the visibility in an open-cockpit aircraft—and often comes through in acrylic just from the painter’s own immersion in the skies.

As for transitioning from the historical to the pictorial, O’Neal chalks it up to fate: “When you start doing things when you’re young, you never know where they’re going to lead you.” →

For more information, visit www.michaelonealaviationart.com.