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For Immediate Release:

‘Below the Radar’

Athens’ native retires following successful career as Navy pilot

ATHENS, Ga. – (May 17, 2018) – The late Reverend Jon Appleton of Athens First Baptist Church used the phrase “without design for recognition” as he penned the boyhood achievements of Ryan Murphy in his recommendation for appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy to Congressman Doug Barnard, Jr., in the winter of 1991.

Reverend Appleton knew Murphy well from the many days they spent together in summer bible school activities. A quiet, friendly, and humble young man, Murphy focused on doing the right thing, no matter his endeavor.

Graduating from Cedar Shoals High School in 1992, young Murphy left Athens for Annapolis, for the beginning of a rewarding career. He obtained a B.S. degree in Mechanical Engineering from the U.S. Naval Academy and an M.S. degree in Systems Engineering from the Navy Post Graduate School, while serving as a Navy combat and test pilot.

Twenty-six years later, Commander J. Ryan (Flopper) Murphy brought that career to conclusion with his recent retirement in March. Colleagues, friends, and family honored him at NAS Pax River, the Navy’s premier test flight center.

Murphy had his eyes set on the skies as early as the first grade, as evident by a response to an assignment for his first-grade teacher. He said he wanted to be a pilot when he grew up. His first airplane ride was at an early age, taking off from Athens-Ben Epps Airport with local attorney Gary Blasingame, of [Blasingame, Burch, Garrard & Ashley, P.C.](#)

Since then, as a Navy combat and test pilot, he has flown 47 different aircraft models.

Life as a naval aviator has been portrayed and often embellished in movies such as “Top Gun,” and Murphy would tell you that while those movies do much to attract aspiring pilots, the business of consistently launching and safely returning to the deck of an aircraft carrier never becomes routine by normal standards. Even with 3,900 flight hours and more than 630 carrier landings in the F-18 Hornet, night traps always awaken “butterflies in the stomach,” which he notes is a good thing because it keeps you sharp and attentive, and night traps deserve your full respect.

While an aircraft carrier may be 1,100 feet in length, for a “trap” (tail hook catching the arresting cable) to be successful, the aircraft must touch down within a designated area, spanning less than 200 feet while the ship’s flight deck is moving forward at an angle and bobbing with the ocean sea-state.



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Every landing is graded both for critique and competitiveness amongst pilots of the air wing. Murphy's flight jacket bears a patch identifying him as among the top 10 pilots in the air wing for landing proficiency.

During 22 years of active duty, Murphy deployed four times aboard various carriers, with all four of them involving combat duty in the Middle East and/or Afghanistan, and one deployment during joint duty with the U.S. Air Force Air Expeditionary Force to the Middle East, where he served as Chief of Master Air Attack Plans.

Most notable among all deployments was immediately after September 11, 2001 with VFA-82 aboard the USS Theodore Roosevelt during Operation Enduring Freedom. Following the 9/11 attacks, VFA-82 led all squadrons with missions into Afghanistan. These missions were nighttime, could last up to eight hours, and required as many as four in-flight refuelings.

From 2013 to 2015, Murphy served first as Executive Officer and then Commanding Officer of VFA-143 (The World Famous Pukin' Dogs) a historical Navy squadron dating back to WWII, which is presently an F-18 Super Hornet squadron based at NAS Oceana in Virginia Beach, VA.

Within this period, VFA-143 was a recipient of the coveted Battle E award, designating it as the top ranked combat-ready F-18 squadron in the Navy.

In addition to assignments with carrier operational squadrons, Murphy served three tours at the Navy's flight test center at NAS Patuxent River, MD. Two of the assignments included attending and graduating from the U.S. Navy Test Pilot School, followed by flight testing with VX-23 involving F-18 and T-45 aircraft, and a tour as a TPS flight instructor.

Following his command tour with VFA-143 at Oceana NAS, he returned to the Navy's test pilot community at Pax River for a third tour, serving as the Director of Testing and Evaluation for the Navy's and Marine Corps' new Joint Strike Fighter, the F-35 Lightning II. His lead of the 800-member team of military and civilian personnel focused on flight testing of the F-35B and F-35C, for certification of combat and carrier ops.

Murphy's exemplary service has been recognized with the awarding of a variety of medals and citations, including the Defense Meritorious Service Medal, two Meritorious Service Medal, nine Air Medals (one Individual Action with Combat Distinguishing Device, 8 Strike/Flight), four Navy Commendation Medals (with Combat Distinguishing Device), a Navy Achievement Medal, and various campaign and unit citations.

Selected for promotion to Captain and picked to lead operational testing of the naval variant of the F-35C at Edwards AFB, Murphy chose, instead, to transition to civilian status this March.

When asked where his future will take him, he simply smiled and humbly stated "staying under the radar ... somewhere where there's an airplane to fly."

Boeing will make sure he has an airplane to fly and test. In June, his flight suit will bear the Boeing emblem in place of his Navy Wings of Gold.

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