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THE IOWA LAWYER

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Spotlight on service

"Top Gun" turned attorney discusses his time as a fighter pilot

By Melissa Higgins, Communications Dept.

What do flying a fighter jet and putting together a case for trial have in common? More than you'd think, says attorney and military veteran Donald Beattie.

Beattie practices law in Des Moines and says his experience flying in the Marine Corps taught him the necessary mindset to be successful in the courtroom.

"The Marines never retreat, they always advance," he explained. "That's what I do in practice. I never get on the defense and never let anyone bully me or my clients."

Beattie was nearing the end of his senior year in college when he got two important letters in the mail in the same week: his service induction notice, part of "Nixon's lottery," and his law school acceptance letter from Drake University.

Plans to pursue a law degree would take a four-year hiatus, as Beattie met with recruiters and ended up joining the Marines' flight program. It was October 1970 and Beattie had no previous flight experience. His father, a World War II Seabee, was proud. His mother, he says, "freaked out."

Beattie went to Officer Candidate School, then flight school in Pensacola,

Florida, before ending up at the Marine Corps Air Station in El Toro, California. He trained flying F-4 Phantoms, learning air combat tactics, until his Lieutenant Colonel decided he wanted to make that squadron the number one fighting force in the U.S. Military air arsenal. They became so proficient that almost all of them graduated from Marine Corps Fighter Weapons School, more popularly known as "Top Gun."

His elite group, known as the "Death Rattlers," got advanced warning about a major war brewing in the Middle East. They trained for almost a year and packed their bags to be deployed to fight alongside Israeli fighters. The deployment never happened.

So while many of his cohorts served on the frontlines in Vietnam, Beattie stayed stateside. But even without a combat theater, he witnessed loss, including several friends and flight instructors who were killed during training missions.

"Training is far more dangerous than combat because you're flying with inexperienced people," he explained.

Beattie knew the risk to his own safety. He was told that there was a 50-50 chance

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Donald Beattie is a graduate of Drake University Law School and practices at the Beattie Law Firm in Des Moines. Pictured here with his flight helmet, Beattie was an Instructor in Air Combat Tactics, having graduating from Marine Corps Fighter Weapons School. From 1971 – 1974, Don was a Naval Flight Officer in the Marine Corps.

he would someday have to eject from his plane and a 50-50 chance he would not survive it. Luckily, he never had to eject, though he came close during an incident with a malfunctioning canopy light.

He knew the risk, but took it anyway, alongside other young men with the same penchant for danger.

"We were a pretty crazy group," Beattie said, as he told stories about what happened during their midnight missions thousands of miles out into the Pacific.

Once, he and a friend decided to push the limits of elevation. F-4s were only permitted to go 60,000 feet but on that particular day, during a NORAD air defense mission, they decided to push 90,000.

"You could actually see the curve of the Earth. We were literally on the edge of space," he said. With the same spectacular view as a satellite, they could see all the way up to Alaska and all the way down to the Baja Coast.

They also tested the speed ceiling, reaching more than 2,000 miles per hour during one mission.

"That might have been the scariest thing I've ever done in my life."

Because of the great risk associated with making flying a long-term career, in 1974 Beattie decided to leave the Marines and come back to Drake Law School. He graduated, passed the bar and set up a practice in Des Moines.

After several decades of success in the legal world, Beattie couldn't nip that desire to get back into the air. About 15 years ago, he and another attorney, Frank Comito, purchased a four-seater plane and decided to take flight lessons. They began the lessons, but neither could pass the physical to get approved for a pilot's license.

"Here we were, two lawyers with an airplane and we couldn't fly," Beattie chuckled. They ended up selling the plane about five years ago, perhaps a blessing in disguise because of the extreme commitment it takes to be a successful pilot.

"When I got out, I said I would never fly again because there is so much preparation. I have such a tremendous amount of respect for aviation. We lawyers get distracted very easily. We're always thinking about our cases."

So for now, he stays landlocked, dedicated instead to his practice and his clients.

"I can't die practicing law, so after I got out of the Marines, life has been pretty easy."



Second Lieutenant Donald Beattie, pictured in his Marine Corps uniform, in December 1970. He had just returned home on leave, after completing Officer Candidate School, and was headed next to Pensacola, Florida, to begin flight training for the F-4 Phantom.

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