

THE NAVY YEARS

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AFTER THE JAPANESE ATTACK on Pearl Harbor, there simply was no question about it in my mind. I was destined to enroll in the military and go off to war and fight the bad guys just as soon as our government would have me. First I enrolled in the Army A6 Pilot Cadet program and went through all of the tests, physical etc, and even got sworn in. Shortly thereafter, I received a letter from the war department telling me that the quota for army pilots was full at the time and that I could go into the Air Corps to become a bombardier, navigator, or as an option take an honorable discharge. I took the discharge and promptly sidestepped to the Navy Air Corps and enlisted. Rather than wait for the pilot openings, I had a chance to go in as a Combat Air-Crew Flight Engineer and decided to grab it, considering my young experiences already acquired as an aircraft mechanic. In retrospect, this was one of the best decisions of my life, since it provided me with a base for my future career in aviation. Of course, at the time, this was not planned, except by destiny.

Boot camp was fought at the “Battle of Millington;” a Naval Base located near Memphis, Tennessee. If you were in the military, you may agree that the “boot” experience will forever be imprinted upon your mind. I believe it serves me well to this day. The shaving of our heads, severe discipline, involvement with Naval traditions and our platoon marching to the tune of “Sky Anchors Away,” for this budding aviator it made me proud to be serving our nation in time of war. I still love to march. Ask our three boys! They were each taught the technique when we took walks around the neighborhood, as I called cadence. “Your left...your right...your left right left. I left my wife and forty-eight kids, an old gray mare and a peanut stand.... your left...your right...your left.”.

After graduation day, there was an indulgence of generous quantities of very low

octane beer they served we “Airedales”, at a local downtown bar named “Daisy May’s”... I marvel at how I am able to remember seemingly unimportant things like the name of that bar, when I can hardly remember my next-door neighbor’s name. It is my theory that in later years, ones mental “hard drive” becomes so full of trivialities that at some point, there is little room for more important information to enter. Could that possibly be? If there were just some way of dumping old useless data from ones mind and permitting new things to enter, we’d all be better off. Hell, why not. This system works quite well on our real computer hard drives, and a fortune lies in front of the person who develops the process! Maybe I’ll work on that idea!

Shipping out to the next ‘Battlefield’, our class traveled by troop train directly to the Navy Mechanic School in Norman, Oklahoma, then on to Naval Air Station Cecil Field, in Jacksonville, Florida, for our Gunnery training. This all lead to my assignment to serve with squadron VPB-204 as a Flight Engineer on Martin PBM-5’s in Panama’s Coco Solo Naval Air Station for the duration. Anti-submarine patrol and air-sea rescue were our missions, with average flights of well over 5 hours. Many lasted over 8 hours, with missions all the way to Bermuda. Circling the fleet in an air-sea rescue mode while they were in operation was called “Dumbo.” These flights could last a long time but the boredom was occasionally broken up by one of the carrier guys tucking his Corsair propeller between our float and the hull, while flying in formation. What a sight. Unfortunately, I did not own a camera to record these moments of excitement. From the launching of PBM to the delightful sound of those 2,000 HP engines, and the occasional jet assisted take-offs, to “making the buoy” and beaching our machine. It was all an experience, never to be forgotten.



PHOTO # 6 - CAPTION

MARTIN PBM PATROL BOMBER

R. Ward Collection

The PBM was a slow but powerful pure seaplane twin-engine patrol bomber, carrying a crew of seven. Manufactured by Martin and powered with a pair of Pratt & Whitney R2800 engines, it grossed out at 56,000 pounds. It carried twin 50 caliber turrets in the nose, amidships and tail, as well as two bomb bays. Submarine hunting was done visually, as well as with radar and the use of radio sonobuoys. These small radios were dropped in patterns around a suspected area and the radio signals triangulated to determine the position of a submarine. Nothing in flight happened very fast with this historic aircraft but we did have bunks and a full galley aboard. Flight food rations were exceptional, except for the rather bitter “Donald Duck” brand orange juice. Then there was the “raisin bread.”

Raisin bread became commonplace for the following reason, as reported directly to me from one of the Mess Cooks. He said that it was virtually impossible to eliminate the weevils from the flour used in baking. These little black critters apparently loved the tropical climate environment. It was an annoyance for all of us, but picking the weevils out of the white bread was part of the eating ritual. Sure, the sailors complained but we picked out the weevils and ate the bread anyhow. The problem was almost resolved when they started placing more and more raisins in the bread. The weevils seemed to meld into the overall piece of bread, but the raisins were larger than the weevils and you still had to pick them out. The solution? Grind up the raisins! That ended the problem. The weevils

were finally nowhere to be seen. Our ordnance-man was generally in charge of the galley when on patrol in our PBM. We never complained about his cooking, otherwise this duty might be passed along to the complainer. Speaking of chow! Who ever having served at the “Gitmo” Navy base on the island of Cuba can forget the great food? My memory seems to recall that their cooking won many Navy fleet awards.

Our seaplane ramp sat directly under and alongside a cliff leading up to the main airfield. Being quite isolated from the rest of the base, we were able to mill around in anything from dungarees and T-shirt to just a pair of navy boxer shorts. I recall one day, when some officer from the base brought a Wave officer down on the ramp and she got all bent out of shape at the sight of so many men out of uniform. To his credit, I heard her escort say to her – “Just what the hell do you expect? You asked to come down here to men’s country and now you want to complain?” That ended that! She probably had dreams that night of what was under all of our shorts.

PBM Operations taught me a lot. The launching and beaching of one of these flying boats was a thing to behold, as was operating at sea from a seaplane tender. These great experiences are imprinted and etched in my mind. Since the PBM was a pure seaplane, except for a very limited number of PBM-5A amphibian versions, they were not easily stored. Most were ‘deep six’d’ by the Navy. A few made it into the civilian world for use by an array of adventurous opportunists, but water operations were difficult without the proper manpower and beaching equipment. Unfortunately there are literally none left, save a single later model PBM-5A that is now being restored. What a terrible shame! This machine performed its duty in a magnificent manner, but the forthcoming generations will not

appreciate its rich history as they might with our other war birds.

To say that I was proud to be a part of this historic squadron is a gross understatement. Being able to finally apply our training in things of the real military aviation world provided this young airman with a sense of accomplishment, valued to this day.

The designer of the VPB-204 Insignia shown on the bracelet that I wore throughout my Navy tour had this to say about his work. “The squadron insignia is one in which all members of the squadron can take pride. It tells a story, in itself, much better than could be told in words. It points out the past endeavors and future aims of the squadron; it stands for some of the individuals and yet gives a picture of the whole; it tells a part of the story of the war against submarines and the squadron’s place in this type of warfare.

The Indian has long been a symbol of America. He has always been thought of as a crafty hunter and a foe to reckon with. And so the Indian head was chosen as being symbolic of the squadron, peering over a cloud stalking his prey, the submarine. But the insignia tells more than that. The Indian is a hunter and as such he must have fitting equipment to supplement his natural talents. He is a warrior, thus he must have adequate weapons with which to combat his enemies. Therefore, our symbolic Indian is seen holding a lantern to hunt down the foe and a flat nose depth bomb to destroy his enemy.

The touch of red on his war plume is a constant reminder to those who are familiar with the meaning of the insignia, that members of the squadron have lost their lives in action. On his headband can be found the victory “V” both in code and lettering.”



PHOTO # 7 – CAPTION

SQUADRON VP 204 BRACELET INSIGNIA & COMBAT AIRCREW WINGS

R. Ward Collection

I think of so many things that made life interesting during my VPB-204 tour in Panama. Not all of them relate to flying. Among many, the following two incidents are impregnated in the crevasses of my mind. They both relate to "breaking points".

Some detached duty would move our flight operations from Coco Solo NAS to the NAS Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, better known as Gitmo. During one of these tours, myself along with a couple of my inseparable aircrew mates, namely Dick Bland, a Flight Engineer, and "Woody" Woodruff, an Aircrew Ordinance man, decided to make a beer run across the bay to frequent the infamous bars at Caimanera. These two guys accompanied me throughout my Navy tour, and were simply fun to be around. No one who sampled Cuba's famous and powerful "Chief Hatuey" Beer will ever forget the colorful picture of the old Yaino Indian printed on the label of each bottle. Chief Hatuey was involved in some

Spanish rebellions during the early 16th century. His name, in fact his rebellion, continues to live on even today, through the distribution of his high-octane brew in certain parts of the world!

Bland was a jovial individual who enjoyed throwing verbal and sometimes abrasive darts toward anyone with whom he associated. It was just his way! We all took it in stride and had just as much fun thrusting our verbal attacks back at him. Where it went wrong that day, I'll never know, but for some reason while the three of us sat around a small table in a cramped and humid Caimanera Bar, Bland was laying it on to Woody hot and heavy, when apparently the breaking point was reached. Woody picked up his beer bottle and stated in very clear terms - "Bland, one more word out of you and the 'Chief' will kiss your head!" You guessed it! Bland kept it up and indeed the "Chief" kissed his head!" The only salvation was that the bottle must have been made from cheap glass or else Bland's head was

extremely hard. Glass flew everywhere. For reasons I don't understand, Bland was able to get on his feet while uttering the following words; "Woody, you'll never hear another word from me." With that, he strolled out of the bar and down the dirt street to wait for the Navy boat to take us back to our seaplane ramp at Gitmo. Bland indeed kept his word. From that date on until we were discharged, the two of them never spoke, unless they were flight crewing on the same PBM. I remained very good friends with both, but on an individual basis.

I was never able to track these two Guys down after the War, though I have tried. Dick Bland was from Faribault, Minnesota. A few years ago, I made contact with his old high school class reunion chairperson. She determined that he was deceased. Woody came from New York. If anyone reading this knows his whereabouts, I would like to hear from him. It sure would be fun to look him up and buy him a case of Chief Hatuey beer. I sure as hell won't "bug" him though.

On a more humorous but ultimately sad note, I share the following incident. It happened at the mess hall at Coco Solo NAS, Panama. Though I vividly do recall the name of the Aircrewman involved, I am going to change the name, since I don't know his whereabouts at this time, nor even if he is still with us. We'll call him "Harris".

It was while standing in a long line for chow at the base mess hall. Lines were never fun, but if you wanted to eat, you stood in line. It was as simple as that. To this day, I refuse to stand in line at a restaurant, and my wife does not quite understand why. My recollection about this particular scene is that I was in line for about 15 minutes and had worked my way to within 5 or so feet from the table where I would pick up my metal tray and pick up my chow. Standing directly in front of me was "Harris." Literally, when Harris was ready to pick up his tray, the Officer of the Day (OD), with his Officer's cap tucked under his left arm, walked directly in front of Harris, scooped up a tray and proceeded to sample the food. This of course was part of the daily duty of the "OD." Well! That action did not

agree with Harris whatsoever. In an obvious fit of rage, Harris spouted out in a loud and clear manner...*Sir! If you're so God Damn Hungry, why don't you eat the scrambled eggs on your hat!* The OD, without saying a word, continued in a gentlemanly manner through the chow line, sat down, ate an abbreviated meal and departed without a word to anyone. I sure wish I could remember who that OD was. Perhaps he'll read this and make himself known to me.

Before continuing, you should know that Harris was somewhat different. He was a loner, very skinny and his head resembled that of a skeleton. As I recall, he had very few associates, though frankly, he was always very friendly toward me and I reciprocated during any of our brief encounters. One thing seemed to be very noticeable however; he was constantly being ridiculed by a lot of the other guys over his looks. We've probably all seen this action occur during our travel down life's path. Pick on the weak one in an effort to give one's self strength could be the theory. Have you ever seen a bunch of chickens' gang up on another of their kind? I have! One chicken will peck at the neck of another chicken. Soon another will peck at the same spot. Then another will peck, and on and on until all of the chickens draw blood. All of this directed toward the weak chicken. In retrospect, the whole thing reminds me of the incident with Harris. Perhaps a "shrink" would prove me wrong, but I'm convinced to this day that his frontal attack on the OD, that day in the chow line was the result induced by the action of many of the other men pecking on the weak "chicken" over a period of time. Shortly after the incident Harris was eliminated from the squadron roster of VPB-204 and shipped back to the States. There seemed to be little doubt in anyone's mind that he received a Section 8 discharge. The story however, does not quite end here. In 1952 I started my own Aircraft Fixed Base Flight & Maintenance Operation in Three Rivers, Michigan, where we still reside. Having purchased N79276, a Cessna UC78 Bamboo Bomber on the Military surplus market for about \$600.00, I rebuilt and configured it for my charter airplane. On this particular day, in 1952, I was hired to make an overnight trip to Detroit City Airport. After dropping off my passengers and

securing the aircraft, I went outside of the old terminal building and hailed a cab to take me to a downtown hotel. As I entered the cab, I could not believe my eyes. The driver was none other than Harris! Thinking that he would recognize me, I offered a friendly hand toward him, only to discover that he apparently did not recognize me. I uttered something like...."Isn't your name Harris?" When he acknowledged that he was, I reminded him that we were in the same squadron in Panama. His comment was..."I don't remember too much about those days." How very sad, but isn't it human nature to allow painful experiences to fade? How very fortunate many of us are that we can still clearly remember many of those military days as we continue our approach down life's glide path.

Our current family magic carpet is a Beechcraft Model D50 Excalibur conversion model D50C. This model sports a pair of Lycoming IO720 400 HP engines. Having owned a "Twin Bonanza" since 1977, this fantastic flying machine has taken us to many parts of the world, especially in the Caribbean. In February 1986, we embarked on an interesting trip with stops at the Turks and Cacos, San Juan Puerto Rico, Curacao, Panama, Costa Rica, and back to Three Rivers. The stop at Panama was motivated by my desire to retrace the footsteps of my youthful Naval Airman days. To some extent, this could have been a mistake, because nothing is ever as one imagines it to be, after that many years. Perhaps one should not tamper with memories of this sort. I just don't know! On the other hand, I'm glad to have accomplished the visit for a number of reasons, among which includes staying at the historical George Washington Hotel in Colon. While operating out of Coco Solo NAS in Colon Panama, I was always in awe when I looked at this structure, which of course was off limits to the likes of us. This hotel was constructed during the construction of the Panama Canal and looks directly toward the Atlantic side of its entrance. The majesty of the building was shrouded in a cloud of neglect, but I was able to sense the rich history in a real way, while walking the halls. Naturally, the highlight of that trip was for me, accompanied by Donna, to set foot on the old seaplane ramp. Taking a cab, with a very friendly

Panamanian driver, we set out to the old abandoned base. I was not prepared for the emotion that I experienced in a very odd way. It was like walking in another person's shoes as I strolled along the ramps, which were so active in those early years in the 40's. The old derelict tower was still there and even a few parts of the old radio equipment, but the maintenance hangars were completely gone, save the metal door tracks, still attached to the concrete. One of the buoys was sitting by the launching ramp and I stood there like some nut case, trying to hide my tears from Donna, while I touched it, in an effort to refresh my soul. How very small the whole placed looked. It was hard to conceive just how many huge PBM Mariners sat on that seemingly small ramp. The barracks were turned into a school, which unfortunately was locked up over the weekend. I would have enjoyed seeking out the spot where I bunked down. Perhaps I could have spotted a glimpse of the ghost of the guy who used to go around the barracks almost every evening with an electric toaster, loaves of bread and some cheese. Order up a snack and he'd provide a toasted cheese sandwich on demand, for a price of course. This enterprising young airman was looked upon as some sort of a weird loaner. His prime off-hours activity was running an enterprising business hustling toasted cheese sandwiches around the barracks. Why would any red-blooded American airman not take advantage of the great sights and sounds of such places as the Copacabana nightclub in Colon? At my current stage of my life, it's easy to see who the dummy was. That guy, who's name slips my mind, has to be the retired president of some multi-national Corporation, sitting on his 75 foot yacht, while someone else brings him a toasted cheese sandwich and a beer. All in all, I like to think that VPB-204 helped develop some pretty good aviators and individuals with honorable character. The latter being a trait, it seems to me, which may be more difficult to find these days.

Dick WARD