

WRIGHT



AIRCREW---NAVAL AIR FORCE



SHORT STORIES ABOUT NAVAL AVIATION

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Naval Aviation is high adventure, and there are too many stories to tell. However, I will relate a few short tales to give you a broad picture of life in the Air Navy. I certainly believe that Naval Aviation can and will supply enough excitement for most people. Here are the stories, informally told.

THAT WAS QUITE A JOLT

Air squadrons have more than just flyers---there are administrative clerks, mechanics, metal-smiths, electricians, electronics-technicians, cooks, medical-technicians and supply-clerks, most of which do not fly. Once in a while, though, one of the “ground-pounders” becomes interested, and requests to accompany an aircrew on patrol. And so it was that a Storekeeper Chief Petty Officer found our skipper in a good mood and was permitted to ride in the rear compartment of an AF Guardian aircraft for a morning flight from the carrier USS Mindoro. He was told that the catapult would be a quick surge, and that the carrier landing at the end of the patrol would be a real jolt---and that he should prepare himself for it.

After the patrol, as the plane moved around in the landing pattern, preparing to come aboard, I was standing on the cat-walk (*a sunken walkway all along the flight deck on both sides*) to watch the aircraft-recovery operation. The guest passenger, the Storekeeper, was bracing himself for the jolt, expecting the worst. As the plane reached a point about 150 feet above the water behind the carrier, the Landing Signal Officer (LSO) saw that the plane was not properly approaching the flight deck, and therefore gave the pilot a wave-off (*a visual signal with large paddles, to tell the pilot to go around and try again*). At that instant the pilot pushed the engine throttle all the way forward to increase air speed---as he did, the single engine just stopped, instantly. I remember the abrupt silence. The plane tilted, and took a dive into the water along the left side of the ship. (at about the height of an 8-story building).

Since all aircrew members wore crash helmets, and were strapped-in with seatbelts and shoulder harnesses, they experienced only minor injuries as the

large, heavy plane impacted the sea. All the regular aircrew knew immediately that they had crashed. However the guest passenger thought this was a normal landing, and certainly agreed that it was "quite a jolt." He did not know anything had gone wrong until the water started coming into the plane as it was sinking. He and the rest of the crew did not waste any time exiting the expensive plane, which disappeared in a couple of minutes. A plane-guard helicopter---which was always hovering on the starboard side of the ship while aircraft were being recovered---soon picked them out of the water and brought them back aboard. I just happened to have my camera with me on the cat-walk and recorded the entire event on film. This kind of experience is to be expected in carrier flight operations, but that was the last time the Storekeeper requested to go on air patrol.

LOST AT SEA

We were crossing the Atlantic Ocean, returning to the USA from 3 months in the Mediterranean Sea. Earlier that day, I had been on air anti-submarine patrol for 4 hours, and had landed back aboard the carrier a few hours ago. It was now twilight, and the carrier USS Mindoro was again recovering aircraft, when a plane crashed onto the flight-deck and seriously damaged the carrier's arresting gear. Two more planes were still waiting to come aboard, and they were low on fuel---they had been patrolling for nearly 4 hours. This was a dilemma for the carrier, because the planes' fuel would be gone before the deck repair could be completed. Although we were about 150 miles at sea, there was a chance that the planes might reach a coastal landing field---so the carrier gave the flight-leader a vector (course) to the nearest coastal field. The planes departed immediately. After a while, the carrier realized that the vector given had been erroneous---but the planes could not be contacted because they had switched their radios away from the ship's frequency.

After a while, the flight-leader had become half-way suspicious of the vector and was also listening to a navigation beacon----but its beam was so wide that he was erroneously flying across it. It was now dark and they were completely lost. Murphy's law applies here--the Radar units in both planes were inoperative; the harsh atmosphere at sea and the rough carrier operations take their toll on delicate aircraft instruments. The wingman

reported that his fuel was nearly gone and that he was going to make a controlled crash landing (called ditching) in the sea. My good friend, Sam Perez, was a crewman in the leader aircraft. He said he watched the white splash as the other plane skidded into the sea----though it was now dark, there was some moonlight. Sam felt that his plane would soon be next.

The flight-leader decided to climb as high as practicable, considering his fuel state, and broadcast the international distress signal, "Mayday." Very soon, two naval stations on the East coast provided a radio fix, locating him 35 miles off the northern Virginia coast. This was not a solution because the plane's magnetic compass was erratic----so the pilot did not even know which way was West. Since their gas tank was nearly bone dry, they were doomed to make a controlled crash into the sea. Sam said that his right leg started jumping, nervously, and that he could not stop it.

Just as they were about to descend to the sea, a new voice came on the radio. A cargo plane returning from overseas had heard the Mayday dialog----the voice said, "We heard the direction-finder location of your distressed plane and believe that we are very near to that location. We will turn up our navigation lights and turn on our landing lights. Look around to see if we are visible." Thank God---in the distant darkness, there was a beautiful light source above the vast black ocean. "Follow us and we will lead you to Chincoteague Auxiliary Air Station." The question was---could the fuel last that long? The gage already indicated empty.

It was a long shot, but the flight-leader decided to chance it, since they could use their parachutes if the gas ran out---and the crashing plane would not be a danger to civilian residential areas. They anxiously followed the transport and were luckily able to reach the runway at Chincoteague. The plane's engine stopped completely and instantly just as its wheels touched the runway---they were out of gas. The plane was towed to a hangar. The carrier was notified that its airmen were down somewhere at sea. VS-22 and surface ships conducted a search throughout the night. The flyers were found the next day by VS-22 and picked-up by the ship's helicopter. I was there when they returned, and I took a picture as they arrived aboard. They said that ships were visible to them during the night, and that searchlights had swept near their raft, but they could not get the attention of the ships.

As for Sam, his leg stopped jumping when he climbed out of the plane at Chincoteague. He did not at all enjoy the harrowing experience; however, the next time he was on the flight schedule, he was back on patrol again.

GOOD TIMING

It was one of those bright sunshiny crisp autumn days when it is just a pleasure to be alive. We were making a check-ride from the Naval Air Station at Norfolk to test out a repaired engine, and we would be gone only a couple of hours. We were at about 5,000 feet and enjoying the view over Virginia Beach. The constant drone of the engine was comforting. I had just turned on the Radar to play around with it when---instantly---there was no noise at all except from the air sliding over the skin of the plane. The engine had just stopped. Since this aircraft weighed 7 tons and had a glide path of 45 degrees, we were going down fast. Attempts to re-start the engine failed completely.

It was, however, very-lucky timing for us----the engine had stopped directly over the Naval Auxiliary Air Station at Oceana. Since that was before Oceana had become a Master Jet Base, there was almost no air traffic, and so we quietly spiraled right down onto the runway. We went back to Norfolk that day by ground transportation. This incident is just an illustration of the uncertainty that constantly exists in aviation---we were thankful that we had not been a hundred miles at sea when this engine stopped purring. Test-pilot operations are always worthwhile & interesting.

WRONG TURN

The aircraft carrier USS Mindoro was operating in the Caribbean Sea during a multi-ship operation called Convex II. VS-22 was aboard and was conducting regular air anti-submarine patrols. A hunter-killer aircraft team had just returned to the ship and was in the process of being recovered---landing. The last plane to land missed the cross-deck cables and, as the pilot applied its brakes, the left brake locked and the plane veered sharply to the left and over the edge of the carrier deck---and down into the sea. We could see the crash and we could see the air-crewmen hurriedly getting out of the plane before it quickly went to the bottom. The last time VS-22 had conducted an emergency exit drill from one of our aircraft aboard the carrier,

I had ‘won the whiskey’ by getting out of the plane quicker than anyone else----but I think that these guys in the crashed plane beat my record. My close friend, Tony Lowman, was one of them.

They were picked out of the water by a nearby Destroyer (ship) and were given dry clothes by the Destroyer crew. The airmen were soon sent back to the carrier via ropes rigged between the Destroyer and the carrier----in a steel chair-like frame called a bos’n chair. The transfer operation was an interesting spectacle for everyone on both ships. By tradition, the carrier was obliged to supply the Destroyer crew with plenty of ice cream as payment for the rescue. The smaller ship could not make ice cream.

The loss of a million dollar airplane and the associated danger are not unusual for an air squadron at sea. *I always wondered why the transfer of the air-crewmen had not been done by helicopter----but I know better than to try to analyze how the Navy operates.*

LOW-DOWN HAZARDS

Since it is the very-low-level flying---investigating potential targets right at sea level---that creates the most chance for crashes, our VS-22 squadron would include night low-altitude flying as a routine part of the training. Thus, it would be common for one of our planes to be zooming along remote beaches at 100 feet above the sand or water----we might even zoom into an isolated inlet or swamp area. Most times, the searchlight would be shining ahead---it had a 70 million candle-power beam. We have heard accounts of ardent lovers often being discovered and shockingly surprised by the overpowering searchlight, along remote shorelines. Of course, we regretted such occurrences.

And so it was that one of our planes was flying low in a swamp area and violently crashed, killing all aboard. Although each of our planes carried a radio altimeter to keep the pilot constantly informed of height, “stuff happens!!!”

Consider the altimeter. Here is how it functioned. It has an antenna that faces downward. An electronic oscillator is smoothly changing frequency (at a constant rate of change), back and forth through a wide band---this varying signal is being transmitted toward the ground. If, at a given instant the frequency were, say, F1, this frequency would go to the ground and be bounced back up to the plane----the round-trip bounce would take longer if the plane were high above ground or water, and would take a shorter time if the plane were lower. The altimeter keeps measuring the difference in frequency between the returning bounce frequency F1 and the new frequency F2 that is currently being transmitted by the sweeping oscillator. This frequency difference is converted to an electrical current and causes a needle to smoothly display altitude, instant by instant. Transistors were not perfected at the time, so vacuum tubes were used in the comparison (discriminator) circuit of the altimeter.

The harsh scenario of salt air and myriad rough carrier-landings often takes a toll on delicate instruments such as this altimeter. The point is that we depended heavily on an electronic gadget for our lives. Vacuum tube characteristics can degrade over a few days in time and cause errors in altitude-display readings. There was also an aneroid (pressure) altimeter on board, but it provided only an approximate reading. A plane traveling at 150 MPH at very low altitude at night fleetingly depends on gadgets, luck and the pilot's judgment (and the pilot can see **almost nothing**, other than instruments). Even in the daytime, over the sea, it is very difficult to visually judge height above the water. We will never know exactly what caused the loss of our friends in this swamp crash---it might even be that the engine failed. We only knew that it probably would happen again at any time to another aircrew. And the thought was constantly on our minds as we operated complicated electronics equipment in anti-submarine exercises.

SHAKY BUSINESS

At the end of the main runway at Naval Air Station, Norfolk, there is a high chain-wire security fence---perpendicular to the runway. Outside this fence, and parallel to it, is the public highway leading to the base. Across the highway is a rail-yard, with tracks parallel to the highway. You can see that this scene would not make a pretty picture. If an aircraft could not get airborne in time, there would be a disaster.

Air Anti-Submarine Squadron Twenty Two---VS-22---was housed in hangar LP-2 (*land plane hangar #2---there were seaplane hangars also*) and sister squadrons were in other hangars nearby. One morning, an AF-Guardian aircraft from one of these squadrons was taking off and was airborne, high above the rail-yard, when its engine stopped. The pilot tried to turn back to reach the runway, but tragically smashed into the rail-yard. The pilot was killed; the crew members survived with serious injuries. The plane was demolished----it was just a large pile of aluminum junk.

A Naval Flight Officer---call him Lt. Smith (*not his real name*)---undergoing training in our squadron, became shaky because of this and other dangerous happenings, and requested to be grounded for a while. I could see that he was noticeably nervous.

About 2 weeks later, a Guardian from another sister squadron was departing for patrol, could not get airborne in time, smashed through the fence at high speed, went across the highway and exploded against some rail-cars. The driver of an automobile, which had just passed that point, saw the explosion immediately behind him via his rear-view mirror. The pilot and all the crew were killed instantly. That automobile driver was Lt. Smith. I don't think he ever flew again. Of course, most of the rest of us just went about our daily routine---we knew it was a calculated risk, but we liked the danger, the glory and the unique adventure of hunting submarines during the black nights. We were crazy.



H. Charles Wright, Aircrew
Air Anti-Submarine Squadron Twenty Two
United States Navy, Air Force---Atlantic Fleet
SEE APPENDIX BELOW

PICTORAL APPENDIX



U.S.S. MINDORO CVE-120

ANTI-SUBMARINE HUNTER-KILLER FLAGSHIP





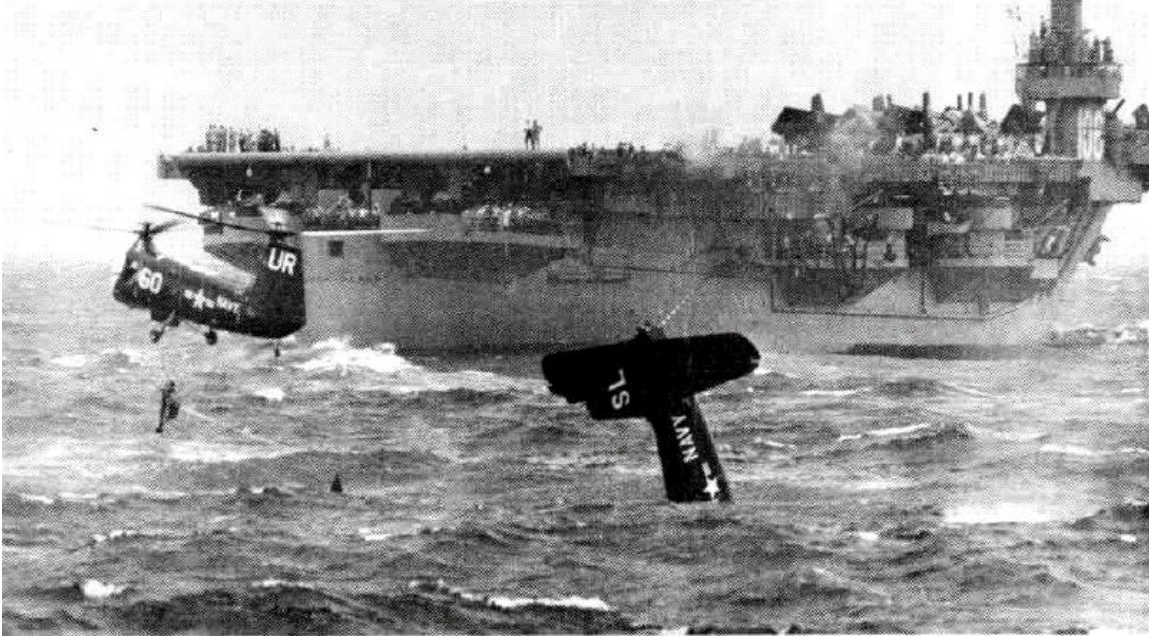
MODEL OF AN ANTI-SUBMARINE GRUMMAN AVENGER AIRCRAFT. ON THE RIGHT WING IS A SEARCHLIGHT. ON THE LEFT WING IS A RADAR POD. THE AIRCRAFT CARRIED A CREW OF 4. I SPENT MANY SCARY NIGHTS IN THIS GREAT AIRPLANE, AND ALSO IN GRUMMAN AF GUARDIANS. See pictures below/



LAUNCH OF AN AF GUARDIAN AIRCRAFT FROM THE CVE-120 MINDORO



GRUMMAN AF GUARDIAN AIRCRAFT LANDING ON CVE-120 MINDORO



This AF-2S Guardian crashed after the VS-22 pilot took a wave-off. The very-expensive airplane rolled CCW until it was upside-down and then plunged down into the sea. The pilot was far under water before he was able to exit the crashed aircraft. Note the helicopter picking him out of the sea. Just after this picture, the pilot's parachute accidentally opened and it pulled him back away from the helicopter---like a tug-of-war. He went back into the sea and nearly drowned. A motor whaleboat from a destroyer ship eventually rescued him. The carrier is a CVE. The other black dot in the sea is a floating wing-tank from the Guardian.

HERE IS ANOTHER INCIDENT.



VS-22 AF GUARDIAN---ALMOST CRASHING ALONGSIDE THE SHIP. THE TAIL OF THIS AIRCRAFT SCRAPED THE SEA BUT SOMEHOW IT DID NOT CRASH. WHEW! NOTE THE CREWMAN COCKPIT DOOR IS OPENED, EXPECTING A CRASH.

NEVER A DULL MOMENT

*TONY LOWMAN---ATAN VS22 AIRCREWMAN
USS MINDORO CVE-120*



**VS-22 AIRCREWMAN---MAKING A BAD FACE
PREPARING FOR A PATROL FLIGHT
(During the flight, he crashed into the sea alongside the carrier)**

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