

From the desk of

George Bush

DON

OK
=

4 March 1997

Don Rhodes
10000 Memorial Drive
Suite 900
Houston, Texas 773024

Hi Don

This is the letter I called you about. Do with it what ever seems best. Also enclosed is a sure cure for insomnia.

Regards,

lou

Lou Grab

GEORGE BUSH
March 1997

Don
File Copy

Dear Lou,

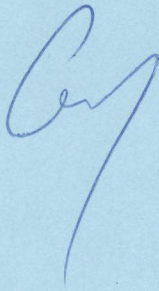
Don Rhodes was in my office a minute ago bearing his copy of *Flyboy*.

I couldn't put it down -so many happy and sad memories came flooding back.

This is about the best piece I have seen written on our days aboard the San Jac. I am often asked what it was like out there in the Pacific. I am sure you are, too. Your *Flyboy* says it all.

Thanks so very much for sharing that and for sending along that letter which will be a vital part of our archives. Some day you'll have to come see our Library - hopefully on opening day -Nov. 6, 1997; but if that doesn't click for you come any time.

Warmest personal regards,



H-Louis & but-CHART,

Your letter was exceedingly fine -
Gracie is a little hard to get along with and
at present has the "hard nose" but if all
goes well I'll stick this in the letter his
writing. He has told you about our prospective
new squadron, about Bull Bowen, etc. etc. There
is little left for me. I bought a car
up here, a '41 Plymouth 2 door sedan -
a grand car - it only the paint would
quit flaking off. We propose to drive
to Maine, or wherever our new outfit
forms -

Groose - I know that the snow has
gone its way, is not bad at all - in fact, aside
from the local shit the individual squadrons
hand out, it is pretty nice!

We have flown a few times and have
completed ~~and~~ an instrument course (6 hrs)
which gives up a "pink card" - that entitles
you to take off it 2 guys are smoking cigars
on the duty runway - ~~not~~ a far cry from
the master instrument card which
Melvin had.

Give my best to the "loopy one." Tell him I really appreciated his letter of a month or two ago. Tell Zach-a-paw I want to meet his wife and tell Ricky to give my best to Marge. Also if Ricky or Rag need "squaring" work with 'em. You 2 guys are too apt to get discouraged - you lose sight of the long range objective for which we are striving - work with 'em nite & day. It is a great feeling to note an improvement for which you are responsible. Even as I write Grace is beside me as physical proof - of course he slips into dirty ^(holes) rats every 20 after, but for the most part my work has reaped its reward. And so my final word is - "Keep up the fight - if Rag says cards count & in casinos and spades don't count for your owl poop - humor him along and then DECK Him! - the kid'll learn.

Rumor has it we may go to Zantland Me., but 20 miles from Kennebunkport - heaven this summer if we're there that

long. You

Your shipmate must be a "dogger"
if he only has one Cross & 1 A. Medal
and was in the 1st Air Group-

Well, Give my best to "Hot Connie"
and "Hot Pamela" - Keep that old FHA
home fire burning -

Will send you our address when it
is definite where we go -

advers

George

FLYBOY

by

Lou Grab
A Torpedo Squadron 51 Pilot



THE NAVY FLYING CAREER OF LOU GRAB

This is an autobiographical review of my flying days which originated in November of 1941 when I signed up for civilian pilot training, and ended when I left the service in September of 1945. My huge scrapbook which was mainly put together in 1946, accounts for my incredible memory. I am especially grateful to my daughter, Kathleen Grab, for her editing skills.

George Bush and I became classmates in June of 1943. We went on to become original squadron members of Torpedo Squadron 51, and we flew together until November of 1944. He went home to marry Barbara, and I went home to marry Connie.

CALL TO ARMS

On December 7, 1941, I had turned nineteen in November, I was in my second year at Sacramento Junior College, a happy fraternity member, a proud owner of a good Model A, a wearer of nice clothes, earning spending money working at my Dad's service station, and also looking forward to learning to fly. A friend, Mel Hayes, who would later be best man at my wedding, had gotten me to join his fraternity, Omega Alpha Kappa, OAK. Big band music had just been enhanced by a new tune, Glenn Miller's String Of Pearls. Fraternity dances were popular on weekends.

The previous years of working had imbued me with a bit of business acumen, and I assumed I would someday be a businessman. I had completed accounting classes and other business-like subjects. Another friend, Bob Barr, whom I had known since we were in the sixth grade, convinced me I should enroll in the civilian pilot training program offered at the college. Bob had a strong interest in aviation, and went on to have a long and enjoyable private flying career.

My Dad's little neighborhood store and service station was a gathering place for our neighborhood, called Sutterville Heights. Our business was known as the Sutterville Service Station. Our customers were represented by long established families, including a few Japanese families such as the Yakotas, the Yasudas, and the Hamamotos. Goro Yasuda was my age and a good friend.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor caused everyone to suddenly change one's focus on the future. We were at war. But the draft board [Selective Service] wasn't calling up nineteen year olds, and I had really been looking forward to learning to fly. I continued with my current activities.

The government decided to impose a ban on private flying within 150 miles of the coast. This caused the college to have to alter our class schedules. We met our regular class requirements while attending classes Monday through Thursday, and on Thursday evenings we would board a school bus bound for Truckee. Friday through Sunday was devoted to flying. This changed my weekend activities considerably.

At first, flight operations at Truckee were limited. We were expected to fly planes equipped with skis because of the snow. Landing with skis was difficult for our instructors, let alone the students, so more planes than normal required repairs. None the less, Bob Barr and I went on to successfully complete the ground school at the college and the flight school at Truckee. As a result, we earned our private pilot licenses which were good until revoked, and I don't think they ever were.

In the meantime, Japanese families were relocated to places that were at least 150 miles from the coast. One of my Japanese friends gave me his deer rifle to keep for him, but the Sheriff made me turn it in.

The country had become totally emersed in the war effort. Everyone had to decide on a means of helping to win the war. The prospect of my ever flying off a carrier seemed to me to be out of reach, but worth a try. The Navy required two years of college; my Junior College time met that requirement. So, on June 2, 1942, with my Dad's permission and two letters of recommendation, I went to the Navy recruiting office located in the Sacramento main post office. The local recruiting office arranged for me to go by train and ferry to the Naval Aviation recruiting office located in the Ferry Building in San Francisco. I passed all the tests, barely getting through hearing screening. I returned to Sacramento, a Seaman Second Class, with orders to Brigham Young University, and to complete the Secondary Civilian Pilot Training Program.

A short time later, the Navy made rating and program changes. Seaman Second ratings were changed to Naval Aviation Cadet, and the flight training program was changed to the Naval Aviation Cadet Training Program. This was called the V-5 program. I proudly wore a V-5 lapel pin and actively encouraged my friends to enlist in V-5.

FROM CIVILIAN TO G.I.

I drove my Model A to Provo where I stayed in a dormitory at the University. We flew Travelairs at a small airport just south of town. It took about ten weeks to complete the program. All the people in the class were members of the V-5 program. We had a great time at Provo. The instructors wanted us to do well, and the local people were also interested in our progress. Those of us in the program were getting anxious to be involved in active Navy duty. I think each of us passed everything.

I drove back to Sacramento, and after a short stay at home, I reported to St Mary's Pre-Flight School in Maraga, California. The program there was a cut above the traditional Navy Boot Camp. We began with Immunization shots, had close hair cuts, were issued uniforms and athletic gear, and were on the receiving end of much instruction about the right way, the only way; the Navy way. We marched everywhere we went. We drilled quite a bit, but there was a very heavy emphasis on physical fitness. More people probably left because they couldn't meet fitness requirements than for any other reason. We also acquired a whole new vocabulary which included such words as bulkhead, head, port, starboard, fore, aft, etc.

We ran the obstacle course. We climbed ropes, and cargo nets. We had boxing instruction as well as hand to hand self-defense instruction. I had played football in high school, and decided to elect football as my intramural sport. I wasn't much in high school, but in Pre-Flight I wasn't half bad. Classroom instruction included Navy regulations, Navy history, and plane and ship recognition drills.

Toward the end of our two months stay we were invited to attend a tea dance at nearby Mills College. Even though Sacramento wasn't far away there just wasn't free time to go home. My foster mother, Mom Wiseman, came to visit me on a Sunday afternoon. She brought a batch of chocolate chip cookies. Two months at St. Mary's seemed like an eternity, but I managed to pass all the requirements. The Navy swim card was the most difficult objective for me to obtain. Treading water for five minutes was next to impossible.

FROM BOOT CAMP TO E BASE

Livermore Naval Air Station was a Primary Flight Training Base. Previously, this kind of facility was called an Elimination Base, or "E" Base. The goal had been to eliminate all trainees who were not good at flying. I felt that removal of the negative label hadn't changed much, but then I was in no position to make a comparison. Instructors gave you an "up" or a "down", and it seemed to me that some instructors had reputations supporting up or down attitudes. Cadets did wash out. My Civilian Pilot Training (CPT) experience really paid off. Because the war was going on during the time we were enrolled in CPT, instructors made an extra effort to get us ready for military flying. They knew we weren't going to be flying Piper Cubs on weekend cross country trips.

Discipline in general was not as rigid as it had been at St. Mary's. Ground school required good study skills and navigation was stressed. Physical fitness was also all important.

One day a torpedo bomber (a TBF) flew in to Livermore and parked on the flight line among the Stearman Yellow Perils. The TBF is 40 feet long, 16 feet high, and it has a wing span of 52 feet. The Stearman, a biplane, has a wing span of 32 feet. I was impressed, and after spending some time examining that huge machine, I decided that I wanted to be a TBF pilot. That's the plane I would ask to fly, if the time came when the question was asked.

After successfully completing Primary Flight Training, which took about eight weeks, I was given orders to report to the Corpus Christi Naval Air Station. I had my Model A parked outside Livermore, so I drove home to see my Dad and my sister. I also saw my foster parents, Mom and Pop Wiseman, and I had a date or two with Connie West who lived next door to Mom and Pop. At this time I made a very big mistake. I decided I would not be stationed anywhere where my Modle A would be available to me. So, I had my Dad sell it.

WINGS OF GOLD

The train from Sacramento to Corpus Christi took forever. Crossing the lower southwest part of the country was very slow going. The railroads gave track priority to trains other than the one I was on, which was part of the war situation.

Cadet life was an improvement at the Corpus Christi Naval Air Station. We still had to drill, pass inspections, and work on physical fitness. Washing out was always a concern; but, in general, things were better. Sandy Gumm, a former Sacramento Junior College classmate, and I would buy an extra large Hershey bar, skip evening chow, and attend the base movie theater every time the feature changed. We all generally felt much closer to graduation.

We flew SNV's in Basic Training at Cabanass Field. The SNV was a Basic trainer for the Army as well as the Navy, manufactured by the Vultee Corporation; hence, the "V" designation, for Vultee. This plane had a top speed of 180 miles per hour.

Advanced training was great. We flew SNJ's with their retractable landing gear and excellent flight characteristics. The SNJ was manufactured by the North American Corporation. It was high powered and very fast. In fact, it was not uncommon for fighter trainees to win their wings and report to operational training, and the planes flown would be SNJ's. Advanced training for cadets was conducted at Waldron Field and later instrument instruction was conducted at the main station. We also had instrument flying instruction in Link trainers, in conjunction with instrument flight in SNJ's.

May was kind of a culminating month. We proceeded to check out in all the ground school and flight school requirements, and we ordered our officer uniforms from a selling company located on base in the Cadet Recreation Mess building. I went all out. I ordered Blues, Whites, Khakis, and Greens. Every day brought us closer to learning where our next station would be.

June 9, 1943, was graduation day. We marched to the presentations accompanied by a real live Navy band, which played Anchors Aweigh and Wild Blue Yonder. I won my wings of gold, and I received orders to the Ft. Lauderdale Naval Air Station, where I was to learn to fly the TBF. Former President George Bush, whom I did not know at the time, was in the same graduating class, and he also received orders to Lauderdale. He was eighteen on graduation day and his nineteenth birthday was a few days later. It was not common knowledge at the time, but he had the distinction of being the youngest pilot in the Navy.

THE AVENGER

Two other ensigns and I went by train across the rest of the United States, stopping at New Orleans, prior to reporting in to the Ft. Lauderdale Naval Air Station. I was assigned to Flight 44, which was composed of ten pilots and crewmen trainees. George Bush was also one of the ten pilots assigned to Flight 44.

Our instructor was Tex Ellison who had just returned from combat in the Pacific. After we had plane familiarization in ground school, Tex stood on the wing and made sure each of us knew enough to solo. After a few take offs and landings our experiences expanded to include bombing flights over Lake Okeechobee, navigation over the Atlantic, formation practice, gunnery runs on a towed sleeve, and night flying. All of this was orchestrated by Tex Ellison.

In ground school, we continued to do the same kinds of things we had been doing at Corpus, except that everything had to do with the TBF. Survival training and navigation were stressed. Physical fitness turned out to be going to the beach to swim.

A tragedy occurred which shocked all of us. We had all gone through the ground school pressure chamber, learning about the importance of the use of oxygen at high altitude. Each pilot then took a flight to 20,000 feet to experience changes in the characteristics of the TBF and to use oxygen. One plane returned with a crewman who had died from lack of oxygen.

We lived in the Junior Bachelor Officers Quarters (JBOQ). Life was now truly a cut above that of a cadet. The JBOQ building has recently been demolished, but a whole room was saved. It is to be installed in what was the Link Trainer building, and it will be known as the George Bush Room.

The TBF was manufactured by the Grumman Corporation and first became operational about the time of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The manufacturer suggested the plane be given the name Avenger and the Navy concurred. The base paper at Ft. Lauderdale was called The Avenger. Eventually, production of the TBF was turned over to General Motors Corporation and the plane's designation was changed to TBM. Same plane, same name, different Navy designation.

Two months at Ft. Lauderdale went by real fast. From there we had an overnight train trip to the Carrier Air Training Unit in Glenview, Illinois, where we were to do carrier landing qualifications. After a few days of field carrier landing practice with a landing signal officer, we flew out to the USS Sayble, located on Lake Michigan and made five daylight landings. Our final experience was to make two landings on the Sayble at night. I had quite a surprise.

After my first night landing, the deck crew rolled my plane back to the aft part of the deck for a take off. I went to full throttle with my brakes on until I had a signal to take off. I went down the deck attempting a take off. Suddenly I found myself stopped at the bow at full throttle, going nowhere. The tailhook had dropped down and latched on to one of the deck cables. I took off and returned to make my second landing.

It isn't any wonder that, today, the bottom of Lake Michigan is a great source of restorable Navy WW II planes.

After qualifying, many carrier pilots were sent directly West to replacement pools, to replenish combat losses all over the Pacific. Looking back, I am so glad I was sent to the East Coast to join a brand new small squadron with it's good leadership and to have belonged to a new air group on a brand new ship. This additional training made us all better at what we did.

This TBF trained, carrier qualified ensign, was given leave from Glenview and ordered to report after leave, to the Norfolk Naval Air Station. I went by train to Sacramento, visited with my Dad, my sister, and Mom and Pop, and had a few dates with Connie.

TORPEDO SQUADRON 51

After another trip across the nation, I reported to the Duty Officer at the Norfolk Naval Air Station on September 22, 1943. I was assigned to Composite Squadron 51, or VC 51. This was to have been a squadron consisting of nine TBF's, nine SBD's, and twelve F6F's. The planes and the crews of the TBF's and the SBD's moved from Norfolk to the Chincoteague Naval Air Station on September 27. The F6F's went elsewhere to train. The TBF's and the SBD's trained for about a week, when we learned that our organization had been changed. The SBD's were sent elsewhere. The SBD was a good dive bomber. In fact, Bill Mooney, a dive bomber pilot who stayed with us as a fighter pilot, gave me a ride in an SBD. It was quite a thrill. He opened the dive brakes and dove the plane almost completely vertical. The nine TBF's became Torpedo Squadron 51, or VT 51, and we became part of Air Group 51. The Air Group now included twenty-four F6F's and nine TBF's.

The skipper of Torpedo Squadron 51 was Lieutenant Commander Don Melvin. He was a skilled pilot, with good knowledge about aerial tactics, and an aeronautical engineer in his own right. He followed a Navy curriculum and he taught us a great deal over and above Navy requirements. Our Executive Officer was Lieutenant Legare Hole who was a very good pilot and well liked. He was a good role model for the eight boot ensigns in the squadron. Another lieutenant was Dick Houle, a transfer from instructor duty. When we flew wing on him while flying over the Chesapeake, we could usually look forward to returning to the base flying about ten feet off the water. Lieutenant Junior Grade Dick Plaisted, another pilot, had served briefly aboard the USS Monterey, a CVL. Ensign Moose Nemsak had more service time than the other ensigns. George Bush was one of the eight ensigns, as was Stan Butchart. Butch and I became acquainted at St Mary's. We became roommates, at Chincoteague, which continued until we left active duty. We had an Administrative Officer, Bush Daniels, an Ordinance Officer, Ted White, and an Air Intelligence Officer, Ross Allen. We also shared a flight surgeon, Dr. Battenfield, with the fighter squadron. The enlisted compliment included three Petty Officers, thirty-nine Air Crewmen, one Yeoman, and we shared a parachute rigger, Sayers, with the fighters.

VT 51 had exclusive use of the Chincoteague Base. While there, we flew to the Philadelphia Navy Yard, to attend the commissioning ceremonies of the Uss San Jacinto which was to be our ship. We remained at Chincoteague until January except for short stays at Hyannis and Charlestown.

We went to Hyannis Naval Air Station to learn how to drop torpedoes. Each pilot made four live drops. We went from Hyannis to the Charlestown Naval Air Station for gunnery practice and live bomb drops. The TBF has two fifty caliber guns in the wings, and we made firing runs on a towed sleeve.

The fighter squadron joined us at Charlestown to practice making coordinated attacks. The San Jacinto was operating in the Chesapeake and we made our practice attacks on it.

Ralph Bagwell, the ship's Landing Signal Officer joined us at Chincoteague where he worked with us as we practiced making field carrier landings. We did this especially when the ceilings were so low we couldn't do anything else. George Bush washed out a TBF while practicing field carrier landings.

The loss of our own combat planes was a common occurrence in all air groups. We returned from the Pacific with only one torpedo pilot not having actually lost a TBF. That was Stan Butchart. On the other hand, he came back from a strike with one side of the tail horizontal stabilizer shot off. To this day, I tell Nat Adams, a VF 51 fighter pilot, that the Japanese Government should recognize him as some kind of an Ace. He lost five F6F's. I remember a combat situation when one of the big carriers had taken a bomb hit and there was no way they could bring their planes aboard. The Admiral told the Captain of the San Jacinto to take the planes aboard no matter what. Our deck crew lined up six F6F's and pushed each of them off the fantail to make room for the other carrier's planes. While they were being rolled aft, a mechanic removed a clock from one of the cockpits. He gave it to me and I still have it.

Skipper Melvin instilled a strong sense of pride in our formation flying. This was especially true when we approached the task force to land. We always looked good and we always had an exact interval in the landing circle so that our landings took a minimum amount of time. We also made all our take offs in a steady climb. It would have been sloppy flying to dip down after leaving the bow.

The Air Group went aboard the San Jacinto at the Norfolk Navy Base in January. Our Chincoteague days were over. We had worked hard together, but we also had enjoyed leaves in New York, as well as local liberty in towns like Pocamoke and Salisbury. Stan Butchart met his wife, Miriam, in Salisbury. My twenty-first birthday occurred on November 19th, and Connie sent a telegram. Tom Burns and Andy Barbera became my regular crewmen and they flew with me until I left the Navy. Tom was the radioman, and Andy was the turret gunner. I will always be grateful for their loyalty and service.

THE USS SAN JACINTO

The San Jacinto was one of nine ships in the Independence Class. It was a converted light cruiser with the ship designation and number, CVL 30. At the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Navy had nine light cruisers under construction. Carriers were needed more, so construction was redirected and the light cruisers became carriers. The first one was the USS Independence. The number of people required to operate the ship was about 1500. Add an air group to that and a full complement for each CVL came to about 1700.

The people of Texas over subscribed in war bond drives intended to raise enough money to replace the cruiser Houston which had been sunk. The Navy responded by naming a CVL the USS San Jacinto. In fact, the Texas flag was flown aboard the San Jacinto.

CVL's turned out to be hard working and very successful ships. They were not unlike destroyers who seemed to be doing all kinds of extra tasks larger ships were too big to do as well. CVL's were often called upon to do more than the larger more cumbersome carriers. Pilots flew more. All of the original air group pilots returned from the Pacific with well over 100 carrier landings aboard the San Jacinto. Stan Butchart had about 140 and I had 130. Incidentally, every time a pilot made the ship's 1000th landing, a large cake was made, and the pilot who made the landing cut the cake after dinner in the ward room. Jack Guy made landing number 1000, and Stan Butchart made landing number 2000.

Life while at sea wasn't bad. The torpedo squadron went to general quarters in the after ready room every evening, and otherwise when called. All the officers and enlisted men showed up ready to fly. Seating was by rank from the front of the room to the rear. When secured from general quarters and not involved in flying, time was mostly one's own. We played cards and Acey Ducey, and listened to big band recordings in the ward room. There was always coffee available as well as the makings for toast with butter and jam. The stateroom I shared with Stan Butchart was not crowded, and we each had a desk where we could write letters, censor enlisted men's mail, read, or work on crafts such as making shell jewelry. Ward room food was served to us at tables covered with white table cloths and set with plates and a full array of silverware. The food was excellent; most often it consisted of things rationed at home. There was a ship's ice cream store where we could obtain a sundae which was called a gedunk. There was also a barber shop.

The ship's chaplain's office published a daily newspaper called the San Jac Sun, which came complete with world news, sport's scores, news about things happening on the ship, and cartoons and jokes. Medical services were as you would imagine, first rate. Skilled people were in abundance, so having personal items repaired was never a problem. Our parachute rigger, who's name was Sayer, made each pilot a metal knee strap-on note pad holder which was very useful when flying. He also made extra canvas parachute bags which were very useful when we moved from one air station to another. I still have my knee pad holder and a parachute bag.

When the task force retired to a safe anchorage or atoll for provisions, we went ashore to swim, to hunt for sea shells, and to enjoy our ration of two beers. In the evenings, we saw the latest movies, which were shown on the hangar deck. The picture, Casablanca, set us all to singing strange versions of, "Oh, you must remember this, Sam, a kiss is but a kiss..." We also enjoyed playing volley ball in the lowered forward flight deck elevator. George Bush and Jack Guy were good at spiking the ball. VT-51 pilot, Francis Waters, organized a ship's band which really had a great big band sound when they played for us on the hangar deck. Francis played the trombone and resembled Tommy Dorsey. We all called him Tom. Jack Guy played base, and Bill Joyce, an air crewman, played the drums. He later played professionally.

When the San Jac was brand new and her crew had just gone on board, the ship sailed on the Chesapeake Bay until time to go on a scheduled shake down cruise. The cruise was to be about a month's duration in a relatively peaceful area so that the crew could gain experience working together and get ready to join the fleet. The air group went aboard the San Jac at Norfolk Naval Base, for the shake down cruise which took us to Port of Spain, Trinidad. We did a lot of flying; not without mishaps. I crashed into the barriers when I failed to get the throttle all the way back. Dick Lazzarevich, a fighter pilot, landed on the forward elevator after bouncing over the barriers. Jack Guy and Dick Houle made water landings because of engine failures. After experiencing take offs which brought our torpedo planes close to touching the water, skipper Melvin decided that all of our take offs, in the future, would be by catapult.

Our stay in Trinidad was highlighted by the enjoyment of Planter's Punch at the Macqueripe Officer's Club and an evening of Calypso music. Five torpedo squadron ensigns took a four passenger taxi to a home where local people sang Calypso songs. Jim Wykes sat on the floor of the cab so the driver would take all five of us. George Bush, Lou Grab, and Stan Butchart sat in seats. I can't remember who the fifth person was. I do remember that the five of us returned to the ship to annoy as many shipmates as possible with our off-key self-styled Calypso singing.

The air group had acquired valued extra training by going on the shake down cruise. The ship returned to the Philadelphia Navy Yard from the shake down cruise. The air group flew to the Norfolk Naval Air Station and while there, each pilot qualified aboard the USS Charger by making two night carrier landings. Captain Martin, the captain of the San Jacinto, had some reservations about the performance of the air group on the shake down cruise. I felt he was wrong, and over time we became a respected contingent.

The San Jacinto went on to earn the Presidential Unit Citation for its victorious accomplishments. Each member of the ship's company, as well as the air group received a copy of the citation, a letter of congratulations from the Secretary of the Navy, and a small ribbon to add to one's breast collection.

The success of the ship's air groups was proudly displayed on the bulkhead below the bridge in the form of painted planes and ships to indicate the numbers destroyed.

When Torpedo Squadron 51 went on board the ship, we had developed into a self reliant unit. Each of us had an intimate awareness of each other's flying abilities, likes, dislikes, and other idiosyncracies. We could easily talk back and forth while flying and while maintaining complete radio silence. Our hand signals and gestures were rather good. We each had nicknames, and we constantly related to each other as members of a team. Flying together had become a way of life. I suspect that we probably caused a few of the ship's officers to have hidden desires to take their ship off to war without these flyboys who had suddenly been thrown in with the ship's company. We did not change. We probably bonded even stronger. Over time everyone acquired a great amount of respect for each other and to the commitment we all had to win a war.

FLYBOY AT WAR

On March 6, 1944, the San Jacinto sailed from the Norfolk Naval Base for the Canal Zone and subsequently to San Diego. The noon meal, which we ate as we left the dock, was spaghetti and meat balls. As we entered the Atlantic, we encountered rough water. Virtually everyone had some degree of sea sickness. It's crude, but true, to say we had a complete puke-up fore and aft. We had a brief liberty in Panama where I acquired Chanel #5 and silk hose, which I sent to Connie.

Moose Nemsak left the ship at San Diego, and was replaced by Milt Moore. We called him Gracie after the comedienne, Gracie Moore. After liberty in San Diego, we sailed for Pearl Harbor with a full load of planes, which the San Jacinto ferried to Pearl. The Air Group just went along for the ride. On this trip we had Easter services. The order of worship included the hymn, Eternal Father Strong to Save, which chokes me up a little bit every time I hear it.

Upon arrival at Pearl Harbor, the squadron was sent to the Kaneohe Naval Air Station, where we practiced gunnery and bombing. The ship conducted maneuvers with the USS Essex. The squadron spent two days participating with the carriers. George Bush and I swam at a beach guarded with barbed wire. We thought the wire was to keep the enemy away, but, in reality, the wire was to keep people from swimming in a treacherous place.

On May 2, 1944, our training days had come to an end. We sailed from Pearl Harbor to join the fleet at the Majuro Harbor. Buster Kilpatrick had replaced Ross Allen as our Air Intelligence Officer. The Air Group 51 planes were identified by a large X on the tail. I began my combat flying by flying anti-submarine patrols off and on during about eight days early in May. This was called ASP, and it required three TBM's, each flying in a separate area, out ahead of the task force, armed with four 500 pound depth charges. On May 15th, Jim Wykes failed to return from an anti-submarine patrol. This really grieved us, and it enhanced our anger at the enemy for starting this war. We had now lost three friends.

I saw action on May 19th. We conducted searches in two plane teams; an F6F and a TBM. We flew to within about 1000 miles from Japan, looking for sampans or picket boats which we suspected were sending messages home about our fleet operations. My team found a small trawler which the fighter strafed with his six 50 caliber guns, and I dropped several 100 pound bombs. It was a very minor activity, but the fleet PR people had revealed it to the press.

The Sacramento Bee printed an article, Capital Airman Raids Marcus. The article states that we bombed Marcus Island for two days and sunk a small trawler, and that our flights had taken us closer to Japan than anyone since the Doolittle raid.

Prior to every strike, Buster Kilpatrick briefed us about our targets. We were often provided with reconnaissance photos and small maps, which we carried in our chart boards on the plane. Buster also supplied us with maps, made of silk, which showed the currents at the target area. He also gave us the locations of rescue submarines. Skipper Melvin described the tactics and the way we were to join up to return to the task force after making our bomb runs.

We saw our first real action early in June when we bombed Siapan prior to the invasion. After making pre-dawn take offs, we arrived at the target area and were welcomed with heavy anti-aircraft fire. There were the usual puffs of smoke, but because of the semi-darkness tracers were much in evidence. After we had dropped our bombs and returned to the ready room we were all very excited at having had a real baptismal of fire. I flew twenty-four flights in June, which included fourteen ASP's and nine strikes. I bombed Siapan five times, Guam two times, and Rota once.

The skipper and Jack Guy were the only two pilots who were able to participate in the First Philippine Sea Battle on June 19, 1944. The rest of our planes were involved in other flights. I was out on ASP. The hour was late when the skipper and Jack took off, which meant that they would be returning after dark. They did a good job of bombing, which earned each of them a Navy Cross. When the planes returned, the Admiral had the ships turn on their lights, breaking the ordinary blackout requirement. The returning pilots were very low on fuel, and they were told to land on the first available carrier. Jack and the skipper managed to land aboard the San Jacinto. Jack Cochrane, who had been in Flight 44, also landed on our ship and spent the night on a cot in our stateroom. The next morning when he flew back to his ship, a large carrier, he made his first ever catapult take off. A Japanese plane entered our landing pattern and attempted to land, but Ralph Bagwell gave him a wave off. That led to all kinds of speculation as to what ever became of him.

Al Warta, one of our fighter pilots, had a brother in the Marines who went ashore as part of the invasion of Siapan. As soon as the air field was taken, Al landed and saw his brother. Al returned with a whole lot of Japanese money which he shared with all of us. We all had a great admiration for the fighting the Marines were doing. They would do an invasion, retire somewhere for R & R, and then invade again at some other enemy stronghold. We were lucky; we lived at the other end of the cleanliness spectrum and were able to take showers every day.

We participated in support of the Mariannas Occupation which took place from July 17th to July 23rd. The Marianna's Turkey Shoot was a great day for our fighter pilots. This was the day the enemy assembled a large air strike force and headed for our task force. As it turned out, the enemy was poorly organized, but with very real intentions. We destroyed virtually every one of their planes. The number of planes destroyed that day was outrageous.

The huge fleet of ships was really something to see, and when we went on strikes we joined up with other air groups. The numbers of planes was in the hundreds. Our fighters always flew air cover over us when we went on strikes. They had to weave back and forth because we were climbing for altitude. They would kid us about going slow, and we would tell them they needed to stay with us because our navigation was more reliable than theirs and without us they couldn't make it back to the ship. We would approach our target at about 14000 feet and try to be in position to attack from out of the sun. The fighters would make a strafing run firing their six 50 calibre guns. At the same time we would push over to gain speed and then we would dive right behind the fighters and drop our bomb load. We then joined up on our lead plane, rejoined the larger group, and returned to our respective carriers. The task force would turn into the wind, have 35 knots of wind across the deck, and bring us aboard.

July was mostly a Guam month. I flew three strikes on Guam and several ASP's in the area, near the end of the month I had two strikes on Palau. At month's end I had flown thirteen ASP's and five strikes. I had also flown a round trip to the USS Hornet to pick up a replacement person. On July 27th, we lost Dick Houle and his crew when he had a strike on Palau. Dick was so likable, this was a terrible loss for all of us. Again we had lost three good friends.

Some ASP's lasted over four hours. We sat on a parachute. On top of the chute was a survival packet, containing a supply of canned water and a one man life raft. Those water cans could become mighty uncomfortable. Each of us also had his own parachute harness which had a survival backpack in it. This contained C rations, and a machete among other things. The backpack was not uncomfortable. We clipped it to the parachute every time we climbed into the cockpit. I still have my machete.

Most of our mail was delivered when we retired to a safe atoll. A good sized letter arrived for me from my Dad which really was an emotional surprise. My Dad had asked several of his regular customers to send me a note. He gathered all their letters

together and sent them off to me. I still have those letters and, to this day, I get a little emotional thinking how nice those people were.

Each of the torpedo pilots experienced at least one ride in a breaches buoy. This included those who made water landings, and were rescued by a destroyer. A destroyer would sail parallel to and along side of the San Jacinto, while a harpoon-like gun sent a light line from the hanger deck across the destroyer. The light line was then used to connect the two ships with a heavy line. A canvas bag with a pulley on it was then used to transport people and things back and forth between the ships. This was called a breaches buoy, Some bags had holes for legs to hang out, and others were just bags.

I rode a breaches buoy when I went from the San Jacinto to a destroyer, and when I went from the destroyer to the USS Steamer Bay, a Jeep carrier. I returned to the San Jacinto with a replacement plane and a replacement radioman whose name was Joe Reichert. After I had parked the plane, the plane captain opened the tunnel door and said to Joe, "Welcome to the San Jacinto." Today, Joe tells this story, and he says he knew he was on a friendly ship.

I had an unusual ASP. I had just taken off to go on station ahead of the task force when the ship's Combat Information Center (CIC) sent me behind the task force to circle over a destroyer which had found a submarine. I spent the next three hours circling and giving information to the destroyer about what I observed. The destroyer succeeded in sinking the sub, and relieved me to return to the task force. Meanwhile, the task force had sailed off over the horizon to a location unknown to me. I was lost. I turned on my identification signal, IFF, and the ship sent a fighter out to lead me back to the carrier. I heard it from the fighter pilots about how a hot shot torpedo pilot should know how to navigate.

Dick Plaisted was on ASP when a Japanese Jill flew by below him real close to the water. He pushed his nose over and fired away at him until he ran out of ammo. At the same time, one of our fighters blazed away with all his guns, and the plane was shot down. The two pilots shared in the shoot down. Every time we flew ASP, our fighters also flew Combat Air Patrol (CAP).

The decline in the quality of Japanese pilots eventually led to desperate measures. Kamikaze pilots began to attack, usually a few planes at a time. Our combat air patrols couldn't always shoot them down and those who penetrated our anti-aircraft really did some damage. When they were able to dive on our ships, they appeared to be headed directly at you. The San Jacinto had a near miss just off the bow. No damage was done, but small pieces of plane and a couple of fingers littered the flight deck.

August was restful. I flew eight ASP's and did not fly any strikes. On the other hand, September was something else. I flew seventeen flights and ten of those were strikes. Early on, we were making strikes on the Bonin Islands, and on September 2nd, George Bush was hit while making a bomb run on Chi Chi Jima. He had to bail out and neither crewman survived. George got into his life raft and was rescued by the submarine, USS Finback. Ted White, our ordnance officer, was his gunner. Ted had done a great job making sure we took off with proper ordnance, and everyone thought a lot of him. John Delaney, George's radioman, was a well-liked air crewman. George was distressed, but perhaps the long period of time on the submarine was a time of release for him.

We bombed the hell out of Palau. I flew seven strikes on targets on Palau from the 12th to the 18th. On September 15th, 1944, we lost Francis Waters and his crew in action over Palau. This loss was deeply felt throughout the ship because Tommy Water's band was well-liked. Three more friends were gone.

On the 20th of September, we crossed the equator. Everyone on the ship was involved in the activities. There was no choice. Pollywogs had to do the bidding of the Shellbacks. The San Jac Sun published articles about each day's activities as we approached the crossing. There was harmless hazing, and everyone had a good experience. When we crossed the equator all the Pollywogs became certified Shellbacks. I still have my Shellback certificate. I'm not sure, but I think George missed out on this, and that he rejoined us a short time later. On the other hand, George Bush became a member of the Caterpillar Club, which is only for people who make successful parachute jumps.

September 23, 1944, was the first birthday of Torpedo Squadron 51. I have the edition of the San Jac Sun published on that day. It does us proud, and I was impressed with it's cartoons about the birthday.

October was kind of a grand finale. The invasion of Leyte was underway in the Philippines when the Japanese fleet decided to show up nearby. We went to general quarters and stayed that way all day. This had an adverse impact on our eating habits, because the people who prepared the meals were at their battle stations. Lunch was probably K rations. I dropped one torpedo in the morning and another one in the afternoon. Dick Plaisted did the same, except that he found it harder to return to the carrier. On his afternoon run his plane was hit, and he was forced to land in the drink. Dick and his radioman, Wendall Tomes, sustained facial injuries. Joe Smith, the gunner, had to help Wendall exit through the turret hatch and then pull the life raft out from the side of the plane

before it sank. Dick had trouble getting out of his parachute harness and inflating his May West, but he did it. With Joe's assistance, all three managed to get into the raft. Joe administered first aid to Dick and Wendall. They spent about nine hours drifting in the raft until the USS Caperton, a destroyer, rescued them. This was a destroyer which had been busy sending torpedoes into the enemy ships. The three men were returned to the San Jac three days later.

The Navy had won the second Philippine Sea Battle. The results were real justice. The enemy carriers which had made the attack on Pearl Harbor and were still active were sunk that day. Prior to the sea battle, we spent two days hitting Okinawa. I had one strike. We hit their fuel storage and left huge fires as the fleet headed south.

November saw the last of my combat flying. I had eight flights.

The actions of Torpedo Squadron 51 were typical of all torpedo squadrons in the fast task forces during the period of time we were there. We were proud to have been able to do what we had been trained to do. I am personally grateful for having been selected to fly from a carrier and I am also lucky to be alive.

There, but for the grace of God, go I.....

Ens. James J. Wykes, USNR, Detroit, Mich.
Robert E. Whalen, AMM 1/c, Joliet, Ill.
Charles L. Haggard, ARM 3/c, Winchester, Ky.
Missing while on routine ASP off Eniwetok; failed to return, 15 May 1944.

Lt. Roland R. Houle, USNR, White Bear, Minn.
Otis E. Ingram, ACOM, Little Rock, Ark.
Walter E. Mintus, ARM 3/c, Portage, Pa.
Missing in action at Palau, 27 July 1944.

Lt. (jg) William G. White, USNR, White Bear, Minn.
John L. Delaney, ARM 2/c, Providence, R.I.
Missing in action at Bonin Islands, 2 September 1944.

Lt. (jg) Francis M. Waters, USNR, Savannah, Ga.
Paul P. Bensman, AOM 2/c, Alton Ill.
Hyman Atun, ARM 2/c, New York, N.Y.
Killed in action over Palau, 15 September 1944.

ON OUR WAY TO THE USA

In November, Air Group 51 was replaced. The San Jacinto had sailed over 100,000 miles during the time we had been on board. We disembarked at Guam, where we had time to walk around and admire the B29's located there. The Air Force was making daily bombing runs on Japan from there. We were easily able to collect assorted small pieces of Japanese planes which were in abundance. I still have a couple.

Our transportation home was on some kind of landing ship which had been converted to a personnel hauler. Much time was spent waiting in line for the next meal, which wasn't exactly what we were used to. We didn't care, we were going home.

Upon arrival in California we were given thirty days leave and orders to our next base. Several of us married in January. This group included the Grabs, The Butcharts, and the Bushs. Some of us exchanged wedding announcements and wedding gifts. Dick Plaisted, who had been married to Marjorie at the time he first joined the squadron, was George Bush's best man.

Stan Butchart, Dick Plaisted, and I were given orders to the Sand Point Naval Air Station in Seattle, and subsequently to the Pasco Naval Air Station. We were to be a nucleus to a new Torpedo Squadron 51. Early in May, pilots and air crewmen from the Original VT-51 received their combat decorations at Pasco. There were press releases and all kinds of picture taking. At about the same time, Germany surrendered.

While stationed at Pasco, Connie and I shared a house with Miriam and Stan Butchart. The house was located in a small town across the river called Kenewick. We had joined the world of war time rationing right along with everyone else.

The second VT-51 was decommissioned after a few months of existence. Dick, Butch, and I spent a brief period of time, at the Barbers Point Naval Air Station on Oahu, in a replacement pool. The atomic bombs were dropped on Japan suddenly ending the war. A point system releasing pilots from the Navy was established, and we were on our way home without hesitation. Besides, Connie was pregnant with Judith.

I stopped wearing j.g. bars in September, 1945, when I separated from the Navy in San Diego. All veterans were given a lapel pin to wear. I wore mine for awhile.

I was one very retired, very lucky flyboy.

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