

CHAPTER IX - MOFFETT FIELD

I left Memphis with my sea bag and a Greyhound bus ticket for Naval Air Station Moffett Field, California. The Greyhound people had screwed up by misrouting me to San Francisco and then back to NAS Moffett Field. I was unaware of the fact that Moffett Field was thirty miles south of San Francisco, and I could have gotten off there rather than go all the way up to San Francisco and catch another bus back to Moffett Field. I finally arrived at the air station, but now I needed to locate Air Transport Squadron Five (VR-5). After wandering aimlessly for about an hour, I finally stopped and asked someone where VR-5 was. The person I asked pointed to a huge hangar on the other side of the airfield. I said, "Thank you," and headed for the hangar completely ignorant of the fact that I was walking across the main runway. I was supposed to have taken the unmarked road that went around the runway. It didn't take long before I found out, however. I couldn't help but notice a jeep headed towards me, at top speed. The jeep was being driven by a sailor wearing dungarees with a khaki dressed officer sitting next to him. The officer was also wearing an arm band identifying him as the OOD (Officer of the Day). The OOD yelled at me, "Where in the hell do you think you are going?" I pointed to the hangar and said, "Over there, Sir, I'm looking for VR-5, Sir." He then asked sarcastically, "How long have you been in the Navy, Sailor?" I answered, "Not long, Sir, this is the first time I had been on a real air base." He then told me that I was standing in the middle of the duty runway, and I'm lucky that an airplane hadn't landed on me. He then ordered me into the jeep and took me over to the VR-5 Duty Officer. The Duty Officer gave me a mild reprimand and had his assistant check me in.

This huge hangar was one of three blimp hangers that were built for the Navy during the lighter than air craft glory days. VR-5 was housed in the northern half of hangar number one. VR-5 was part of (NATS) the Naval Air Transport Service. Our squadron flew R6D Douglas Lift Masters. We were also the reluctant custodians of the Navy's two Lockheed R6V Constitutions. The Constitutions were huge double-decker propeller driven airplanes. The R6V required a 12 man crew and carried 168 passengers. These airplanes were at least twice the size of the R6D Lift Masters. Unfortunately they were remarkably underpowered. Air transports as large as the Constitution wouldn't be practical until jet engines were adapted for use on transport aircraft several years later. Our sister squadron, VR-3 occupied the other half of the hangar. VR-3 was part of (MATS) the Military Air Transport Service. They flew the Lockheed R7V Constellation. The R7V was a beautiful airplane. It had a dolphin shaped fuselage and sported a distinctive triple tail.

I BECOME A SEAMAN GUARD

Instead of assigning me to the metal shop, for some mysterious reason I was sent to the Terminal Division instead where I was taught "weight and balance," the important art of the distributing the weight of passengers and cargo plane for maximum flight efficiency. After about three weeks as a weight and balance technician, I was used to fill the Terminal Division's obligation to supply a man to "Seaman Guard". The Seaman Guard is a division of sailors who do nothing but stand armed security watches 24 hours a day. All of the other squadron divisions are required to send men to Seaman Guard for a three month tour on an as necessary basis. These men are divided evenly into two sections called "Port" and "Starboard." The watch standers in the Port section would stand all required watches one day, and those in the Starboard section would stand all required watches the following day. When your section had the duty you would have to stand all of the 12 to 4, 4 to 8, or 8 to 12 watches, both A.M. and P.M.

The beauty of working “port and starboard” was that you had every other day off. Tony Bennett may have left his heart in San Francisco, but most of us on Seaman Guard preferred the City of San Jose, just a little south of Moffett Field. Hitchhiking was the popular mode of transportation. U.S. Highway 101 was always busy, and all a sailor had to do was stick his thumb out and he would be offered a ride within minutes. The reason San Jose was so popular was because that’s where the girls were. San Jose State University was co-educational but, because of the draft and the war over in Korea, the female- male ratio was better than three to one. It made San Jose a paradise for the young sailors, stationed at Moffett Field

TWO CHICKS AND A CHUCK

In the Navy, everyone is called by his rank and his last name. At Moffett Field, my rank was Airman and I was called either Airman Sterling or simply Sterling. Usually it was Sterling. The College crowd at San Jose State, that welcomed me into their world, called me either Charles or Chuck. On my first venture into San Jose, I met a cute little coed from Bakersfield named Lucy. She and a girl friend named Jo Ann were hanging out in a coffee shop just off campus. After a bit of successful flirting, Lucy and Jo Ann invited me to join them at their table. Jo was the cuter of the two but she told me early on that she had a boyfriend in the Air Force. She made it clear that the fly boy was her true and only love. Lucy, on the other hand was eager to fool around. I invited Lucy to go to the movies and she accepted. As an afterthought, I asked Jo if she wanted to tag along and make it a threesome. She said yes and for the next couple of months the three of us spent a lot of time together. Lucy and I became intimate friends and Jo Ann would fade from the scene if Lucy gave her the high sign. We were such an item on campus that Jo Ann coined the phrase, “Two Chicks and a Chuck” to describe our trio. From then on I was known as Chuck, on the West Coast.

Dobson, another sailor in the Seaman Guard, needed a day off on a day he normally had duty. He asked me if I would swap days off with him. I agreed. This swap meant that I would have a day off on a day that I would normally have the Duty. I arose early, on my unscheduled day off, and started getting ready to go into town to see my girlfriend Lucy. As I was getting dressed I struck up a conversation with Dave O’Neal, another sailor, who was also getting dressed to go into town. Just for conversation, I asked him where he went for Liberty. He told me that he was going to San Jose to see his girlfriend. He said that he had a girlfriend going to college there, and he was planning on taking her to the movies. I told him that I also had a girlfriend in San Jose and I thought the movies were a pretty good idea. I suggested to him that if our girlfriends didn’t mind, we could make it a foursome. It sounded like a workable plan until one of us mentioned the name of his girl friend. We were both dating coeds from San Jose State, and both of our girl friends had the same name. This was simply too much of a coincidence. We both pulled out our girl friend’s picture and confirmed our worst fear. We were both going steady with the same Lucy.

After we got over the shock that Lucy was going steady with both of us at the same time, we decided that we needed to confront Lucy. O’Neal and I finished getting dressed and went into town together. Walking from downtown to the campus, O’Neal and I worked out a plan. One of us would knock on the sorority house door and ask for Lucy while the other hid around the corner. After a couple of minutes the other would do the same. I went first. I knocked on the door and told the girl answering that I was calling on Lucy. The girl asked me to have a seat in the waiting room and ran up the stairs to tell Lucy that I was there. She returned after a couple of minutes and told me that Lucy would be right down. Just about then, there was another knock

at the door. This time it was O'Neal, also asking for Lucy. The girl had an, "Oh my God, what do I do now?" look on her face and ran upstairs again. Neither O'Neal nor I acted as if we knew each other. After a few more minutes, Lucy finally came down to face the music. We told her how we found out that she was dating both of us. We then asked her if she was still in the mood for a movie. After the movie, I told Lucy that I was bowing out of our relationship. Sharing a girl friend was a little too modern for my taste.

A TALL BEAUTY NAMED MARGARET ANN

After my break up with Lucy, I started going to the USO (United Services Organization). The USO was sort of a home away from home. They had a nice dance floor, a lounge where you could read and a well equipped game room. The main attraction was the dance floor. The dance floor was a magnet for the sailors from Moffett Field and the girls from San Jose State. It was at one of these dances that I met my future wife, Margaret Ann Fahey. I was moon struck with Margaret Ann from the moment I first saw her. She stood just a wee bit over six feet tall and had the figure of a New York fashion model. Her blue eyes were gorgeous and her long brown hair was absolutely beautiful. I was gangly and awkward, standing six and a half feet tall. Because of my shyness I never mastered the art of dancing but I decided to give it my best try. I asked Margaret Ann if she would dance with me and she said accepted. I spent the next several numbers stumbling around the dance floor with her. I spent most of this time apologizing for my clumsiness and trying not to step on her toes. After a couple more dates at the USO, Margaret Ann invited me to dine with her at her sorority house. She was one of fifty girls living at the sorority house. Margaret Ann and three others worked for their room and board. The other forty six were paying members. One of the sorority perks was that each girl was allowed to invite a guest to dinner once each week. I quickly found out that there was always a girl who would give Margaret Ann their invitation so that she could invite me every time I was there around dinner time. Their food was so much better than Navy chow that I made it a point to dine at the sorority house as often as possible.

Margaret Ann and I spent a lot of time at a little coffee shop near the campus. We would stop there after an evening at the USO or the movies. This is where I first met Glen and Barbra. Barbra was Margaret Ann's best friend and Glen was Barbra's fiancé. Barbra was also a very light skinned African American and was passing for white. Margaret Ann had told me this in strict confidence but Glen didn't have a clue. One day Barbra seemed very upset and needed to talk to Margaret Ann about some problem she was having. She asked Glen and me to give her and Margaret Ann some space so that they could talk about what ever was going on. The problem was, Glen had proposed marriage to Barbra. In the excitement of the moment, Barbra had invited Glen home to meet her parents the following week end. Barbra's parents were obviously black, and now Barbra was afraid of Glen's reaction when he discovered that he would be marrying into a black family. Barbra was very upset and was considering cancelling the planned weekend and her engagement to Glen.

Glen and I were sitting in another booth, respecting Barbra and Margaret Ann's request for privacy. Glen told me that he was crazy about Barbra and had asked her to marry him. He went on to say that he was worried because he hadn't been entirely honest with Barbra. He told me that he was part African and was passing for white. That bit of news was a tension breaker. I called for Margaret Ann and Barbra to join Glen and me at our booth. The time for secrecy was over. They both had the same problem and their problem turned out to be no problem at all.

ALUM ROCK PARK

On one of our more memorable dates, Margaret Ann and I went hiking in Alum Rock Park. The park was a nice hilly area with lots of paths and hiking trails. It had rained earlier that day and much of the terrain was slippery. Unfortunately, just before sunset, the spirit of adventure led us into taking one of the off beat trails. We soon found ourselves lost and in complete darkness. Poor judgment caused us to take the wrong path. We found the path we chose was too slippery to go back and going forward seemed unwise. We eventually stumbled, slipped and slid ourselves to the edge of a cliff. The cliff dropped straight down into total darkness. I found myself hanging on to a tiny little bush for dear life. It was the only thing preventing me from falling into oblivion. Margaret Ann wasn't in much better off except the bush she was hanging on was a lot larger than mine. The thought of our falling to our deaths scared the hell out of me. I decided to try and find out how far the fall would be. The first thing I tried was matches. As a smoker, I always had a book of matches with me. I lit a match and then drop it into the dark nothingness. My match went out within the first two or three feet. This wasn't any help at all. Next I looked for pebbles or twigs to drop. I was hoping I could hear them hit bottom and get an indication as to how far they had dropped. I heard nothing at all. Not even a hint. Finally in desperation, I let go of my tiny little bush and dropped. Much to my relief, I survived the fall. It was only about ten feet. I then told Margaret Ann to let go and I would catch her. Silly me, there was no way I could have caught her but I did manage to break her fall.

Our ordeal left both of us muddy, scratched and bruised. We were tempted to walk back to town because of our appearance, but we were very tired and took the bus instead. The House Mother at the sorority house met us at the door. She gave me an ear full. Next she asked Margaret Ann if she had been raped. Satisfied that Margaret Ann hadn't been sexually molested, she sent her upstairs to a good hot bath and cleaned up her scratches. I was grateful and satisfied that Margaret Ann was in good hands, so I went back to the base.

Margaret Ann and were spending so much time together. that she began failing some of her classes. Margaret Ann's parents gave her an ultimatum. She had to choose college or me. Margaret Ann chose me. She moved back in with her parents in Los Banos, California. Her father, William Griffin Fahey, was a rugged farmer of Irish and Danish descent. Her mother, Evelyn Josephine Larsen Fahey, was a housewife of Danish descent. The Fahey's lived on a small farm near Los Banos. The journey from Moffett Field to Los Banos was about 230 miles round trip. I made the trip at least once a week. I couldn't stand being away from Margaret Ann. When I was lucky enough to have a week end off, the Fahey's would let me sleep in their old storage shed. It was on one of these visits that Margaret Ann and I became engaged. Soon after we announced our engagement, VR-5 decided to transfer me to their detachment at NAS North Island, San Diego, California.