

CHAPTER X - MARGARET ANN AND I GET MARRIED



Margaret Ann and Charles wedding photo

When I checked in with our detachment at San Diego I was assigned to the Aviation Metal Shop. Our detachment had two R5DSkymaster's, two TBM-3R's and a special R4D-8 Skytrain, that had been customized for the senior Admiral in the San Diego area. The Aviation Metal Shop's main job was to keep these airplanes structurally sound. The shop was organized into four duty sections. That is we worked a standard forty hour week plus every fourth night and every fourth week end, if necessary. This meant that twice a month, I had from 4 P.M. Friday until 8 A.M. Monday free to hitch hike up to Los Banos and be with my darling Margaret Ann.

With the help of Margaret Ann's mother, a date was set for our wedding. Under California Law, Margaret Ann at 19 was a legal adult. This same law said that I was a minor because I was only 20 and wouldn't be an adult until my 21st birthday. Margaret Ann and I had two choices. We could postpone our wedding until my 21st birthday or I could get my parents to sign a paper granting legal permission to marry as a minor. I called Mama and gave her all the information that I thought she needed to know. The way I saw it, all she really needed to know was how to write, "I give permission for my son, Charles Edward Sterling to get married," and have it notarized. Mama wouldn't sign anything without more information however. She wanted to know Margaret Ann's name, where she lived, what she looked like, when and where the wedding was to be and on and on and on. The next thing I know, I was begging Mama not to make me beg. We were talking long distance and I was running out of quarters. She was finally satisfied and mailed me her and Daddy's notarized consent.

My next problem was with the Navy. I went to my Division Officer and requested a week off for the wedding and honeymoon. He denied my request for a leave of absence because I didn't have my Commanding Officer's permission to get married. He also advised me that if I did get married without permission, I would face a Court Martial for violating Naval Regulations. Too many wheels had been set in motion to let this stop me. I resubmitted my request directly to the Commanding Officer. This time I lied. I told him that I "had" to get married, that it was a matter of honor. This time my request was approved with the Commanding Officers congratulations and best wishes.

Margaret Ann and I were married in the Methodist Church of Los Banos on August 17, 1953. Don Christiansen, one of Margaret Ann's cousins, was my best man and Margaret Ann's sister, June Marie, was the bridesmaid. Since Los Banos, California was about 400 miles from San Diego, California and almost 2000 miles from Galveston, Texas, none of my friends or kin was in attendance. After the wedding we went next door, to the church's recreation hall for the reception. The cake was impressive. It three tiered and beautifully decorated. Instead of it being topped with the standard, formally attired groom standing by his bride, our cake was topped by a tiny little sailor and his bride. Both figures were slim and trim, as Margaret Ann and I were, and the bride figurine was almost as beautiful as my lovely Margaret Ann.

HONEYMOON ON THE TRAIN

Margaret Ann's parents drove us to Merced, California and bought us tickets for the nine o'clock train to San Diego the next morning. Next they checked us into a hotel for the night and asked us if we would like to go to the movies. We agreed that the movies would be fun, so they drove us to the local movie theater. After paying for our tickets, we thanked them for all that they had done for us, said goodbye and went into the movie theater. We tried our best to watch the movie for about fifteen minutes and decided to go back to the hotel.

Aunt Margaret and Uncle Ira picked us up at the San Diego train station the next day. They drove us over to a friend's house where we could stay for thirty days for free. Their friends were going on vacation and said that they would rather have us in their house than leave it empty. They also had a cat named "Blackie" that they needed someone to look after. Blackie was a nice, lovable cat except he had a bad habit of jumping up on the food preparation area meowing for handouts. He had plenty of food in his dish, but he seemed to think that whatever Margaret Ann was preparing would be even tastier. Some people don't seem to mind, but neither Margaret Ann nor I like cat hair in our food. So we would shoo Blackie away any time he came close to the food preparation area. As it turned out, we must have shooed Blackie once too often. He disappeared the day before Aunt Margaret and Uncle Ira's friends returned home from vacation. We searched the neighborhood for the next several days, but Blackie was never seen again.

We spent the next thirty days in a rundown apartment house in a slum area near downtown San Diego. We signed a month to month lease. Our apartment was one of four on the second floor, and there was only one bathroom for all four apartments. The lease agreement required the tenants to take turns cleaning the bathroom. Our only entertainment, besides ourselves, was a twenty-five cent movie treat, once a week. We usually walked the twelve blocks to the movie and caught the bus back. If we weren't too tired, we would walk back and spend our bus money on a fountain coke at a drugstore along the way back to our apartment. Young Navy couples occupied all four apartments. The husbands had their jobs to occupy much of their time, but the ladies had to face endless hours of boredom. It wasn't at all surprising, that they spent a lot of time in each others company. Margaret Ann surprised me one evening by asking if she could measure my private part. It seems that the other girls had measured their husbands' and Margaret Ann was wondering how I measured up to the other guys. I think I came out pretty favorable, but I'll never know for sure. Margaret Ann was too much of a lady to complain if she thought that she was being short changed.

THE TRAILER PARK

Aunt Margaret and Uncle Ira were living in a house in Palm City, a small residential area near Imperial Beach. Their house was right next to a low rent trailer park. The trailer park had a small one bedroom apartment for the manager to live in. For the time being, both the apartment and the manager position were up for grabs. The job was fairly simple, and offered free rent, free utilities and paid thirty dollars a month. We took the job.

It didn't take us long to discover that the greatest irritant to the job was the telephone. Most of the trailerites didn't have one. If they needed to make a call, they would come up to the office and used the office phone. We had a public address system so that when someone called in for one of the tenants, we would summon the tenant on the public address system. There was a park rule against taking phone calls and an ordinance against using the public address system after ten o'clock at night. Saturday nights were usually party nights. Even though you ignored incoming calls, we still had to contend with partying tenants, who would bang on the office door begging us to let them call out.

Margaret Ann and I lived in Palm City until our name came up on the list for Navy housing. In addition to my meager Navy pay, I was given an extra \$33.00 a month for not eating in the chow hall and an extra \$51.10 for not living in the barracks. Moving into Navy housing meant we would have to manage on a tighter budget. I welcomed the move however, because but I had managed to get Margaret Ann pregnant and managing the trailer park was much too stressful for her.

PATRICIA ANN IS BORN

Our daughter, Patricia Ann Sterling, was born at the Balboa Naval Hospital in San Diego on July 2 1954. The Naval Hospital was doing a land office business in baby delivery. At this time, Balboa Hospital's baby production record was second in the Nation. Some Hospital in New York City out-produced Balboa Hospital on a regular basis. Even so, Balboa had a reputation for turning out babies like a Detroit assembly line. Everyone was anxious for Patti's arrival except Patti. Margaret Ann started labor early, the day before. We spent much of the day timing her contractions and wondering if they were close enough. We even made a speed run out to the hospital only to be sent back home. The pre-delivery room was completely full, and there were pregnant ladies lined up on gurneys, down the hallway. All of them were having contractions closer than Margaret Ann's. The second time we took Margaret Ann to the hospital, they let her stay. She was placed on a gurney and took her place at the end of the long gurney line. It was a very lonely line. A couple of times one of the ladies would be pulled out of line and taken directly to the delivery room. Nothing like that happened to us, however. We had to sweat out every agonizing minute. Margaret Ann was finally taken into the delivery room, where things got busy in a hurry. Shortly after they wheeled her in a Nurse came out and told me that I was the father of a beautiful little girl.

PLEASE DON'T SEND ME MESS COOKING

Just as everything seemed to be going my way, fate threw me a curve. The Detachment Leading Chief ordered me to report to the chow hall. He said that all lower rated men had to take their turn working as a mess cook or as a compartment cleaner. He said that it was a three-month assignment and after I served three months, I would be returned back to the Metal Shop.

That was horrifying news. Being assigned to the chow hall meant that the Navy would take away the \$33.00 a month I was receiving for not eating there. Taking \$33.00 out of our budget meant that Margaret Ann and Patti would be on a starvation diet. The Leading Chief turned a deaf ear to my problem. In desperation I told my tale of woe to the Chaplin. After a few phone calls, the Chaplin told me that the Leading Chief would adjust his assignment schedule a few days. He would send a single sailor mess cooking, instead of me. He would then assign me to the compartment cleaning detail that he was going to give the single sailor.

After completing my tour as a compartment cleaner, the Leading Chief decided to make a clerk out of me instead of letting me work in the metal shop. The Detachment was short on clerks, and he needed someone to take care of Navigation Office. The Navigation Office also served as the office for an experimental unit the Navy called the “Codfish Airlines.”

All of the enlisted men working out of the hanger area were divided into four duty sections. I worked a normal eight hour, five day week as a clerk and then stood “duty” every fourth night, and every fourth week-end, working as a structural mechanic. Having the “duty” meant being available for all necessary work from 4 P.M. until 8 A.M. the next morning. Much of our time was spent “standing by” waiting on our airplanes to return from cross country trips. When we were in a stand by mode, we were allowed to crawl up into the loft above the metal shop and catch forty winks. On “duty” weekends (every fourth weekend), I was allowed to do catch up work in my office unless there was an unusually heavy maintenance work load. I spent most of my catch up time cleaning and buffing my office floor.

Lieutenant Pulaski, the Officer in charge of “Codfish Airlines,” invited me to fly out with him as a reward for the extra effort I put forth in taking care of his office. “Codfish Airlines” was a nickname for Carrier On board Delivery. It was an experiment to see if flying mail, cargo and passengers out to the carriers and back on a routine basis was feasible. The Navy had a modified a TBM Avenger Torpedo bomber for that purpose, and I was privileged to be one of her first passengers. My seat was in her belly where the torpedoes used to be kept. We flew out and landed aboard the USS Badoeng Strait (CVE 116). Touring the ship, I discovered that she was affectionately called the “Bing Ding” by her crew. As I toured the ship I managed to find the ship’s store Unable to pass up a bargain, I bought twenty cartons of “sea stores” cigarettes for seventy cents a carton. The Navy Exchange price was two dollars a carton, in those days.

Landing on board and jettisoning off of the Bing Ding can only be described as both terrifying and exciting. I couldn’t help but think thoughts like what if the wheels collapse and your becomes an instant coffin. I also found myself estimating the distance to the escape hatch in the event the pilot was forced to ditch the Avenger into the ocean. I just knew if that happened, I would be a dead man. Since the Avenger was originally designed to carry torpedoes in her belly and not passengers, the escape hatch was an after thought, and not a well thought one at that.

After working as a clerk several months, I asked the Leading Chief to let me go back to the metal shop as my primary assignment. Being a full time clerk and a part time structural mechanic just didn’t make sense to me. The Navy had insisted that I become a Structural Mechanic, and I felt that I should be working as a Structural Mechanic full time. The Leading Chief said no way. He said that I was doing such a good job as an office clerk that it was not possible for him to replace me. My interpretation to that bit of news was that I should quit doing such a good job. After a couple of weeks of not entering the latest changes in the navigation charts and other publications, some of the pilots began to complain. The Leading Chief called me into his office and asked me what my problem was. He said, “What’s the matter, aren’t you

happy?" I answered, "You know damned well that I'm not happy," I told him that if he wanted the job done properly he would have to find someone else. Instead of sending me to the Metal Shop, as I had requested, he swapped me for another Airman, who was working at the Air Terminal.

SAFETY EQUIPMENT MAN

The North Island Air Terminal turned out to be wonderful. I was given the job of taking care of the squadrons' safety equipment. Our R4D's and our R5D's carried life rafts because much of our flying was over water. In an emergency, our pilots were instructed to ditch their plane in the ocean rather than crash on land. In support of this philosophy, our transports carried rubber life rafts and inflatable life vests. The life rafts inflated automatically and were equipped with emergency rations, signaling flares and an emergency radio called the "Gibson Girl." The Gibson Girl earned its nickname because its shape reminded Airmen of Charles Dana Gibson's famous pin ups of WWII.

The life vest was equipped with a simple one cell flash light, a whistle for signaling, and a packet of yellow green dye, to make it easier for rescue aircraft to locate a person in the water. In addition to the signaling devices there was also a packet of "shark chaser," This pungent packet was designed to be dangled just below the wearer's feet and protect the wearer from shark attack. Inevitably at the end of the briefing, someone would ask me what was in shark chaser and if it really worked. If there were no officers or ladies present I would tell them that shark chaser was composed of hamburger meat and shark genitalia. Sharks didn't know whether to eat it or make love to it and it drove them crazy.

I had to inspect and replace any of this gear that wasn't absolutely perfect. The most fun part of my job was giving the pre-flight safety briefings to the passengers. My talk was similar to the ones given by airline stewardesses on commercial flights in today's world. I would tell my passengers that their life jackets could be inflated either by puncturing a small Co2 cartridge or by blowing into an inflation tube I would warn them not to do either unless they were actually in the water.

A fork lift was necessary for me to do all this, and I didn't have a fork lift driver's license. My new boss sent me to a two week Fork Lift Drivers School where I qualified for the license. I was pleased to find out that a fork lift license somehow made me eligible for flight pay. I was informed that the squadron was short of qualified fork lift drivers so they offered flight pay as an incentive to anyone who qualified to drive one. I had to fly at least four hours every month, as a flight orderly, before I could actually receive the extra pay.

I had a large wooden box, mounted on a pallet skid that fitted on the front of my fork lift. It was perfect for lifting safety equipment up to the aircrafts cargo hatch. At Forklift Drivers School, my instructor had emphasized that when moving the fork lift, the base of the forks should be about one inch off the ground and the tips of the forks should be about five inches off of the ground. I was also taught to be extra careful when operating my fork lift around aircraft. One day I had a pallet full of safety equipment that needed loading aboard a R5D Skymaster that was down for maintenance. The Airframes Shop Chief was leading a team of structural mechanics in replacing the airplanes deicer boots. Going back to my Safety Equipment shack, I skirted the R5D very carefully paying particular attention to the right wing that I had to pass under. With great care I passed under the wing with inches to spare. Pleased with myself for giving the Navy a good days work, I relaxed and waited for quitting time. Just as I was about to

lock up my little shop and go home, the telephone rang. It was Chief Cockerhan, the Airframes Shop Chief. He asked me if I had seen his hat. Puzzled at the question, I told him that I hadn't. He then asked me if I would go out and look under my fork lift for him. He said that someone had told him that they had seen his hat there. I went out to the forklift and saw what used to be a chiefs hat. It was now a mangled mess wedged between the pallet and the concrete apron. Chief Cockerhan then asked me if I would bring it to him. I told him that his hat was in such a disaster that I didn't believe he would want it. He said that it wasn't a matter of him wanting it. He said he had to have it or they wouldn't let him out the gate. As I returned the Chief his hat, I apologized profusely and offered to pay for damages. It was 100% totaled. In an attempt to maintain his composure the Chief muttered, "Never mind, I'd rather hate you." A few years later, I ran into Chief Cockerhan in a passageway on the USS Coral Sea. He was now a Master Chief Petty Officer and I was a Chief Warrant Officer. I said, "Hi Chief, remember me?" I'm sure he did but he completely ignored my salutation. I would have given anything if the Chief would have let me buy him a new hat. As it stands it looks as if Chief Cockerhan will go to his grave hating me.

Our two R5D's routinely flew up to the San Francisco area and back almost every day. The R4D usually just sat there awaiting the Admiral's pleasure. Ever so often they would assign me as "flight orderly" on one of the R5D's. My job was to serve coffee and boxed lunches on the longer flights. I liked the short flights the best because on short flights no one ever used the wash room and all you had to worry about was coffee. The flight orderly also had the job of emptying and cleaning the "honey bucket". The honey bucket is the lavatory in the back of the plane. They can get pretty foul. One of my friends started calling his wife "honey bucket" as a private inside joke. She really liked the nickname and told all of her friends about it. It wasn't long before one of her friends told her what "honey bucket" meant in Navy slang. After that my idiot friend spent a lot of time on the couch.

REENLISTMENT FOR PATTI'S SAKE

Even though I had very little experience actually working as an Aviation Structural Mechanic, I was lucky enough to be recommended for promotion to Aviation Structural Mechanic Third Class. That was especially lucky because the United States was winding down from the Korean War, and there was a directive not to reenlist anyone lower than third class. Patti was chronically ill with respiratory problems. She was suffering from repeated attacks of asthma followed by occasional bouts of pneumonia. It was later found that one of her bronchial tubes had withered instead of growing and was the cause of most of her suffering. Without Navy medicine, I was afraid she would die. Because of Patti's medical condition, my promotion was God sent.

I reenlisted in April of 1955 and received orders to VR-21 in Hawaii. With my reenlistment leave, Margaret Ann and I bought ourselves an old clunker and took vacation time off to visit my folks in Texas and Margaret's folks in Los Banos. This old clunker was our first car. Margaret Ann was a good driver but I couldn't drive at all. Our family didn't own a car during WWII and for a long time after. I couldn't ask Dad to teach me to drive because of this and I was afraid to ask his one brother, who did own an old vehicle because he was a mean drunk and I was afraid of him. Margaret on the other hand had been raised on a farm and had been driving since her early teens. She taught me how to drive. With a little practice and a lot of study, I managed to get a drivers license while we were visiting my folks in Texas.

During my early days with VR-5 at San Diego, I had to rely on my thumb to get me back and forth to work. Lucky for me one of my neighbors, a Second Class Petty Officer named Peoples, was also stationed with VR-5. He drove a little Crosley. His tiny little car only had room for a driver and three passengers, if none of them were very big. I was pretty big, height wise, but I could fold my legs in a way that didn't take up much room. His other two passengers and I took turns filling up his gas tank and once a month we would give him a little extra for incidentals. It was a win-win for everyone.

One day Base Security pulled him over and gave him a speeding ticket. The citation accused him of going 50 in a 45 mile per hour zone. The base was very strict on traffic safety and getting a ticket meant losing his base sticker. Peoples decided to fight the ticket by requesting Captain's Mast. Request Mast is an avenue available to sailors that allows them to stand before their Commanding Officer and request redress of grievances. Peoples told the C.O. that he couldn't possibly be guilty of going 55 because his little car couldn't go that fast. Peoples then invited the C.O. to drive his little car and see for himself. The C.O. said that he believed Peoples to be a man of his word and dismissed the speeding ticket.

When Peoples cramped little car went in or out the main gate there was always a flurry of activity as everyone dug out their wallets so that they could show their identification card and their liberty pass to the gate guard. This was especially difficult for Peoples because he had the added task of maintaining control over his little car. One day as we were going through the gate, Peoples was a little slow in producing his credentials. He only managed to display his wallet, leaving his Credentials safely hidden away in his wallet card holder. The Marine Sentinel, not noticing Peoples mistake, signaled permission for us to go on through. This struck Peoples as being funny so the next time he drove up to the gate, instead of showing his credentials he displayed the bare palm of his hand, Much to everyone's delight the Marine waved us through again as if everything was proper. The next time Peoples tucked his thumb in and held up four fingers with the same results. Peoples continued his amusing little charade until he was only holding up his little pinkie. This time the gate guard noticed and asked Peoples what the hell was going on with his little pinkie. Peoples laughed and explained his little game to the Marine. To the best of my knowledge, Peoples never played his little game after that.

Now that I had orders to Hawaii, Margaret Ann decided to stay in California and let me check out living conditions over there. She would join me there later if conditions were favorable. My orders called for me to travel to Treasure Island Receiving Station at San Francisco and await further transportation to Hawaii. After arriving in Hawaii, I would have to check into the Pearl Harbor Receiving Station and await transportation to the Naval Air Station at Barbers Point. Once at Barbers Point, I would find my way to the VR-21 Duty Officer and report for duty. All of this would be very tiresome and would take at least a couple of weeks.

Before leaving San Diego for Treasure Island, I stopped by my boss's office to shake his hand and say good bye. He asked me where I was being transferred to. I told him that I was headed for VR-21 via Treasure Island etc. etc, etc. He told me that Admiral Martin was going to fly out to Barbers Point in two days and asked why I didn't just hang around San Diego and fly to Hawaii with the Admiral. I told him I couldn't do that because my orders said that I should do something else. He said that orders are orders, but orders can be changed. He then called someone at the Eleventh Naval District Headquarters and had my orders changed. Instead of going through routine protocol, I flew directly from my old duty assignment to my new assignment in Hawaii bypassing all the annoying inconveniences in between.