

CHAPTER XII - NAS MEMPHIS

On a hot summer day in 1957, I reported to the Naval Air Station Memphis for duty. I was assigned to the Air Station metal shop. As an Aviation Structural Mechanic First Class, I was disappointed to learn that there was seven AM1s already assigned to this tiny overcrowded shop. Even more disappointing, I learned that I was junior to all the rest of the AM1s. Because of my lack of seniority, I was assigned to the one job that none of the others wanted. I was put in charge of the aircraft crash and salvage crew. This position required me to be on 24 hour alert; seven days a week, fair weather or fowl. Any time the crash bell sounded, I had to drop whatever I was doing, round up my crew and rush to the scene of the crash. Once at the scene, my crew and I would work with the investigators in their attempt at determining what went wrong. We would then disassemble the wreckage, load it all onto trucks and clean up the area the best we could.

This assignment was both interesting and exciting but it also kept me away from my family for days on end. I was supposed to be on shore duty, an assignment where I could spend a lot of off-duty hours with my family. With this job, I was spending far less time with Margaret, Patti and Richard than I felt I was entitled to. This thankless assignment also caused me to miss some time with my parents.

My parents drove up from Galveston to Memphis on a surprise visit to spend a week's vacation time with us. Just as they arrived, the crash bell went off and I had to run. A small jet trainer had crashed in Mississippi. After a quick, "hello" followed by an apology and a hasty, "gotta' run, see you later," I rushed over to the base to round up my men. The crash was an especially messy one that took an entire week to clean up. I arrived back home just in time to wave goodbye to my parents.

I can't tell you how much I resented this assignment. Orders are orders, however, and all I could do was grin and bear it. In the six months I had this job, I was away from home at least half of the time.

The easiest of all the crash assignments I had to go to, was when one of our jet trainers made a wheels up crash landing at Blytheville Air Force Base, Arkansas. All we had to do on that one was remove the wings and load the trainer on a couple of flat bed trucks and haul it all back to our base. While we were at Blytheville, I witnessed a rare ceremony. The entire base, my crew included, turned out for a retirement ceremony for an old Master Sergeant. This old Sergeant had enlisted before Pearl Harbor and had later received a field commission for valor. Even though his field commission was "temporary" he was promoted over and over again. He eventually attained the rank of General. At the end of WWII he was allowed to stay in the Air Force, but he had to revert back to his "permanent" rank, which was Master Sergeant. When the Master Sergeant retired, they restored him to the rank of Brigadier General. At the ceremony, the Commanding Officer removed the Sergeant of his stripes. He then replaced them with General stars and gave the newly retired General a snappy salute.

My most unpleasant cleanup wasn't difficult at all. A Jet fighter had failed to pull out of a steep dive and had slammed into the clay earth in Northern Mississippi. All we found, when we got there, was one of the pilot's fingers, some minor debris, and a big fiery crater not unlike a miniature volcano. I didn't want to waste a body bag on the pilots' finger, so I wrapped it up in a sheet of waxed paper and stuck it in my foul weather jacket pocket. We then camped around the blazing pit for the next two days, hoping the fire would burn itself out so that we could retrieve the some of the wreckage. A Federal Aviation Accident investigator visited the site and declared

the situation hopeless. He then advised us to bulldoze the hole over, clean up the site, and go home. I stopped by the base, stored my gear and did just that. I went home.

Margaret greeted me with a cautious peck on the cheek. I was absolutely filthy with Mississippi mud and was sporting a stubbly beard. A cheek peck was all I could expect until I did some serious cleaning up. Right after I finished cleaning up, there was a knock at the door. It was a couple of Corpsmen from the base hospital. They had been sent to my house to pick up the pilot's remains. The presence of two corpsmen and our conversation had caught Margaret's attention and she wanted to know what we were talking about. I told the corpsmen, "Just a minute." and went to the closet where I had tossed my foul weather jacket. I was grateful that the pilot's finger was still there where I had left it. Except for the finger, the pilot's real grave is in an unmarked site in a farmer's corn field in Northern Mississippi. His finger was escorted in a coffin and sent to the pilot's home town, where it was buried with full military honors.

I GET A NEW JOB

Just as I had become reconciled with the fact that I was trapped in my aircraft crash and salvage job, fate stepped in and rescued me. It was a very slow Friday with absolutely nothing going on in the metal shop. The senior AM1 made a "command decision." He placed the next senior AM1 in charge and went home to enjoy a little extra time off. The senior first class was barely out of sight when his immediate junior mimicked his action leaving the third senior AM1 in charge. This farce continued repeating itself until the mantle was finally passed to me. Shortly after I had inherited the "in charge" position at the metal shop, the Base Operations Officer sent a messenger to the shop. He was looking for an AM1 volunteer to take the job as the lead assistant to the Operations Duty Officer. I jumped at the chance. Anything would be better than the part time job I had as head man on the salvage crew.

My new job was to assist the ODO (Operations Duty Officer) and set policy for the other assistants. There were 8 Naval Aviators who took turns at being the ODO. When they had the helm as duty Officer, it was from 8 a.m. one day until 8 a.m. the following day. Their main task was to review and approve all flight plans originating at NAS Memphis. During lengthy periods of time when there were no scheduled flight operations, the Duty Officer was permitted to retire and be on call at his home or at the BOQ (Batchelor Officer Quarters).

There were four Petty Officers assigned as Assistants to the ODO. I arranged our calender so that each of us would work from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. for two days, then from 4 p.m. to midnight for two days, then from midnight to 8 a.m. for two days. This was followed by two days off. During periods of non activity the ODO often allowed us to go home and be on call.

One of the assistant's most important duties was to make sure the Air Controllers and the Aerologist were fed. Both of these groups worked in eight hour shifts and were not allowed to leave the control tower area for the duration of their watch. The "flight cook" had to prepare box lunches for their noon meal every day. The flight cook went strictly by the book. Each box contained a ham and cheese sandwich, a roast beef sandwich a pint carton of milk, an apple and a cookie. It was a very good lunch. In fact it was a wonderful lunch except it was boring. It was the same thing day after day after day.

GOOD CHOW, COOKIE

After a couple of weeks as the senior assistant, I decided to see if I could quell the complaints about the lunches. I went over to see the flight cook and asked him if he could fix something different for a change. He told me that he was sorry but he didn't have anything different. I questioned him about that. I was sure that he had something different. He hum-hawed a bit and said, half jokingly, that he could make them peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. I told him to do it. I assured him that I would take full responsibility for any complaints. After settling the box lunch problem, our conversation turned to other things. One thing we talked about was morale. He said that he had been a cook in the Navy for over thirty years. He said that he must have cooked at least one good meal in all of those years but he has never had anyone tell him, "Good chow, Cookie." All he ever heard was bitching and complaining.

A couple of hours later, my driver picked up the lunches for the crew and a fresh jug of coffee for me. I could hardly wait for the comments as the crew tore into their boxes. The first to bite into their sandwich was Madeline Antwine, one of the more vocal complainers. Madeline wasn't what you would call a real looker, but she did have the sweetest voice I ever heard. Madeline made some remark like, "This is really good." I quickly dialed the Flight Cooks number, handed the phone to Madeline and said, "Don't tell me, tell the cook." After that, my desk would receive a call nearly every morning to discuss the day's menu. The cook really went out of his way to vary his menu, and I went out of my way to make sure any praise made it back to the cook.

The flight cook also made boxed meals for in flight consumption of passengers and crew. The Crash and Salvage crew were also entitled to boxed meals. The big problem with this was each time boxed meals were ordered there were several pages of paper work required. The Commissary Office had to be paid for these lunches before he could balance their budget. These forms irritated everyone who had to deal with them. They traveled all over the base, stopping at four different places before finally reaching Commissary Office. More often than not, one or more of these forms would contain mistakes rendering them useless. I solved this problem by creating a single form that combined the elements of the other forms and cut the signature requirement down to just two; the AODO's and the Commissary Officers'. Then, to make doubly sure I filled out a sample form, for the AODO to follow and placed it under the big sheet of plate glass that covered my desk.

TOO MUCH TEMPTATION

We had several T-28 piston engine trainer airplanes on our flight line. Every morning the enlisted Plane Captains had to rev up the engines of these trainers, to make sure they were ok for flight. The title Plane Captain is not to be confused with Aviator or Airplane Pilot. Plane Captains are trained to start, rev up and stop aircraft engines, but they are not qualified to taxi or fly an airplane. The job of being a plane captain for these airplanes was usually assigned to AD2s or AD3s (junior flight mechanics).

One of the AD3s had been boasting to his buddies for several months that he could fly the T28 that he was responsible for. Temptation finally became too much for him. Before anyone was aware of what was happening, he taxied his plane out on the runway and took off. As soon as the Air Controllers became aware of an unauthorized airplane taking off they sounded the emergency bell. As soon as the emergency bell sounded, Madeline rushed over and grabbed the "hot line" that connected our office directly to the Senior Air Controller. Madeline listened as the

Air Controller reported the emergency to her. She was supposed to relay that information on to Lieutenant Commander Lucas who was the ODO. Instead, Madeline just stood there with a dumbfounded look on her face. Mr. Lucas asked Madeline excitedly, "What's the emergency Madeline?" She hesitated a moment, searching for words but before she found them, Mr. Lucas demanded the name of the pilot. Madeline responded with, "That's the emergency, Sir, there is no pilot." meaning that the person flying the aircraft wasn't a licensed aviator.

While this was going on, I was making telephone calls to everyone on my emergency list to make sure they were aware of the emergency. I spoke mostly to secretaries and Lead Yeomen. The men I was trying to contact had already left for the Tower. Dozens of cars filled our parking lot and a huge number of onlookers flooded the area between the control tower and the taxi ramp.

The AD3 had managed to get himself airborne, but now he didn't know how to land. One of the off duty ODOs went up into the tower and was trying unsuccessfully to talk the errant T-28 down. Still another off duty pilot jumped into one of the other T-28's, hoping that he could talk the AD3 down safely from the air. He was successful. Both of the T-28's landed safely and taxied their way to the control tower. That was when my glass desk top got broken. Our office space was so crowded that it was hard to see. Madeline jumped on top of my desk so that she could get a better view. When she did my glass desk cover shattered into a dozen pieces.

While waiting on the T-28s to land, someone said the Base Captain was overheard telling another Officer that the AD3 was headed for a court-martial and he wanted security to arrest him as soon as he landed. Lucky for the AD3, the first person to meet him was Admiral Akers. The Admiral threw his arms around the AD3 and gave him a hug and congratulations. The Captain just stood there with his mouth open.

Because the news people captured the Admirals congratulating the errant AD3 for the six o'clock news, the event had to be reported just a wee bit different than it really happened. According to the official news release, the AD3 was found himself in a situation with a runaway engine. The T-28 was headed directly toward civilian housing located at the end of the runway. The fast thinking AD3 gunned the T-28 causing it to take off rather than crash into the civilian housing. Instead of court-martialing the AD3, The Navy made him into a hero.

BUSY TELEPHONE

As an assistant to the Operations Duty Officer, the most rewarding aspect of my job was the telephone. I had to make six phone calls every time a VIP (Very Important Person) landed at NAS Memphis. All pilots with VIP passengers were suppose to call VIP information into the tower before they requested permission to land. The tower relayed this information to me, and I made my six phone calls. I made these calls so often that the persons behind their voices seemed too be old friends. They became more than voices to me. Subconsciously, I began visualizing faces to go with their voices. When I was finally transferred and had to leave my telephone friends, I dropped by each of their offices to say good-bye. I was amazed. None of their faces looked anything like the faces of my imagination. Until they spoke, they were total strangers, but as soon as they opened their mouths they instantly reclaimed their position as "old friend."

The telephone brought me other rewards as well. A lot of the airplanes flying in and out of NAS Memphis had empty seats. As soon as we made contact with an incoming plane, we would ask them where their next destination was and if they had room for extra passengers. As a

courtesy to those looking for hops, I had a notebook full of names and telephone numbers. If, for instance someone lived in Houston and would like a ride to Ellington Field, I would put his or her name on my Ellington Field page. Then, when I had a hop going to Ellington Field, I would give him or her a courtesy call. People throughout the base got to know that if they left me their name, I would look out for them.

My hop list policy paid off in big dividends too. I didn't know how big until Margaret had a medical emergency, and I had to rush her to the hospital. One of the hospital corpsmen that I had helped with a hop, showed his gratitude by checking Margaret in ahead of the Admiral's wife.

Because of Patti's respiratory problems, Margaret Ann, Patti and I spent a lot of time at the hospital. Because of her poor lung condition, Patti was coming down with pneumonia about every three weeks. It was a constant battle to keep her alive. In desperation, the Navy asked Dr. Scott from the Baptist Hospital in Memphis, to consider taking her case. After a thorough examination, Dr. Scott informed us that the bronchial tube serving the uppermost lobe of her right lung was deformed. He said that the malfunctioning bronchial tube was causing the upper right lobe to fill with fluid resulting in pneumonia. Dr. Scott confirmed the fact that Patti's situation was life-threatening. He said that if the deformed bronchial tube and that part of her right lung were not removed, eventually one of her bouts with pneumonia would prove fatal. One of my concerns was how Patti could manage with the upper lobe of one of her lungs missing. Dr. Scott said that the remaining lobes would expand and fill the void left by the removed lobe. He said that the operation was Patti's only chance for survival. Margaret and I gave our consent and Patti underwent her lifesaving operation. I'm convinced that Patti's operation saved her life, but it wasn't the cure-all that we had hoped for. Patti still suffered with asthma. We took her to an allergist who ran a series of test on her. It seemed that she was allergic to almost everything. The allergist prescribed a series of desensitizing shots that had to be continued for years. Patti continued to suffer from asthma, but it became controllable enough for her to live a normal life.

A VERY LONG 24 MONTH TOUR

When I was first ordered to report to NAS Memphis, I was scheduled for a 24 month tour. Soon after I checked in, I was informed that my tour had been reset to 30 months. About a year later, they extended my tour once again, this time for a full 42 months. This 42 month tour of duty was followed by a six month assignment to Aviation Structural "B" School, which was located on the same base. Then just like icing on a cake, I received orders to the Air Intelligence School at Washington D.C. Because the Intelligence school didn't convene for another 6 months, I was allowed to hang around NAS Memphis until the Friday before Air Intelligence School convened. Counting my "A" School experience in 1952, I had spent over a quarter of my Navy career at the Memphis Naval Air Station.

Actually, I didn't just hang around the base at this point. I was assigned the job as Master at Arms for one of the "A" Schools. I was responsible for four compartment cleaners and 320 "A" School students. The students weren't much bother. They would assemble every week day morning and march off to class. As soon as they marched off to school, my compartment cleaners would get busy and make the barracks shine. Then, before the students returned I would make a show of inspecting the barracks to let the compartment cleaners know that I cared. Right after I inspected the barracks I would release the compartment cleaners for the rest of the day.

We spent our entire stay at Memphis living in Navy Enlisted Housing. This housing project was ideally suited for me. It was located in between the Base, where I worked and the Navy Hospital. With the exception of Patti's chronic medical condition and Richard's bout with the mumps, life was pretty good. We had an end unit with three bedrooms in a five unit apartment building. It was a nice complex. Most of our neighbors had kids around Patti and Richard's age. Our closest neighbor was a black couple who had a little girl just a few months younger than Richard. Richard had been learning how to talk for several months and had mastered an impressive vocabulary. The little black girl was just learning how to talk and had adopted Richard as her tutor. She would follow Richard around, pointing to just about everything and asking, "What's that" and Richard would identify the object for her. Everything went well until she pointed her tiny little finger at me and asked the very familiar question, "What's that?" Richard answered, proudly, "That's Daddy." From that moment on, I was the little black girl's Daddy. The name seemed natural to her because she called her own parents Jim and Sarah instead of Momma and Daddy. As a footnote, I must add that the Naval Base, the Naval Hospital and Navy Housing were fully integrated because they were all on federal property, but the State of Tennessee was definitely Old South and very much segregated. It seems odd now, but back then it was all right for Jim and me to hang out together on Navy property, but we had to separate as soon as we left the base area.

RICHARD'S DRIVING

Richard was not only a good tutor; his motor skills were well advanced for a four year old. Every day when I came home, I had developed a bad habit of parking my car in the reverse gear and then tossing my keys on top of our television set, where they would be easily found the next time I needed them. Richard observed me doing this time after time and one day he figured he would take the car for a spin. He took my keys from their usual resting place and went out to the family car. He opened the door, climbed into the driver's seat and slipped the key into the car's ignition. He then started turning the key, in an attempt to start the engine. Each time he turned the key the car would make a "rump" like sound and the car would jerk backwards about a foot or so. Patti spotted her little brother behind the wheel and ran into the house yelling, "Momma, Daddy, Richard is driving the car." I casually walked to the door for a look see. I fully expected to see Richard standing in the front seat of the car, making verbal sounds like "udin-udin" while playing with the steering wheel. Instead I witnessed a determined Richard turning the key over and over until my car crashed into a neighbor's car parked across the street. The next thing I knew, the street was crowded with neighbors who couldn't believe what they were told by the news spreaders and had to come out and see for themselves. The police arrived posthaste, prepared to arrest a reckless driver. They settled for filling out an accident report so that claims could be made against my insurance policy. Before they left, the police officers pretended to "cuff" their suspect. We all had a good laugh when Richard easily slipped out of the handcuffs.

SAMBO

Another advantage of living in Navy housing was its closeness to the Commissary and the Navy Exchange. The Commissary was the Navy's version of a supermarket, and the Naval Exchange was more like a civilian department store. The Commissary and the Exchange sold their stuff at cost plus a small mark up. The only exception to this was supposed to be on loss leaders. A loss leader is an advertised special that sells below wholesale cost that merchants use to lure customers in their doors. A Petty Officer named "Sambo" Stambaugh found another exception. Sambo discovered that he could buy quality produce at the farmers market, just outside of Memphis, a lot cheaper than anywhere else, including the Commissary. Sambo

started making weekly runs to the Farmers Market in order to save a little on his produce bill. When Sambo told me of the good deals he was getting, I ask him if he wouldn't mind picking up a few things for me. As the word spread, more and more of my neighbors enlisted Sambo as their personal produce shopper. Sambo began charging a small fee to cover expenses and make the extra work worthwhile. After a couple of months, Sambo was making daily runs. Sambo's business grew to the point that the Farmers Market people began delivering produce directly to Sambo's truck. Almost everyone in Navy Housing was getting good produce at a very good price.

Unfortunately, Sambo was making everyone happy except the Commissary. The Commissary was losing its shirt on produce and they didn't know why. They decided to have their check out clerks ask customers, who were not buying produce, where they were getting their produce. It didn't take long for them to figure it out. Sambo was informed that working or running a business, without the Commanding Officer's permission was illegal, and Sambo was ordered to shut down his produce operation. Sambo, figuring to pull a fast one, said that the business wasn't his. It belonged to his wife. That argument was flawed however. His wife needed but didn't have permission to do business on government property.

COFFEE IN THE BUFF

Memphis has a way of being hot and humid during the summertime. On most days like that, I would often just hang around the apartment. I usually wore a pair of bleached out "Jamaicas" that I found very comfortable and that's about all. Jamaicas are cotton trousers, cut off just below the knee and they are held up with a cotton rope instead of a belt or suspenders. Because of my unorthodox work schedule, many of my days off work were days when the rest of the husbands of the neighborhood were away at work. Because of this, I was often the only male attending the frequent impromptu coffee clutches that were so popular with the wives. Everything about these impromptu gatherings was informal. It wasn't at all unusual for one of the neighbor ladies to barge in unannounced because she was eager to pass on some juicy gossip that just couldn't wait. If the intrusion happened on the morning, Margaret and I would usually be setting at the breakfast table enjoying a cup of coffee.

One morning Margaret was downstairs brewing coffee while I was upstairs taking a shower. After finishing my shower I dried off, wrapped myself in a small towel and went down to the kitchen for my first cup of coffee. The towel was uncomfortable so I unloosened it from around my waist and draped it across the seat of the chair as I sat down. Just then, Marcia Roberts came barging in the back door with some tidbit of information that just couldn't wait. Margaret, not thinking, invited Marcia to take the seat directly across the table from mine. Here I was sitting naked, having coffee with Margaret and Marcia. I figured that Marcia probably thought I was sitting there in my Jamaicas. I didn't have a clue as to what Margaret was thinking. I figured that the least embarrassing way to handle the situation would be for me to stay calm and wait Marcia out. After Marcia finished her coffee and passed her gossip, she would leave. I could then get dressed and no one would be the wiser. Margaret apparently had her head in the clouds all this time because just as Marcia was about to leave she looked down and saw my hairy leg. She let out a yelp and announced, "Charles is naked." Even though my attempt to remain cool was a failure, it wasn't all in vain. Now Marcia had something new to talk about.

PAYDAY STAKE POKER

My biggest vice in those days was poker playing. There was a group of about a dozen of us that got together for a poker session about once a week. We usually played “pay day stakes” We played on the cuff and then collected our winnings or paid off our losses on pay day. I usually cleared forty or fifty bucks every payday. Margaret didn’t like gambling, in any form, so I went to great lengths to keep my poker sessions a secret from her. We had a little ceramic pig that was broken into two pieces that I hid my winnings in. Since the crack wasn’t detectable with the naked eye, the pig made a perfect hiding place. Except for my secret hidden stash, Margaret controlled the family budget. Our budget was stretched so thin that Margaret was beginning to have big time worries about the upcoming Christmas holiday. It looked as if it was going to be a very disappointing Christmas for Patti and Richard. The payday just before Christmas, I told Margaret to live dangerously and spend my entire paycheck on the kids. She reluctantly did as I asked. After she spent my paycheck, I snuck an amount equal to it out of my cracked pig and gave it to her. She was relieved to know that our spending spree hadn’t ruined us financially. I then told her to spend this money on something nice for herself. She refused to go along with my little game any longer and demanded to know where all the money was coming from. I showed her the secret of the cracked pig and the remainder of my stash. I was thinking it would make her happy but she was furious instead. What if I had lost instead of winning she demanded to know. I tried to explain to her that the guys I played poker with were not very good, and that there wasn’t a chance that I would lose. Margaret would have none of it. I was never to play poker with the boys again.

I CHANGE JOB SPECIALTIES

I had learned early on that a successful Sailor was an informed Sailor. My experience working in education when I was stationed in Hawaii taught me that studying paid off. During my Navy Career, my records show that I spent a little over three and a half years in Navy schools. Most of the time when I wasn’t attending a school of one kind or another, I was taking various correspondence courses. I completed 32 correspondence courses during my 20 year Navy career. I also made it a habit to read every issue of the *All Hands* magazine from cover to cover and the weekly *Navy Times* newspaper. While working as the Assistant Operations Duty Officer, I read in the *Navy Times* the Navy had announced it was going to split the Aviation Structural Mechanic Rating into three separate ratings. According to this article, I would have to choose between being a Structure, Hydraulic or Safety Equipment specialist. These three disciplines made up the present rating that I had been studying over the past seven years. As soon as I made a choice between these three fields, 2/3s of my professional knowledge would be obsolete. I was very upset over this announcement. In another section of the paper, I read that the Navy had created a new rating, PT (Photographic Intelligenceman), and they were looking for volunteers to train for the new field. I reasoned that if I was going to have to forfeit 2/3rds of my professional knowledge, I might as well forfeit it all. I filled out a request volunteering for the new career field. I received orders to the very first PT class. It was to start in October at the Washington Naval Yard at Washington, D.C. That was almost a year away. I asked Personnel if these new orders to PT School would cancel out the orders written earlier for me to go to the six month Aviation Structural Mechanic “B” School. I was told that one set of orders didn’t have anything to do with the other set of orders. I would be attending both schools.

While still at Memphis, I received a letter from a Commander at the Bureau of Naval Personnel. This Commander was the same Commander who had issued My PT School orders. The Commander informed me that the AM rating had been put on the critical Rating list and

because the Navy was experiencing a shortage of AMs I wouldn't be able to change my career field to PT. I took the letter and the orders, both signed by the same Commander, to personnel and asked them what I should do. I was informed that orders were orders and orders must be obeyed. They went on to tell me that I could do anything I wanted to do with my letter. They also cautioned me that if I did travel to Washington, as ordered and the Navy did cancel my orders as we expected they would, the Navy wouldn't pay a dime towards my moving expenses. Keeping this in mind, I made it a point to report for duty in the middle of the night. A sleepy Officer of the Day endorsed my orders and told me to report to the Personnel Office the next morning. Just as I had expected, my orders were supposed to have been canceled. When the Duty Officer logged my reporting aboard in his log book, my orders had been completed, and by definition, completed orders can not be canceled. I was learning to out fox the Navy's system instead of fighting it. My years at Memphis taught me how to go by the book and to use it to my advantage.