

CHAPTER XIX - TOP GUN SQUADRON

In the summer of 1969, I was transferred from Photographic Squadron 63 to “Top Gun” Fighter Squadron 121 for shore duty. I was excited over the opportunity to serve in such a distinguished squadron. VF 121 was the Navy’s elite flying school for advanced fighter pilots. It was the inspiration for the 1986 movie, “Top Gun.” My transfer to “Top Gun” would give me a chance to rest up from the rigorous lifestyle associated with sea duty and provide me with some badly needed time with Margaret Ann and the kids.

My excitement quickly turned to bewilderment however. I was one of five Air Intelligence Officers that had been assigned to “Top Gun”. The Navy had assigned us all into VF 121 because we were all in need of a well-deserved rest. When I checked in, I was told by the senior member of our group that our combined work load was almost zero. Our job as Intelligence Officers for Top Gun was to read all of the secret messages received by VF 121 and give a five minute summary at the all officers meeting once each week. Since there were five of us sharing this five minute task, it was obvious that I would have a lot of spare time on my hands. Rather than risk a slow death from boredom I expressed my concern with the Executive Officer. I informed him that a do nothing job would drive me crazy and I would appreciate it if he could find something else for me to do.

I BECOME TOP GUN LEGAL OFFICER

The Executive Officer said that VF 121 was short of good administrative officers and asks if I would try my hand as the squadrons Legal / discipline Officer. I told him that I was flattered by the suggestion but I felt unqualified. He said that he would send me to Legal Officer’s School before I assumed the job. I accepted the offer and after a month of intensified training I became Top Gun’s new Legal Officer.

The Legal Office consisted of an inner office, where I worked, and an outer office that provided work space for my three assistants. My number one Legal Clerk was a First Class Petty Officer named Ross. Ross was an outstanding clerk-typist. I would have been lost without him. Thanks to his expertise, all of my correspondence became word perfect and error free. My crudely written papers were magically transformed into meaningful prose. With Ross as my right arm, I was well on my way to becoming a very good Legal Officer.

Top Gun’s main function was to train young Naval Aviators to be the world’s best combat pilots before they were thrown into the Viet Nam War. Top Gun also provided quality training to the personnel who would be supporting these deadly missions. Top Gun training meant that these pilots and their support personnel would soon be fighting in a very real war.

The vast majority of these brave men and their support personnel carried out their orders as true patriots. Not all however. A very small number gave in to cowardice and decided to avoid their sworn obligation in any way that they could. A big part of my job was to deal with this small minority.

Rather than be shipped off to war. some of these men suddenly “became” conscientious objectors while others claimed to be drug addicts or homosexuals. Some just simply deserted and sought refuge in Canada. Most of these efforts resulted in less than honorable discharges.

Most of the cases involving men looking for an early release from the Navy were handled routinely. One exception involved a young sailor who claimed that someone had slipped the hallucinogen LSD into his drink at a party. He claimed to be the victim of a cruel joke. It was the policy of the Navy to discharge anyone who had taken a hallucinogenic drug because they couldn't be trusted. The Navy was afraid that the young sailor might suffer a flash back at the worse possible moment. I sensed that the man was lying just to get out of the Navy, but I couldn't prove it. It was my opinion that he deserved a Bad Conduct Discharge, but I couldn't prove either misconduct or perjury. I had to give him the benefit of doubt and issued him a General Discharge under Honorable Conditions.

LETTERS OF INDEBTEDNESS

The most obvious challenge I met as Top Gun's new Legal Officer was to do something with the large volume of letters of indebtedness written to VF 121's Commanding Officer. These letters were written to the Commanding Officer in the hope that he would influence the individual into settling a neglected debt. The Captain was a very busy man and rarely, if ever, saw any of these letters. These letters were routinely sent to the Legal Officer, who was expected to look into and help resolve the matter. The Legal Officer routinely interviewed the accused debtor and then sends the complainant a form letter stating that the individual admits to and will make an effort to pay the debt or a form letter stating that he denies owing the money and does not intend to pay the debt. I had at least a dozen different form letters that made these two statements but with slightly different wording or covering slightly different circumstances. More often than not my form letter would be answered by one of the complainer's form letters. I would respond to his repeat form letter with a repeat form letter of my own. This idiotic routine generated hundreds of letters each month and accomplished absolutely nothing. Sadly I had to give my Commanding Officer a report on the volume of indebtedness letters received each month. The Commanding Officer had to relay this report on to the base Commandant. This made everyone unhappy.

It was obvious that this routine wasn't working. I decided to try a different approach. Every time I received a letter of indebtedness I would call up and interview the subject of the complaint. During the interview, I would make telephone contact with the person that sent the letter. I would then explain the subject's position and ask the letter writer if he would like to talk to the subject for clarification of any points of contention. At the end of our conversation, I would inform the letter writer that I normally answered all complaints with a form letter and ask him if he would like for me to send him one for his files. The answer was usually no and the matter was usually settled. After the implementation of this policy our monthly letter of indebtedness file shrunk from hundreds to a small handful. I made the Commandant and my Commanding Officer very happy.

PETTY OFFICER ANDERSON

What turned out to be my largest and most dramatic challenge was a young, sharp Second Class Petty Officer named Anderson. Anderson barged into my office one day demanding that I file assault charges against one of the squadron's Chief Petty Officers. He told me that in the heat of an argument, the Chief poked him in the chest several times, to emphasize a point. I was flabbergasted. Technically, poking someone with your finger is assault, but I wasn't about to put one of our Chiefs on report for it. I told the young upstart that I would look into the matter and sent him on his way.

I talked to the Chief about this incident and the Chief told me that Anderson's story was a true one. He admitted poking the Second Class several times in the chest as Anderson had stated. He went on to say that the Anderson was a real troublemaker. He told me that he thought that Anderson was a Communist because he had been distributing subversive pamphlets and newspapers about the squadron. Later I verified what the Chief had told me. It appeared as if Anderson was a member of a communist front organization called "Sailors for a Democratic Military." I also found out that this organization had branches near every major American military installation throughout the world. These communist cell organizations tempted lonely servicemen with a cozy home away from home atmosphere. Within this friendly atmosphere, they made every effort to undermine the United States and our Armed Forces. Part of this effort was the publication of a monthly newspaper filled with lies and anti-American propaganda. It didn't really surprise me when I found out that Anderson not only belonged to this organization but was also the editor of their monthly newspaper.

I had never heard of this newspaper until one of my office clerks brought in a copy and suggested that I read the editorial page. I was amazed to read that I had been editorialized as "the pig of the month." It was a biting editorial that was filled with a long list of why this and why that's concerning legal actions taken against trouble makers and mischief makers under my jurisdiction. The article made it sound as if the enforcement of discipline was an act of tyranny. After a whole bunch of "Why's", the editorial concluded with a warning, "If Mr. Sterling tells you that anything you say can be used against you- believe him. He will use it against you." It then went on to nominate me as "Pig of the month."

I asked the young sailor, who brought me the editorial, if he had any extra copies. He said no, but he would be happy to let me have his copy. I told him that I really wanted several copies. I was pleased that such a despicable organization would honor me as "pig of the month," and I wanted copies that I could give to my friends. He told me that he would go to their club house and pick up a bunch of them for me, if I wanted him to. Thinking it unwise to let him go alone, I decided to drive him over there. My clerk directed me to a large ranch style house in a respectable looking neighborhood. I told my brave assistant that it would be better if he stayed out in the car while I went to the door and knocked. A big smiley faced guy answered the door and invited me in. I started to tell him who I was but he interrupted me saying, "It doesn't matter who you are, everyone is welcome here." He asked me to have a seat and introduce myself to the other half dozen or so sailors sitting about the room. He then asked if I cared for anything to drink. I told him, "No thank you, I only came to pick up a few copies of your monthly newspaper." He said that he would get me some and left the room. He returned with a dozen or so copies of their paper and a large assortment of other propaganda papers attacking other Military bases. A couple of minutes later, another man emerged from the back of the house. This second man asked me if I was "the" legal officer from Miramar. I told him that I was one of the Legal Officers but that I was only one of several. He then informed me, in a very rude voice, that I had misrepresented myself and told me to leave. He said that my presence was making some of the sailors uncomfortable. I told him I would be happy to leave but I never misrepresented myself. I told him that I only came for some copies of their paper and to answer the "whys" in their editorial against me, if they really wanted to know. He said that he was interested, but it would be better if I told him away from the house. We walked out to the curb and I broke out the papers list of why's. Then I asked him which one he wanted answered first. He decided that he didn't want to hear my answers after all and said it would be better if I just left. I picked up my bundle of papers and went back to the base. As soon as I got back to my office I leafed through all the papers attacking other military installations and found that they all

followed the same format. The little paper that attacked me was part of a large Communist network attempting to demoralize our military.

It was obvious to me that Anderson was an active Communist spy and the Navy would be better off without him. I simply didn't know how to purge him from our ranks. Recognizing that he was smarter than me, I felt obligated to warn VFP-63's Legal Officer that my troublesome Second Class was due for transfer to their squadron as soon as he completed his training with Top Gun. After calling the VFP-63 Legal Officer, I decided I would also call my old Commanding Officer at the Atlantic Intelligence Center, Captain "Whitey" Fuller. I told him that I had a real live Communist on my hands, and that the Navy needed to rid of him. I told "Whitey" all I knew about Anderson and "Whitey" agreed with me. My troublesome second class should be discharged from the Navy. He came to my aid by sending me a secret instruction that would allow the Navy to discharge Anderson as a security risk. The first stipulation of this instruction was that it couldn't be used unless all other avenues had failed. After a lot of study, it was concluded that the only possible way outside the Secret way was to have a psychiatrist declare Thompson unsuitable for continued Naval Service. I reported all this to my Commanding Officer, and he told me to make an emergency appointment and get him a psychiatric evaluation right away. The psychiatrist declared him suitable which freed me to follow the instructions outlined in the Secret document. I then sent everything necessary, along with the skipper's signature, to the Bureau of Naval Personnel. The Bureau acted promptly and issued orders to discharge my troublemaker as soon as possible. I almost ran down the hall to the Skipper's office with the good news. We had authority to discharge Anderson the very next day. I was so happy, I couldn't wait call the VFP-63 Legal Officer and gave her the glad tidings.

The next morning, as I got to work, Ross told me that the Skipper wanted to see me before I did anything else. The Skipper gave me a direct order not to discharge the Second Class. He added, "Make him stay in and suffer." He then dismissed me. He made it absolutely clear that he wasn't in the mood for questions or comments.

I went back to my office and called the VFP-63 Legal Officer and gave her the bad news. I would be transferring my troublemaking Second Class after all. Unlike the Skipper, she was full of questions and comments. Like an idiot, I told her that the only thing that made any sense to me was that Anderson was either an undercover FBI agent or a Naval Investigative Service Agent working under cover. The following morning, as I arrived at work, I was surprised by two FBI agents sitting in my office. They wanted to know why I blew their agents cover. What puzzled me was the fact that Anderson had access to my service record. He must have known that I had a Top Secret multiple code word security clearance yet he chose to combat me rather than work with me. Instead he chose to keep my gut tied in knots for several months and risk my exposing him for what he was.

I DECIDE TO RETIRE

My encounter with Anderson had a lot to do with my retirement. My daughter Patti's health was also a factor. My shore duty tour was coming to a close, so I called my Detailer in Washington, D.C. and asked what was in store for me. He told me that he had four Warrant Officers, in my specialty group, but he only had three places he could assign us. He said that I had a choice between Hawaii, Washington, D.C. and Vietnam or I could volunteer to retire. He said that I had first choice and that my assignment would be for two years. I asked him if I had a chance of being assigned back to San Diego after that. He said due to the limited nature of my specialty I would never see San Diego again. He said that his list had to be trimmed to three, and

these three would be rotated every two years between Hawaii, Washington, D.C. and Vietnam. I didn't like Hawaii or Washington, D.C. because of the cost of living and Vietnam would mean another separation from Margaret Ann and the kids. I told my Detailer that I would simplify his problem of having one too many Warrant Officers in my specialty. I told him that I would retire as soon as Top Gun would release me.