

RETURN TO ACTIVE DUTY

When the Korean War started on June 25, 1950 the officers and men of Fighter Squadron 781, "weekend warriors" of the Naval Air Reserve at NAS Los Alamitos, California, volunteered 100% for active duty. This singular act of patriotism captured nation-wide attention. The only problem was that most members of the squadron were completely unaware of their individual participation in this noble effort until they showed up for their regular weekend of drill duty. They were startled to be greeted by a phalanx of dignitaries, reporters and photographers, all wanting to make special note of this momentous occasion. Their picture even appeared in "Time" magazine.

The whole show, including the part about volunteering, had been engineered by the squadron's colorful Commanding Officer, LCDR Collin I. Oveland, USNR, Known as "Collie" to everyone in the squadron, no standing on ceremony for this particular group of reserves, Collie was the quintessential Navy fighter pilot of the Steve Canyon variety. What is more, during five years of organizing and reorganizing squadrons at "Los Al," Collie had collected around him a group of equally colorful, decorated World War II veterans who shared his philosophy, "fly hard and play hard." Such was Collie's charisma that not one member of the squadron reneged from the active duty pledge. Of course, peer pressure and the cameras may have helped.

The squadron was quickly called up and transferred to NAS North Island at San Diego. In the process they traded in their Naval Reserve Grumman F6F Hellcats of World War II fame for yet another vintage aircraft, the Chance Vought F4U Corsair, but with the promise of a transition to jets within a few months.

Eventually Fighter Squadron 781 would become part of the first all reserve air group with sister squadrons called up from other locations around the country. The major distinction other than 781 being the only jet squadron in the group was that most of the other squadrons carried, along with their grudges about the jets, the initials "WDV" buried somewhere in their squadron [VF-874] patches worn on their flight jackets. WDV stood for "We Didn't Volunteer."

Meanwhile, unable to keep my mind off the war and on my studies at UCLA, and particularly concerned about my former squadron mates who were at that moment flying combat missions against the invading North Koreans, I volunteered for active duty. Lou Ives, a friend from flight training days who was studying at USC, had the same problem; and by coincidence we were called up on the same date in early October. Jerry McCabe, another former Navy friend, more recently UCLA schoolmate, fellow boxing team member and fraternity brother came in just days behind Lou and me. Having a few friends in VF-781 and knowing they were soon to receive jets it took only a little advance liaison to arrange for our orders into the squadron. At that moment they were arguing over

the watch schedule and were delighted to receive some young Ensigns to stand the weekend and Christmas duty.

The addition of Lou, Jerry and I to the squadron roster also filled out the tactical organization, allowing the pilots to be divided into eight full divisions of four pilots each. From then on we always trained and flew with our tactical partners. The shortest man in the squadron, LT Howard A. MacMillan, was also the most junior of the eight division leaders. Naturally he drew the most junior pilot in the squadron as his wingman. It also happened that I was the next shortest man so we became affectionately known as the "Pygmy Division."

I always felt a bit guilty for the second section of our division, Bob Fleming and Jerry McCabe, because their size did not really quality them as pygmies. Nevertheless, Bob and Jerry fit in perfectly toward the fulfillment of our never-ending quest to prove that even though we were the junior division with at least the two shortest pilots in the squadron, we were undisputedly the hottest!

Mac was an experienced, solid aviator of exceptionally sound judgment with a calm personality and wonderful sense of humor. He was athletic in stature with handsome features and close cropped, curly blond hair. Married with two children, he also soon became my father confessor. I could not have asked for a better leader to carry me through my first combat tour. Over the next year we developed a very close friendship such as only flying, combat and completely compatible personalities could achieve.

After Korea, Mac, like most of my other reserve squadron mates, returned to civilian pursuits, many becoming successful in various aspects of the aviation game. In just a few years Mac became a senior captain with a California based regional airline [Western] but lost his life in the crash of a training flight while he was checking the performance of two other pilots.

Shortly after Lou, Jerry and I joined the squadron we all deployed to the Naval Auxiliary Air Station at El Centro, California for a three week period of intensive weapons training. During this short period I developed a love affair with the propeller driven F4U-4 Corsair. Two to three flights a day involving air to air gunnery, air to ground dive bombing, rockets and strafing and field carrier landing practice rapidly gave one an intimate familiarity with the full envelope of the Corsair's capabilities.

It's been many years and many aircraft since that El Centro deployment, but I still feel the Corsair was the best "natural" dive bomber I ever flew. With my then limited exposure to first line fighters, in the cockpit of a Corsair I felt like one of those railroad engineers driving a powerful locomotive as I looked down that long, sleek nose; and rolling in on a target you did not even need a gun sight. All you had to do was line up the bombing target with that long row of rivets that ran forward along the top of the fuselage. In the dive as airspeed built up so did lift on

the wings and the tendency for the nose to rise. If you timed this right, just as you reached release altitude the target would be disappearing beneath the rising nose in line with the rivets plus or minus a little "seaman's eye" wind correction. Hit the pickle. Bullseye! Or at least something you could brag about later.

One of the most traumatic events of that deployment was our first night in the Bachelor Officers Quarters. In preparation for our arrival the air station had cleaned up some old quarters that had undoubtedly been unoccupied since the Big War, just sitting there all locked up in the desert heat for five or so years breeding whatever grows in the desert. We had been assigned two to a room, each two rooms with an adjoining bathroom. The pygmy division filled such an arrangement with Mac and I rooming together and Bob and Jerry sharing our bathroom from the other side.

Having flown the planes over from San Diego and straightened up our temporary offices in a Quonset hut adjacent to the flight line ... hot, dirty and hungry we all stopped first at the informal O' Club bar for food and beverages. After dark we made our first sortie to our "living quarters" for well needed showers and a night's rest. The flight schedule started somewhere around six a.m. the next morning.

Within minutes of entering our room Mac and I heard a loud commotion down the hall, a commotion that rapidly spread throughout the building. The uproar was stemming from the discovery that each bedroom was loaded with black widow spiders and the bathrooms with scorpions. After about an hour of intensive ethnic cleansing – man against insect – we had removed all of the black widow nests from under the metal bunks, dressers, chairs and closets and were finally very nervously ready for showers and bed. Even then as I stepped into the shower I found a large scorpion hanging on the inside of the shower curtain.

When it finally was time to turn out the lights and Mac started to carefully slide under the sheets I remember shouting "Stop! Aren't you going to pull the sheets down first to make sure nothing's in there? As Mac was saying "No," I pulled his top sheet back, and there in the very center of his bed, long legs all curled up under a huge bulbous body, was the largest black widow spider I have ever seen. That is probably the only night of my life that I never moved a single muscle once I took position on my back in the middle of my bunk. Those ugly things might come find me, but I was not about to roll over on top of one.

The El Centro O' Club bar was at best rustic, akin to an "out-back" road house. The fact that we were allowed in there in our dirty, sweaty flight gear after completing the day's strenuous flight schedule contributed to its "unique" ambiance. One squadron perennial fixture in this establishment, LT "Whiskey Ed" Kearns, particularly enjoyed the ritual of opening his hard boiled eggs, always available at the bar, by cracking them on the forehead of one junior Ensign, namely me. After a few days of this, I finally decided to render him the same courtesy. How were any of us to know that karma, kismet, fate, call it what you

will, was to guide my hand to the only raw egg that ever made it into the hard boiled egg bowl?

During the latter portion of our El Centro training we would simulate armed reconnaissance missions, dropping live ordnance – bombs, rockets and strafing – on old burnt out hulks of vehicles scattered throughout the ravines along the barren eastern slopes of the mountain range just a few miles west of the air station. This added considerable spice to our training, although I am sure that few of us then realized that this would become our daily bread and butter during seven months of Korean combat in the year ahead.

On one such training flight Mac and I had just taken off and were enroute to the impact area when we heard LTjg Jake Holliman's tense report, "Scope's just gone in!" Jake flew wing on LT Bill Piscopo who had just been killed in a crash of his Corsair in the impact area. Mac and I proceeded to the site to aid in directing emergency equipment into the area.

Scope was a superb athlete who had played football at Southern Cal and was the star of our undefeated squadron touch football team. He was tall, lean but well built and good looking with his black hair and dark Italian complexion. He was a fierce competitor and this is what did him in according to Jake. He pressed his run too far, pulled out too low and was hit by the blast of his own bomb. On pull out the Corsair just rolled over and went in on its back.

That weekend the squadron had arranged for a Navy bus to take all the officers to Scope's funeral in Los Angeles. It was an excursion none of us will ever forget. First of all the bus must have been of pre-war vintage. It's a wonder we ever made it to L. A. and back.

It was apparent at the service that Scope's parents had been very proud of their son and were deeply moved by the show of support from the squadron. It was also apparent that the elder Piscopo was a very senior member of a still larger "family." How senior I never knew; but I had never before seen so many large, black limos and black suits with white silk ties. After the service the elder Piscopo pulled Collie aside, pressing folded green into his palm for the squadron to stop and unwind enroute back to El Centro. We added new meaning, breadth and depth to the word "unwind." Scope would have been pleased with his old buddies for I am sure there has never been a wilder wake, and it was all courtesy of the Mafia.

There was another fallout from Scope's accident that probably should fall into the category of a "blessing." As a result of several "planning" sessions at the O' Club bar, several of us had goaded ourselves into making a parachute jump with the Navy's parachute school at El Centro. Arrangements had been made earlier for it all to take place the Saturday of Scope's funeral, so naturally the jump had to be cancelled and we never got to put it on again. Parachuting was not the popular

sport back then that skydiving is today, yet I always regretted the missed opportunity. In the next several years I would have three engine failures in flight and still not have the opportunity to try my hand at parachuting.

As a footnote, Scope's wingman, Jake Holliman, was another to leave the Navy after our Korean tour and enter the world of civilian aviation. Jake became a test pilot for Lockheed and lost his life testing the F-104. His engine failed on final approach, cutting off his engine driven boundary layer control. BLC effectively increased the lift on the 104's stubby wings, and when the engine flamed out and the BLC was lost, Jake's plane went down like a rock.

While still in El Centro we received our first Grumman F9F-2B, Panthers, and began flying familiarization flights for the squadron's transition into jets. This continued in December after our return to North Island. It was during this period that my old squadron, VF-51, returned from their Korean tour.

I remember one afternoon Mac and I were going out for a section tactics hop. Our flight line was immediately adjacent to the approach end of the main runway at North Island. Just as I was walking around the port wing with my hand up on the tip tank for preflight inspection I heard the swoosh of jets coming into the break directly overhead. In the brief moment it took to shift my gaze from the tip tank to the four aircraft above me, the first two had already broken; but I stood there in shock unbelieving what I saw. The second F9F, apparently attempting a high "g," hard pulling break behind his leader had entered a high speed stall. In a fraction of a second the plane had flipped over the top and was pointed straight down at the runway. By then there was nothing the pilot could do to recover or get out. I looked on, still in disbelief, as the aircraft traversed the last few hundred feet in a vertical dive ending in a fireball about a third of the way down the runway.

I found out later that the pilot was Red Newman, a young Ensign (even younger than I was) who had joined VF-51 in late 1949 only a few months before I left that squadron. Not only had I thought highly of Red, but it was doubly tragic that he had just returned home safely after surviving his first seven months of carrier operations and Korean combat. I've often wondered what Red's final thoughts were as he looked straight ahead at that rapidly approaching runway, a helpless passenger but probably fully resigned to his fate with time for reflection during those last five or six hundred feet of his flying career.

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LTJG John R. "Jack" Dewenter
A
and "Eskimo Gal"

VF-781; CVG-102
USS *Bon Homme Richard* (CV-31)
Korea 1951

Moana Hotel in background
“headquarters” for the PACEMAKERS [VF-781] while in Hawaii



left to right: Glen Edwards, Don Broadhag, Jerry McCabe, Buzz Henderson,
Howard McMillan, and Jack Dewenter

The following paragraph was written by Jack Dewenter in a letter to his parents after the PACEMAKERS were on station off Korea:

Waikiki “I had a wonderful time in Hawaii. We were supposed to operate at sea from Monday thru Friday before going into Pearl Harbor, but Monday afternoon twelve of us were on a hop when the ship decided they couldn’t take us back aboard. We all landed at N.A.S. Barbers Point without clothes or money, but thanks to old friends there from San Diego we all left for town two hours later with a car, 12 aloha shirts and a little money. An old friend of Jerry’s [McCabe] fixed us up [for the record, I believe that was only Jerry and I!] with some University of Hawaii girls for Friday night. Saturday we spent the day riding the surf boards at Waikiki Beach. Saturday night the whole air group took over the Moana Hotel and threw a big party. Sunday Buzz Henderson, Bud Davis, Lou Ives, Bob Scully, Dick Shrewsbury [Shrewsbury] (who flies an F9F photo plane) and I rented a Chevrolet convertible and toured the island of Oahu ...”

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