

LUTHER "Dunc" DUNCAN ¹

Ottumwa, Iowa, Preflight Class 16-46

Got your package of FMA [Flying Midshipman Association] memorabilia. Some very interesting stuff, much of which I had forgotten. As to my preflight class I am not too sure myself. I put 16-46 in the FMA roster because that was what George Rothrock was listed as, and I was sure that we were in the same class. But looking at the roster and some of the other correspondence I'm not too sure, since I seem to know most of the guys in 14-46.

I can verify Jim Glover's account of Stu Madison's death. Stu and I were close friends (room mates in advanced at JAX) and I kept in touch after we went inactive. I got the word from his wife Jaque.

Assume I'll see you at Anaheim [the annual FMA reunion] in April [1989] I plan on being at the FMA banquet on the 27th.

Looking forward to it.

[Following] is an account of my Navy career as best as I can remember:

In my senior year in high school (Houston, Texas) a friend of mine told me that the Navy was giving exams for V-5. After explaining what V-5 was, he talked me into going with him to take the test. I made it, he didn't. Was sent to Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas, followed by selective flight training at NAS Dallas, and on to Ottumwa preflight in December 1946.

When I got to primary at Corpus, they were revising the training program. They formed two classes, Xray and Yoke. The Xray class which I was in went through an abbreviated course in Stearmans (N2S) and the Yoke class went directly to SNJs. We were the last class to fly the N2S. Some years later I was happy to have had that training where among other things they taught us hammerhead stalls. The first time I tried to loop a F9F I didn't realize how much stick force was required to pull that sucker around and ended up going straight up with the airspeed going to zero. Fortunately I remembered my N2S training and kicked it off to the side with the rudder.

I was finishing up PBY training when they dropped PBYs and SNBs from the basic flight training program. I got my second choice (F6Fs) at JAX. This was fortunate, since on occasion I would come in a little slow and mush down the last 500 feet. You could get away with that in the F6 but I would probably be dead if I had gotten my first choice. The "hog" was not very forgiving. I did get my chance to fly the F4U (actually the FG-1D) in the reserves at Dallas, but I was a little smarter by that time.

Got my wings 1 July 1948, Class #546 (sic). Other members of the class were:

¹ Luther Duncan letter of 1 March 1989 to Lou Ives. [from Redondo Beach, California].

Lou Pollock
Dean Webster
P.J. Smith [Philip J.]
Bob Neely [Harold L.]
Norman Dunbar
Howard Eberly
Gene Lewis [owned a dairy farm in Chowchilla, CA in early 1960s]

On my way to San Diego, I stopped in Houston on leave to see family and friends. Went down to Corpus to try to hitch a flight to San Diego. Lo and behold they had an F6F assigned to the operations department that wasn't getting much use so I talked the Ops Officer into letting me fly it to Houston to say a last goodbye. On takeoff leaving Houston (now Hobby Airport) I decided to show the civilians what a hotrock Navy pilot was. As soon as I felt the wheels leave the ground I pulled the wheels up. Actually I was in the air because I had hit a bump. The only thing that saved me was that I had a belly tank (empty) that sheared off and gave me enough time to reach flying speed. When informed of the loss by the tower, "Mr Cool" says, "Throw it in the grass off the runway, I'll send someone to pick it up." When I got back to Corpus, I discovered an inch was missing from each prop blade. Needless to say the Ops Officer was upset with me, threatening to yank my wings among other dire things. He finally cooled down and told me to get the hell off the base and never come back.

After reaching San Diego (North Island), I was eventually assigned to VF-52 which was the jet transition squadron flying TO-1s [later designated TV-1--the Navy version of the F-80]. We shortly got F9F-3s and became an operational squadron. Qualified in F9s on the Boxer [USS Boxer (CV-21)] 17 November 1949.

Is this getting too long? It seems the more I write, the more I remember.

Due to Sec of Defense Louis Johnson cutbacks, 19 of us from Air Group Five (all ex flying middies) were waiting to be released to inactive duty on 30 June 1950 when the Korean fracas broke out on 25 June. Our squadrons on the Valley Forge [USS Valley Forge (CV-45)] were in Hong Kong at the time and were immediately dispatched to Korea but needed replacement planes for those that had been lost during carrier ops. The Navy decided to send the planes plus an Air Force group of P-51s over on the Boxer. The idea was to fly the Navy planes from the Boxer to the Valley Forge. Since we were the only carrier qualified pilots on the west coast at the time, we got a telegram from Washington the night of the 29th (at the BOQ bar at North Island) requesting we stay on for 30 days to deliver the planes. Almost everyone accepted and halfway across the Pacific were given the choice of returning to our squadrons. The Boxer, by the way, made a record run from San Francisco to Tokyo which held up until recent years.

For some reason when we reached Tokyo, it was decided that only the props would be flown to the Valley Forge. Dave Tatum (killed in Korea in 1952) and myself (the only jet jocks) were shipped back and forth across Japan and to Okinawa a couple of times trying to catch up with the ship for three weeks, that's a story in itself which I will save for another time. In our travels however we ran into Norm Dunbar in Okinawa, also trying to get back to the Valley. We retired immediately to the nearest O club (Naha Air Force Base called "The Bottom of the Mark"). Got into a bingo game and won several bottles of champagne, which led to Norm's immortal proclamation, "You can't get drunk on champagne" (somewhat slurred). The next morning I had one of the worst hangovers in

my life. Anyway we finally caught up with the ship and the cruise went well, the North Koreans hadn't learned to shoot too well yet. Flew cover for the Inchon landing and headed home just before the Chinese came across and the shit hit the fan.

The next time out we were on the Essex [USS Essex (CV-9)] when the Navy decided they wanted to try out the Banshee in combat so they replaced us (VF-52) with an east coast Banshee squadron (VF-172) in Hawaii. Spent 2 months at Barber's Point flying in the morning and down to Waikiki by noon. Rough! We made 12-plane formation takeoffs from Barber's Point which may be a record for jets. Anyway the reason I bring it up is that we were transported back to Conus on the Princeton [USS Princeton (CV-37) with CVG-19] returning from Korea. We were to fly from the ship to North Island while the returning air group came in with the ship. When we landed at NI we taxied to the end of the runway and changed into Hawaiian lava lavas (wrap-around male skirts), leis, and straw hats. In the meantime, the bands and other groups waiting to welcome the returning air groups had seen the carrier aircraft landing, and since there were no carrier air groups at NI at the time, assumed we were the returning combat air group. Not everyone was amused when the bands welcomed us at the flight line in our Hawaiian dress while the ship docked without a welcome.

One last tale and I'll knock this off. On our next Korean cruise (Dec '51) my roommate Dave Tatum and I got mixed up on who was to bring the booze on board when we were in Yokosuka on R&R and ended up dry when the ship sailed. Happily, very shortly thereafter a COD [Carrier On-board Delivery] plane with my old buddy Jim Glover flying came aboard. We negotiated for supplies and the next time the COD came aboard there was much praying on vulgers' [sic] row for a smooth landing. As always, Jim delivered the goods.

Was released to inactive duty 1 July 1952 and returned to Houston. Got BSME at the University of Houston while flying in the reserves at Dallas in FG-1D's [General Motors' F4Us] and F9F-6s. After graduation in '56 went to work at Douglas Aircraft in El Segundo, California, working on F4D, F5D, A4D, and A3Ds. Jim Glover was there at the same time as a structural engineer (I was in propulsion). We had some great times together. Flew at Los Alamitos in F9F-6 and -7s and A4Ds till 1965.

Went to North American (later Rockwell) in '62 to work on the Apollo, and Space Shuttle programs, specializing on orbit propulsion systems. Retired last May [1988], but still working three days a week at Rockwell consulting on the National Aerospace Plane (NASP) design.

I can't believe I've written three pages. There could have been more but probably should have been less.

What the hell.

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