

Ronald H. "Ron" Gerdes
Pensacola Pre-Flight Class 11-48



Ron Gerdes in front of AV-8C BuNo 158387
Last flight for NASA before retirement 3 March 1988

25 FEB 1988

letter to Lou Ives

February 28, 1990

Ahh ... at last some moments to reply to yours [Lou Ives] of January 31st ... Got my wings at Pensacola on 31 January 1950.

Seems like reunions are IN these days: attended my active duty (VF-111) reunion at P'cola in November [1989] and recently got together with reserve buddies (VF-879/VA-879) at the Moffett OH Club. Would have liked to attend the East Coast bash and have promised myself to be present at the next West Coast affair.

In response to your request for some kind or recent NASA story with photos: My most recent NASA story of course was my retirement two years ago March 3rd [1988] (however, I am working part time for a contractor who operates the flight simulation laboratory at Ames – I'm a flight simulation system engineer). This was followed by my Navy retirement (with pay) on July 17 of that year.

The enclosed photo shows me in front of AV-8C NASA 704 BUNO 158387), the aircraft in which I flew my last flight for NASA on February 25, 1988. We got that C-model to maintain proficiency for Y-model research flights. I believe these are the only Harriers painted with the NASA white paint scheme.

An interesting aspect of my "last NASA flight" that might be worthy noting in [Flying Midshipmen] historical archives is as follows:

At one time at Pensacola, it was traditional to toss student Naval Aviators into the bay when they completed their first solo, and I believe it was done while I was there, albeit in the Whiting swimming pool. When I finally did solo I felt quite smug about the fact that I had managed to cleverly escape the cruel waters of the Whiting pool. That was my first solo in a Naval aircraft (SNJ) back in March 1949. My last solo in a Naval (Marine???) aircraft (AV-8) was on February 25, 1988, almost 39 years to the day. However, fate caught up with me on this day when the chilled waters of Moffett Field drenched my sweaty and aging body as if to avenge that day 39 years ago. As it turn out, on that last flight a group of well wishers greeted me with a cool glass of locally vinted champagne after I shut down the engine. Then as I came down the boarding ladder I was hit by three buckets of water accurately wielded by three admiring crewchiefs. My socks were even soaked. I later learned that NASA-Ames was initiating a new "last flight" tradition.

Hope this is the kind of thing you were looking for.

Running out of bits and bites, so will close.

/s/ Ron Gerdes

Biography

excerpt from Ron Gerdes' 7-05-89 letter to Lou Ives

I received my flight training jacket a few weeks ago. All I can say is I really lucked out all the way. Talk about "Mr. Joe Average," my overall grade (Pre-Flight, Basic, and Advanced) was 54.44 – the Navy sure was number happy. Makes interesting reading though.

Not sure if I told you about my retirement when I talked to you on the phone. I retired on March 3rd of last year. Flew my last flight on February 25th in our AV-8C NASA 719 BuNo 158387. Got hit by three buckets of water as I climbed down the ladder. Plane Captain's revenge. NASA let me fly one of their F/A-18B proficiency aircraft about 5 days prior, so I got a good sendoff.

Ron Gerdes' 5-07-89 letter ¹

I decided that I wanted to be a pilot when I was about 10 after first considering being a theater organist and then a streetcar motorman. A trip to the air races at Oakland [CA] Airport in 1938 was the convincer.

We lived in Alameda, California, during WW II where the sky was filled with Naval aircraft both day and night. I joined the Civil Air Patrol Cadets in order to be able to fly in military aircraft while still at Alameda High School. Got rides in L-2, L-3, PT-17, C-45, and C-47 at the age of 16. Joined the V-5 program ("Get a free \$27,000 Education") at the Office of Naval Officer Procurement, 785 Market Street, San Francisco, on November 10, 1945, at the age of 17 during my low senior semester at Alameda High.

My first and only semester spent in the V-5 Program was at Callahan Hall, University of California, Berkeley, along with NROTC and V-12 troops. That following summer (1946) all V-5s were sent up to NARU-Seattle for summer Tarmac duty. I was put on the line as an SNJ plane captain. I also "checked-out" in F6F, F4U, TBM, and SB2C plane captain duties. Of course, at this time the Navy flight training program was transitioning from the V-5 Aviation Cadet program to the Naval Aviation College Program (NACP) Flying Midshipmen.

I returned to CAL to complete my 2 years of college prior to reporting to Pre-Flight. During this period (1946-1948) NACP students were required to enroll in NROTC courses if the college had a Unit. Along with hundreds of returning WW II veterans were active duty Naval Aviators who were getting additional college credit under a part of the NACP. These pilots would get their "4 hours" each month at NAS Alameda and usually took us along in the back seats of their SNJs. In addition to this form of sniveling flight time, I would go to nearby NARTU Oakland and ride around in the back seats and turrets of SNJ, TBM, and SB2C

¹ Ron Gerdes' letter of 7 May 1989 (Mt. Hermon, California).

aircraft. It turns out that a few of these Reserve pilots that I flew with would later become students of mine when I returned to fly with the Reserve and check them out in their first jet aircraft, the Lockheed TV-1. I chased a lot of WW II Naval Aviators.

I was ordered to Pensacola on March 18, 1946, where I spent about one month in OCTU at Mainside marching around and cleaning heads, and another month at Saufley Field doing Tarmac duty. Finally I was sworn in as a Mid'n on 19 May as part of Preflight Class 11-48-II. The II meant that I was assigned to Battalion II. I managed to keep off the trampoline and reported to Whiting Field or Basic Flight Training on Sept 23rd, along with 40 other Midshipmen like: Bill Bailey, Paul Engle [Ed.: Engel], Al (Boot) Hill, Fred Jamieson, Ralph Neiger, Bill Stollenwerck, Jim Tyson. Jim was subsequently killed while testing a P.1127 Kestrel in England [Ed. A discrepancy here – James J. Tyson, Pre-Flight Class 11-48, of Ashville, NC, reported in JAN '90].

I reported to South Whiting Field as part of class 9D-48. We flew SNJ-4, -5, -6s as follows: Stages A thru C in BTU-1B at South Whiting, Stages D and E in BTU-2 at Corry Field, Stages F thru J in BTU-3 at Saufley Field, and Stages K & L in CQTU at Correy using SNJ-5Cs. We qualified with six landings aboard *Cabot* [USS *Cabot* (CVL-28)] on July 19, 1949.

All of the budding fighter pilots wanted to fly the F8F in advanced training at Corpus. I figured that if I put in for F8s as my first choice and didn't get it I'd end up in TBMs or P-Boats. So I asked for VF-F4U as my first choice and got it and reported to VF-ATU-1 at Cabaniss Field on July 24, 1949. VF-ATU-1 was run by Marines and we flew the F4U-4. Our training was cut short due to the severe budget cuts experienced during the lull between WW II and Korea. As soon as we had accumulated about 60 hours we were shipped off to CQTU-4 again for Advanced CQ. Qualification was aboard *Saipan* [USS *Saipan* CVL-48] on July 30, 1950. I received my wings at Mainside, Pensacola, the next day, exactly 4 years after my high school graduation.

I was lucky enough to be selected for Jet Transition Training at JTU-1, North Whiting, where I reported February 2nd. Al Hill, Fred Pester, and Don (Bosco) Keefe from my Pre-Flight class were with me. I believe we were the 6th class to go through JTU-1 and we flew TO-1 (F-80C) jets formerly used by VF-51 at San Diego. It got to be pretty exciting in the traffic pattern at North Whiting when the wind direction was such that our wide downwind legs in the jets intermingled with the Jaybirds operating over South Whiting. It was amazing how the Navy trained us in those days. They sent us out alone on our first flight in any kind of jet airplane without even a chase pilot to keep us out of trouble. "Follow the procedures on the FAM-1 Card and we'll see you back here at the field in 40 minutes."

I was assigned to VF-111 at North Island [NAS San Diego] flying F9F-2s just in time to make Air Group Eleven's first Korean cruise aboard *Phillipine Sea* [CV-47] in July of 1950. VF-111 moved to [NAS] Miramar for retraining and we departed with Air Task Group One aboard *Valley Forge* [CV-45] for our second TF-77 cruise in F9F-2s. For shore duty I was assigned to FASRon-7 at North Island where I had a fun time flying all kinds of new and old aircraft like SNB, F6F, AD, FG, AU, F3D, F2H, and some old friends like the SNJ, F4U, TV, and F9F. I had applied for Navy Test Pilot School, but Reserves with 2 years of college just weren't being sent to [NAS] Patuxent River. So I applied for release from active duty in order to get an engineering degree.

I went back to UC Berkeley and ploughed through 4 years of Mechanical Engineering. During this time I joined the Naval Air Reserve unit at NAS Oakland flying the good old U-bird again. Talk about longevity: I entered the squadron as the junior man in 1953 and left in 1970 after a 3-year tour as Skipper. Such was the Naval Air Reserve in those days. We later flew TV-1, F2H-2, F2H-3, -4, and A4-A, -B, -C. We came very close to a call-up to active duty during the [USS] *Pueblo* crisis. During the Corsair days we would mix it up with the P-51Ds from nearby ANG base at Hayward [CA]. There were no midairs, but not because we were such skilled airmen. I had to make an intentional wheels-up landing on a foamed runway in a TV-1 due to a stuck main mount.

After graduation and armed with my newly acquired engineering degree, I set out to seek my fortune as a company test pilot. Sputnik [1957] took care of that idea, so I went to work for NASA-Ames as an Aeronautical Engineer. Within 4 years I was assigned a test pilot position along with Glen Stinnett (P)14-48, who preceded me by one year. NASA sent me to the USAF Test Pilot School where battery salesman Chuck Yeager was the CO at the time. I was in the Naval Air Reserve of course, and COL Yeager gave me permission to use one of the school's instrumented T-33s to fly up to Alameda one weekend each month to attend my drills. We had to keep the back seat filled for economy reasons, so quite often one of our foreign students would go with me to see what the Bay Area was like and do a little weekend sightseeing. The transient alert crew at Alameda had a hard time figuring us out: here is this strange-looking Air Force T-33 with a Naval Air Reserve pilot in the front seat and an Italian Air Force Captain in the back.

I still managed to keep my hand in flying Naval aircraft after retiring from Reserve squadron duty. Some of my NASA duties have involved cooperative programs with the Navy and Marine Corps. These programs have included evaluations and tests in CH-46, CH-53, and SH-3 helicopters, and EA-6B, A-7E, AV-8C, YAV-8B, and F/A-18B. By the way, when we bought our UH-12E from nearby Hiller Aircraft Company, Fred Jamieson (from my Pre-Flight Class [11-48]), who worked there, delivered it to our ramp where I officially accepted it.

What about the great retirement? As for NASA, I'm doing some part-time consulting for one of their contractors (Syre) which supports the piloted simulation facilities. I'm "flying" an advanced STOVL fighter which has the capability of landing aboard a DD-963 in near zero-zero conditions in sea state 6. It is all done with an advanced HUD [Head Up Display] format and a lot of black boxes. The program is in cooperation with the Naval Air Systems Command. The airplane handles somewhat like a Harrier [AV-8C].

As far as the Navy is concerned, it's like being "back-in" again. Since I was a Reserve and had to wait for the big 60, I'm now drawing retired pay and getting all the goodies like Space-A, NX, and commissary privileges, etc. Better late than never.

Little did I know what was to transpire when I walked through that door at 785 Market Street 44 years ago and said, "I do."

Ron Gerdes
5 July 1989

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