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(Electronics Petty Officer – 3rd Class)
VF-781
1950-1952



Dick and Margaret Horst

VF-781 50th-year Reunion
San Diego, California

I joined the Navy Reserve in March 1947, went to a few meetings and decided it wasn't for me. Then in October 1948, I enlisted in a program for 18 year olds, one year active duty then 4 years in the active reserve or 6 years as an inactive reservist. I chose the inactive reserve till informed it was the active reserve or back to the regular Navy. After some 5 months in a TBM squadron at Los Alamitos, I was called back for the Korean War. I was one of 4 from that reserve squadron that were called to active duty. So on October 4, 1950, I'm back in the Navy. Four days at Los Alamitos spreading the base sewerage plant product on the under construction base golf course. Did not sit well with me or those others recently called up but that's the Navy. All the work was done in undress blues, not dungarees.

Then on to Treasure Island, San Francisco, for assignment. Having set a record for avoiding work parties, I was assigned to VF-781 about November 4 or so.

VF-781 was in El Centro when I joined them. One of the pilots – Piscopo – was killed the week before I arrived. I was put on the night crew with the electrician in an F8F Bearcat squadron on previous active duty. As you know, 781 was flying F4U Corsairs at that time.

The enlisted men of 781 in November 1950 consisted of several types, groups:

1st Group: The men who were with the squadron before they were activated. This included some 8 17 year olds who volunteered in July 1950 before starting their senior year in high school. There were about 6 CPOs who had been with the 781 before activation. Then maybe 25 - 35 other enlisted men of various rates: 3rd, 2nd and 1st class petty officers who had also been activated with the squadron. Most of these were mechanics, ordinance or sheet metal rates.

2nd Group: A number of 15 - 20 were assigned right out of boot camp. These were all regular Navy. Most had signed up for 3 years but with the Korean War, a year was added.

3rd Group: Those who had served in WW II signed on with the inactive reserve, forgot the Navy, then in Aug., Sept., Oct., Nov. 1950 got telegrams calling them back to active duty. A few like myself who served between 1946 and 1949 were then called back.

4th Group: Transfers from other regular Navy outfits. This included some CPOs and airmen. The first few months some of these enlisted men were not happy about their transfer to a reserve squadron. In time these feelings dissipated, for the most part.

All in all this was a very competent group which improved as the months went by. I know you'd like to hear every story – there are hundreds – maybe later. But first, Nicknames: Rags, Nightoff, Kinky, Snaggle Tooth, Sorrowful, Ace, Killer, Qbomb, Chief Pontiac, Gum Shoe, V.D., Twinky, Hog Jowls, Fearless Gorilla. I don't remember them all.

One funny story: I was on the line one day spring 1951. We had switched from F4Us to F9F jets. Johnny Guerrero was in the cockpit. To adjust the engine valves the engine had to be running and another mechanic had to be in the air inlet duct to do the adjusting while the engine was running. All you could see while walking by were two legs sticking out. Bob Cates, machinist 1st, not bad but not beloved, was in the duct. At this time along comes a recent grad from boot camp, nice guy but green.

On seeing him, Guerrero starts shouting from the cockpit, "Save him, save him", and so the recruit runs over and starts pulling on Cates legs as hard as he can. Cates is finally extracted wondering what's going on. Guerrero is laughing like crazy. I thought it was amusing. Cates explains the situation to the greenie

and finished with "Vell at least there's someone who cares about my welfare." True story.

Liberty in San Diego was "The Panama", "The Pirates Den", "The Blue Note" and sundry other bars on and off Broadway. Other than the YMCA, white hats had a feeling of generally not being wanted. No USO.

It is difficult 50 years later to describe our daily activities before going overseas. Maintenance crews did the 30-60-90-120 hour checks and repaired squawks, malfunctions, modifications, etc. Plane captains took care of the pilots, kept the planes fueled, cleaned, etc. May '51 we're off for Korea, with a 3 day stop at Pearl Harbor. To get to Honolulu you had to take a liberty launch from Ford Island. Going wasn't so bad but as I recall everyone had to be back aboard by midnight or 2 PM. Whatever, the dock on the Honolulu side was swarming with *Bon Homme Richard* white hats as midnight approached. To get in the liberty launch (a large open boat with benches) you had to step on a large slippery rolling log bumper and then drunk, half drunk, or whatever into the launch.¹ That no one was injured was a minor miracle. Funny what you remember: I can still see the scene.

Life aboard ship wasn't bad. A lot of card playing, double deck pinochle, acey deucey, cribbage, not much poker. Bunks were three high. I had top bunk. No air conditioning. Surprisingly everyone got along pretty well. You had your close buddies, usually guys you worked with, but liberty you'd go with different people each time. We had no aviation electrician chief so Al Decontreras, 1st class was in charge. He was the only electrician who had been with the squadron before activation. Jim Jeffcote, a regular Navy radioman chief, oversaw our activities. I don't think any of the radio crew were with VF-781 before it was activated. Harry Decker was probably the smartest radioman. He had an aviation business of some sort in New York before being recalled. Decker was an experienced flyer but less than 20 - 20 vision kept him from flying in the service. Harry was not real fond of the Navy, but he particularly disliked the food. I would have chow with him occasionally and I swear, he would mix everything together then cover it with ketchup. He claimed this was the only way he could stomach it. Again I didn't think the food was too bad, except ...

I spent much of my time overseas on night crew. This meant you went on duty at 1800 and came off duty at 0600. We had midnight chow at ... yes – midnight. It usually consisted of leftovers from the previous evening mess. The cook in charge was a black guy about 54 years who was with the St. Louis squadron. He had served in WW I, WW II and now the Korean War. The Navy should have loved him. He passed out the food as though he'd paid for it, and one piece of bread per person. Enough of us complained to the duty officer that some improvements were made.

Work headquarters were in the "Maintenance Shack" starboard side aft of the island on the hangar deck. It was here we kept our tools, received work orders and played pinochle day and night. During General Quarters every night, cigarette smoke would fill the room.

We had been only about 6 plus weeks when word came on who would be discharged and when. I don't know who dreamed up the system but it was somewhat absurd – my opinion.

1st anyone who had volunteered and went on active duty prior to July 15, 1950 (I'm not sure on the dates but they're close) would be discharged immediately. Yes, destroyers came alongside, picked up our high school kids in boatswains chairs and hauled them back to Japan and the States. Quattlebaum was also in this group. The WW II vets with families back in the U.S. who had forgotten the Navy, never volunteered, but been called back, lined the rails watching the boys go home. The next group to be discharged included most of those who had been with VF-781 as reservists but were not called up until Aug. 1950 and had to serve 15 months. This meant the core of the enlisted men would be discharged before our tour of duty off Korea was over. CDR Oveland gathered the squadron in the ready room. I can hear him still: "Men, the war is almost over. They are meeting in Panmunjon to settle it. All I ask is that you agree to stay until our tour is over. Then we're going to Hong Kong and stop in Australia on the way back". I forget the rest of his words. The only one to sign on for the rest of the cruise was Dayoff, a 1st class mechanic. I think he wanted to stay away from his wife.

The next stop in Yokosuka. This group got off We picked up some replacements from bases in the Philippines and elsewhere and back to sea. Those of us called in after October 1950 had to serve 2 years. I was a 3rd class petty officer and was put in charge of the electrical group. To say we where undermanned is an understatement. But we managed quite well. Hey, I got a meritorious mast out of it, a piece of paper, but the highest award a white hat could get during that cruise. One bad incident in November. A 1st class mechanic, Jim Hodgeson (sic), recently transferred to 781, was killed on the flight deck. December rolled around and we sailed nonstop back to the U.S. Jan. to July 1952, was a period of training for a different group that went overseas. I was finally discharged in October and returned to UCLA, graduating in June 1954.

In closing I'll say this has been very brief I have to practice the piano, work every Saturday (if in town) restoring a P59 to flight status (I worked 10 years with a group that restored a Northrop Flying Wing), work in the garden, on my stamp collection, volunteer at the library, or travel (a lot). But there was one officer most of the white hats had a feeling for and that was Ensign Ives (Yes, I know he was promoted but I sometimes think he was closer to the enlisted men because he was the junior officer). Whatever, it was a long time ago.



A Tale from Dick Horst:

Dolores and Jim

"Hi ya. My name's Jim Quattlebaum. You've been assigned to work with me on the night section."

It was November 4, 1950, about 3 P. M. in the afternoon. An airplane hangar at U.S. Naval Air Station in El Centro, California.

I'd been recalled to active duty after the outbreak of the Korean war. A month screwing about Los Alamitos Air Station and the Treasure Island Navy Placement Center and here I was 125 miles from the ocean about to do my part to defeat the enemy North Korean Communists.

"Glad to met ya, Jim. I just flew in from North Island," I said

"Come on back here after chow," said Jim, "and I'll get ya going."

For the next several weeks Jim and I worked together checking and repairing the electrical problems on the WW II corsairs that the squadron had. I learned during that period that Jim was from Florida and that he had a minor political appointed job with the state highway department.

It was during that first month in El Centro I turned 21. That meant a fast trip in town to get a beer and hope they'd ask for my license. They didn't.

After a month or so of squadron gunnery practice we returned to North Island across the bay from San Diego. By this time Jim and I were pretty good friends.

Describing Jim isn't real easy. He was about medium height and build, not handsome but usually with a smile on his craggy weather-beaten face and a sort of twinkle in his eyes. He had long blond hair worn in a pompadour, common in those days. I remember his white hat was always pushed back on his head, not squared per Bu Pers regulations.

I think he still had most of his teeth. He was 32 years old.

When we got back to San Diego, I found out that Jim's wife had arrived from Florida with his two small boys. I recall they were about 3 and 4. Myrtis, his

wife., had driven out in the 1949 Lincoln two-door sedan. I never found out where he got the money for the car. I suppose he was still making payments.

Now Jim's being back in the Navy was no accident. It seems Jim had separated from his wife but after a period of having to pay some sort of family support, his finances were getting thin. Along came the war. Jim volunteered for active duty and ended up in California. Myrtis thought they should get back together at least for the kids' sake so here they all were in San Diego. Jim had managed to procure government housing and so was ashore on off duty nights, living with Myrtis and the kids. On several occasions I stood duty for Jim so he could get to see his kids.

Occasionally we'd go into San Diego and have a beer or two. I remember one night Jim said he had to stop and see someone at a place south of Broadway downtown. The area was mostly cheap bars, a burlesque house, tattoo parlors, and two or three card rooms. Evidently poker was legal. At any rate these places were open to the public. Jim took me along with him to this place. Mostly older guys, some sailors and a couple women serving beer to the card players. Jim introduced me to one of the barmaids.

"Say Jack, meet Dolores." I said hello while Jim took Dolores off to the side and they had some conversation. Dolores didn't look too bad. Must have been half Mexican, about 25, sorta hard. We left shortly, Jim said he'd met her before Myrtis arrived in town.

December passed. I did get up to L. A. for Christmas, but my girl friend had taken up with some senior at Annapolis (don't blame her). So I decided to stay in San Diego for the New Year. Besides I had duty December 30th. Jim asked if I wanted to go out New Year's Eve as we both had liberty and it seemed a good way to end a so-so year.

Unfortunately Jim as usual was broke but there was gas in his car and I had a dollar and a half. Now you may not think that's a lot of money but tequila was only a buck ten a quart in Tijuana. We drove around Tijuana a couple hours that New Year's Eve looking for some amateur Mexican girls – I guess there weren't any in town – then back to San Diego. Jim was sure the girl at the Laundromat was "hot to trot" but she was on duty till 2 A. M. or so. By 1 A. M. New Year's we'd finished the quart of tequila, and I wasn't feeling too hot, and no action for a couple of dumb sailors so back to Jim's government housing.

We woke Myrtis and the kids which didn't upset her too much. I guess we'd met before. Anyway she was gracious and along with Jim insisted I spend the night. I was in no mood or condition to object so agreed. I do vaguely recall a small bedroom with two beds. I suppose they were doubles but still quite small.

Anyway Jim said "Myrtis and I will sleep with the kids. You can have the other bed."

Sounded OK to me but shortly after crawling in bed I could hear Jim's kids hollering. It seems the only way the four of them could fit was two kids at one end with Jim and Myrtis at the other. The arrangement would have worked but Jim thrashing around kept kicking the kids in the face and they kept up an intermittent hollering. I wasn't feeling particularly well and the crying didn't help.

After an hour of the nonsense Jim said, "Say Jack, can I get over in that bed with you "Yeah," said I. And I guess we eventually all got to sleep.

Early next morning after some tomato juice Jim took me to the "Nickel Snatcher" [the ferry] for a ride back to North Island.

Mid-January the squadron was transferred to Miramar Naval Air Station. And shortly thereafter the F4U Corsairs were replaced with F9F Panthers. Ah! The new generation – breed – whatever, we had joined the jet age.

It was about mid-January we were scheduled to go overseas in a month or two so Jim shipped Myrtis and the kids off on a train back to Florida. The Lincoln stayed in San Diego.

About the same time I began to realize that Jim also had something going with Dolores. As a matter of fact as soon as he'd put Myrtis on the train, Dolores moved in with her 3 year old son. The change of inhabitants was not reported to the Navy housing authorities.

I stopped by a couple times. Jim and I would have a beer or two. Dolores never said much. The kid played on the floor. The whole scene was kind of stark

Our shipping out date was changed from March till May. With the new airplanes the pilots needed additional gunnery training and so the squadron was to transfer back to El Centro the end of March.

Most of the crew went by bus. Those that had cars were allowed to drive. The planes were, of course, flown over.

Jim asked if I would like to drive over with him. It was better than the bus. We were to go over on a Saturday. Jim had stayed at the base Friday night and packed up what few things he kept in his locker. I was still able to get everything in a sea bag and packed it in the car.

Jim said he had to get Dolores out of the government housing and that we would stop and pick her up.

We arrived at the place about noon. I went in with Jim. Dolores was semi-attired, a bathrobe over a slip.

"Dolores, they're transferring me back to El Centro. You have to move out."

With that Dolores said, "But Jim, where can I go?"

"I'll drop you off at your sister's," said Jim.

"But I don't think she's home and besides she doesn't want me and Joey to move in," said Dolores and she began to cry.

"I can't help it," said Jim, "you gotta move out now."

"Jack, get Dolores' clothes out of the closet and put 'em in the car."

With that Dolores really started crying and little Joey sensing a problem, started to cry too.

Me, I grabbed the clothes out of the closet and threw them in the trunk.

Dolores was still distraught but by now realized she was going to be out of that place in 15 minutes so set to putting her few belongings in some bags and into the car. We finally got everything in the car and took off looking for Dolores' sister in the east end of San Diego.

Dolores' sister was not home. No one was home. Dolores was still crying,

"Jim what am I going to do? My sister isn't here. I don't know where she is or when she'll be home."

"Don't worry," Jim said. "I'll find a place for you to stay."

With that we drove a couple blocks farther on and pulled up in front of a bar. Jim and I got out and went inside.

"I know this bartender. He'll put her up."

Jim explained the situation to the bartender. The guy said, "Well I don't know but I've got this little room in the back. I let the drunks sleep it off there. But it's real small. Besides I want to see this woman."

We followed him back of the bar and off to a side door. The room couldn't have been more than 8 by 8. A bed and a nightstand occupied the room.

"Yeah, this looks fine," said Jim.

There was an outside door to the room. We all went back to the car. Jim introduced the bartender to Dolores. He eyed her over and nodded OK.

"Now, Dolores, this guy said you could stay 'til your sister gets back so let's get your clothes and stuff out of the car.

Jack! Grab some of this stuff."

Dolores started to cry again. "Jim, I can't stay here."

But we grabbed her goods and hauled them with her and the kid into the small room.

As we got back into the car the bartender said, "Sure, she can stay here as long as she likes."

He was unshaven, about 45, swarthy. I think he smiled when he said that.

We pulled out and headed on to El Centro, stopping a couple times for beer.

Dolores wasn't mentioned.

The squadron was at El Centro another six weeks. During that period Jim and I catted around. Brawley, Imperial, Calexico and Westmorland. The latter two blocks of bars and beds, north of El Centro had been "officially" closed down since December but Jim's smile and 6th sense could locate the one or two places still open.

It was also during this period that Jim was called down to see the legal officer on several occasions. I didn't pay any attention but some of the others in the squadron said a big Cadillac limousine had been seen at headquarters and that Dolores was seen with some well dressed civilian getting in and out of the car.

We sailed from San Diego May 8th. Korea bound.

Later during the day one of the maintenance crew who was going thru the San Diego newspaper shouted out, "Hey Jack, come on over and read this."

I looked at the article. It was in the legal announcements section of the paper: "Marriage of James Quattlebaum and Dolores Lopez is officially annulled effective May 2, 1951."

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Dick Horst, AO3, in Sasebo, Kyushu, Japan

June 1951



Japan

1951



Gatlin, Decontreras

VF-781

With F9F on the hangar deck of the Bon Homme

1951



Decontreras in cockpit, "Quattlebomb" leaning on canopy, and Horst in back
With VC-61 F9F Photo Plane (note the "PP") on the deck of the Bon Homme
(photo is reversed)
June 1951



Electrical and Electronic crew
on Hangar deck of Bob Homme
(Jake Holliman, right)
September/October 1951