

John R. "Jack" Nicholas
Ottumwa, Pre-Flight Class 10-46



THE NAVY CAREER OF JOHN R. NICHOLAS

In 1945 while attending the engineering school at Northwestern University, I learned that the V-5 program was open and thus went to the recruiting office on 11 August 1945 to enlist. They advised me to get my high school transcript, birth certificate, and parent's permission and to return on 20 August for mental and physical exams. Then on 14 Aug, the Japanese agreed to a cease-fire; did I frighten them or was it just a coincidence.

Fifteen applicants started exams on 20 Aug and two of us were-sworn in on 21 Aug. I wanted to immediately quit school, but my Dad felt with the cease-fire in effect, I might not get called to active duty, so back to school I went.

In October my orders to Villanova College in Villanova PA arrived; I'd not heard of this school. On 31 Oct, a large group of guys gathered on the plaza behind the Board of Trade building in Chicago. We then marched to Union Station for the overnight train trip to Pennsylvania on an all Navy Penn RR train.

People who inquired about this marching group were surprised we were entering the Navy – "What for, the war is over". On the train were guys going to Bucknell, Pennsylvania, Rennsaler, other schools, and about 30 guys for Villanova. We were in the first car behind the locomotive and tender and it was the dirtiest train ride ever. When I sent my clothes home, my mother responded "How did you get so dirty in two days?"

When the train stopped in Villanova PA the next morning, the detail leader Edwin Meyers lined us up and marched us onto the campus. We sort of resented his manner and called him "Admiral", a moniker he retained. That day, 11-1-45, we received our shots, moved our room furniture from storage into our dorm, Mendal Hall, and received hair cuts. That evening, some of us were lucky and got our uniforms that consisted of used blues and whites plus new skivvies, shoes, and socks. Classes had started before we arrived; thus we were a week behind in schoolwork when we attended our first classes with textbooks.

Villanova is a Catholic school, Order of St. Augustine, with V-12, ROTC, and Marine units. Some of our teachers were priests and they began each class with a prayer in speed speech. We stood fire watches and had military drill on Saturday. In short, we were attending college with a \$50.00/month allowance, I never got that kind of dough from my Dad.

On our first liberty, after 3 days in the Navy, we went into Philadelphia and stopped at a bar for a beer. When the bartender served us he added, "Don't get caught in here". Between semesters, all of the Navy units embarked on the USS *Columbia* (CL-56), a light cruiser. We had a tour most days, engineering dept, bridge, CIC, fire room, etc. but in the main we were deck apes. The Navy terminated their wartime contracts with the colleges about 30 June 46. Having finished the two-year college requirement for flight training, I received orders to NAS Glenview IL for Selective Flight Training. After taking the Aviation Cadet oath, we were issued officer type uniforms including dress blues and khakis.

In ground school, we learned code and blinker and received instruction in Navy customs and etiquette, military drill and course rules. We flew N2S-3s with a lockable tail wheel. My instructor, LT Wright, advised all of his students made it to designation; I continued the streak. On 15 July, I had my safe for solo check, got an up, and then taxied my plane too close, much too close, to a field

marker. My check pilot had to push and pull the plane so I could clear the marker and continue my solo at Arlington Field; he was a forgiving guy, a Santa Claus.

My home was about 7 miles south of Glenview and I went home every weekend; loved it. Three friends from high school were stationed at Glenview; one in the crash crew, a second in the pay office, and the third ran the coffee mess in the instructors ready room. He would ask LT Wright, "How's your student doing?" and then relay the response to me.

After some leave, I took the CB&Q railroad to Ottumwa IA for Pre-Flight on a ticket procured by my Dad. I rode in the parlor car, seated in an individual overstuffed swiveling chair. Beer was available by pressing a call button; I thoroughly enjoyed the trip.

I was assigned to class 10-46 in Battalion 4 led by LT Ed (Hunchy) Ludeman. I enjoyed Pre-Flight; the ground school wasn't tough and the physical stuff mainly fun except mass exercises. The swimming was the most demanding especially the mile swim and some swims while wearing a flight suit. I collected many demerits for little stuff and had to march them off. The winter of 46-47 was cold so we pulled our watch caps over our faces when marching into the wind to ground school. We also had some snow ball fights and sometimes we washed the faces of the Georgia and Florida guys with snow; they were both surprised and upset. On 14 Dec we mustered in the drill hall and about 90% of the Regiment took the oath of Aviation Midshipman.

During Christmas leave in 46, my Dad wanted some pictures in dress blues. I resisted, but did comply; today I think they're pretty good, in fact I like them. Returning to Ottumwa, there were so many Mid'n at Union Station in Chicago that the train master said "Navy first"; we enjoyed that recognition. It was -30F the next morning in Ottumwa. Some strong and lasting friendships began in Pre-Flight. As a class we lived together, went to class together, ate together, marched to church together, fought the system together, went on liberty in search of girls together – included in this group are Cad Neidlinger, Dick Fingers Rauhut, George Stith, Bob Harpo Marx, Lou Ives, Roy Murphy, Jim Burton, John Reilly.

During 1946, the Navy went through a big demobilization; many flight instructors and mechs left the Navy. There was no recognizable purge of flight students. Some Mid'ns finished Pre-Flight and were sent to Corpus Christi. About 4 - 6 weeks later, they returned to Ottumwa. This group could not start flight training because of the paucity of instructors. Our class's time in Ottumwa was extended a few weeks. In mid February, I left Ottumwa on the CB&Q to St.

Louis, then the MoPac to Houston and Corpus Christi. Enroute, we stopped in Little Rock and there I first saw racial discrimination: separate drinking fountains, separate-waiting areas, it disturbed me.

At Corpus Christi, reveille was at 0530 followed by a muster outside which was conducted by CPOs enrolled in the Aviation Pilot program (AP). There were also some 1st and 2nd Class Petty Officers in the AP program undergoing the same flight training we were enrolled therein. After Corpus Christi, we seldom saw an AP student. We had to wait several weeks before we could start ground school and flight training and we spent those days doing menial tasks including lawn mowing and on one exciting day we polished bowling balls. Our initial training was in the N2S-5 Stearman with a steerable tail wheel. One week we would go to ground school in the morning, then after lunch bus to NAAS Rodd Field for flight training. The next week, the schedule was reversed. In the morning we would "Roll out the yellow birds" from the hangar and in the afternoon we would "Roll in the yellow birds". We also refueled the planes and helped start them by cranking the inertia starter. We flew off the mat at Rodd and all of the outlying fields were sod. My instructor gave me an up, but the check pilot rewarded a down. So after a warm-up flight I got an up and soloed. There were a number of students who quit the program at this time and a significant number who washed out in A stage.

In the spring of '47, the Navy inaugurated two new syllabi. In the Yoke program all flight training was in the SNJ, the students did not train at all in the N2S. The Xray program was used to transition N2S students like myself into the Yoke program. I finished B stage in the N2S and then went to NAAS Cabaniss for SNJ training. Because of the heavy new student load, we had to work on the SNJ line for about 4 weeks. Then we went to ground school full days for awhile and finally down to the flight line for some flying. After soloing the SNJ, a student could fly three hops/day M-F plus two hops on Saturday. One week I had 15 flights and in July 1947, I flew 61.0 hours. I had a good instructor, a chap named Depaninger.

Meanwhile, back at the barracks a poker club flourished including Roy Murphy, Harpo Marx, John Lindsay, John McNamara, John Barkley, Lou Ives, couple of guys named Van and others. We met in an empty but unlocked barracks and never cleaned up our coke bottles, cigarette butts, or trash. One day a Battalion Officer found our "clubroom" and saw our mess and also found a note with some names thereon. He contacted these guys and told them to get their fellow players and clean the entire barracks building, and we did. I spent an evening polishing brass doorknobs.

After Cabaniss, we went through instrument training at Mainside flying SNJs under the hood. We also spent time in Link trainers. The first 10 flights were basic instruments, then a check ride. Then 5 radio instrument flights and a check ride followed. I accomplished all of it in less than 3 weeks and was finished with the Corpus Christi training on 28 Aug 47. We had some great Texas liberties including Houston, Galveston, Laredo, San Antonio, Matamoros, we also enjoyed drinking beer at the cadet club.

After the Labor Day weekend, I boarded a heavily loaded R4D with about 12 other Mid'n and we flew to Pensacola. There we were placed in flights of 6 for formation, cross-country, gunnery, and night flying. My flight consisted of Tom Voorhees, Mal Thompson, Rudy Radigan, Jim Raborn, and one other. Our cross-country flights were the hurricane evacuation flights (4), to Memphis and return, in September '47. We had good times on this flyaway, but those who remained at Pensacola worked to clean up the mess created by the hurricane.

Gunnery was special; we flew in right echelon about 10 kts above stall speed. Shortly after we'd peel off the instructor would shout "Reverse", reverse". In fact, he was hollering all of the time during our runs. I made it through gunnery without ever hitting the sleeve. The next squadron was CQTU-4, carrier qualification. The first flight was a solo "slow flight"; how slow will the SNJ fly before stalling. Then plenty of FCLP. One day when returning from FCLP with B. J. Stringer in the back seat, we ran into heavy rain. I made a 180 turn and returned to better weather where we both looked for a place to land. We landed at an unattended outlying field. Thirty minutes later, two SNJs were overhead and one radioed to take-off and join-up. The squadron XO was critical of our landing field choice, but the CO said, "Well done". We embarked on the USS *Saipan* (CVL-48) for our 6 carrier landings. I needed 10 or so passes to get 6 traps. After one launch, I noticed a big splash off the ship's stern; someone had spun into the water. He was picked up by the plane guard and returned by highline to the *Saipan*; it was my buddy Tom Voorhees.

The PBY flying boat was next. Each flight consisted of an instructor, two students, and a mech. We took off from Pensacola Bay, flew over to East Bay, and shot landings: normal, full stall, and instrument landings; we did very little airwork. I flew with Rudy Radian in this squadron including both solos. On our solos, we had a mech with us and we either shot landings, or sat on the water having a cigarette; it was boring.

The night flight was hairy and very dark. To land, we had to line up with a single row of flares in the water, then establish a descent of 200 ft/min, keep the wings level with no horizon, and maintain airspeed of about 80 IAS. When the

plane hit the water, we pulled the throttles back. I wasn't much of an instrument pilot and thus struggled the entire flight. I was glad when that flight was complete.

Liberty was better in Pensacola; we were close to town, there were some gambling places in town, the AcRec had several dances, and New Orleans just hours away. Returning from Christmas leave, I looked for Bob Marx and learned he had suffered a brain concussion and broken left femur in an auto accident and thus was in the Naval Hospital. Six months later he was still in a cast. He eventually was released from the hospital, flunked the eye exam, and left the Navy.

Our final squadron was flying SNBs at Whiting Field. We lived in the BOQ at South Field and flew out of North Field; a bus ride every morning and evening. The beer hall was the "O" Club which we enjoyed, but we ate in the wardroom and that was lousy. Our flights were similar to the PBY training, a little airwork, but lots of landings, most of them included single engine work. My check pilot was ENS Klein, a reputed hardnose. I made three major mistakes on this flight including a ground loop while taxiing. I expected a down, but his opening words when debriefing were "On your solo you should work on ...". On our solos we could not leave the flight patterns at Whiting. The final flight at Whiting was a navigation flight in an R4D, six students per flight. I was number 18 student in waiting for this flight when this training was canceled. PBY training was also canceled at this time. We spent two rainy days checking out of Whiting and Mainside and then flew to Jacksonville.

We all loved Jacksonville; it was our final training squadron before designation. We lived in the JBOQ, we had an open gate, and we could wear civilian clothes.

I was assigned to ATU-5 flying TBMs in a flight that included Carl Schluter, J.C. Shows, Jim Glover, Bob Martin, Mal Thompson, and Bob McIntyre. On my first TBM flight, Dick Nickerson, known as "Little Nick", climbed up on my wing and help me start, it was much appreciated. The take-off was OK, I flew around for awhile, then we 7 rendezvoused and returned to JAX for our first landings; they weren't bad. Our training included lots of ordnance work, rockets, glide bombing, and even some gunnery. We had 5 night flights, some instrument work and a cross-country to New Orleans. The weather was good and we finished the flight syllabus before the ground school syllabus.

Carl Neidlinger lived in Jacksonville and he introduced me to Catherine Gaule, it was a wonderful courtship which lasted for several years. We returned

to Pensacola for Carquals in type, which concluded with 7 landings on the USS *Wright* (CVL-49). Upon returning to JAX, we underwent several days of intense

ground school to complete the syllabus. Then on Thursday, 24 June 1948, we mustered in the Admin Building and were Designated Naval Aviators. A great day. I acquired 416 flight hours, soloed in 5 types, and made 13 arrested landings in 24 months of flight training. However, on Friday, I returned to ground school to complete my communication checkout. Then I flew to New York with the JAX NARTU and onto Philadelphia.

Having never traveled West, I requested and received orders to San Diego. I flew American Airlines to Los Angeles where I met Stu Ferguson and Lou Ives. We had several days at the beach and then drove down to North Island to check in with ComFairWestCoast. They immediately assigned us to FAETUPAC at NAAS Ream Field for four weeks of electronic training. We returned to North Island to await our squadron assignments. While I was unpacking, John Reid watched me start to pin on the lapel anchors. He commented "We're not wearing those out here Nick", and I never wore them again. I volunteered to attend the homing torpedo school in Key West for 7 weeks.

Meanwhile Air Group 21 was forming at NAS Seattle – many Mid'n were included in that group. Upon returning to North Island I took the oath and became an Ensign USN on 14 Dec 48. I was then assigned to VC-21 for future assignment to VS-25. So I requested and received orders to VR-32, the ferry squadron, and went flying.

My first trips were AD-3s to Alameda. After following Lenny Komosarek in a Corsair to Quonset Point and then returning a different F4U to North Island, I was made a Solo Pilot; I could get lost by myself. My first ferry was an SNB to the Beech factory in Wichita returning with a TBM from El Paso. My final trip was an AD-3 to Norfolk, returning a F4U-4 to North Island. VS-25 was commissioned on 1 April 1948 and I was there. We flew some, attended some schools and carqualed with 8 landings on the *Badoeing Strait*. I volunteered to attend Mine Warfare School in Yorktown VA. About this time, the Seattle Air Group was decommissioned, the pilots returned to North Island and went into North Island Air Groups. In July, 49 I was notified that I would not be retained in the regular Navy. Shortly thereafter I was sent TAD to the USS *Curtiss* (AV-4), a seaplane tender in San Diego; I was most unhappy. Highlight of this four-month tour was a cruise to Hawaii. I also qualified as OOD Underway. Returning to San Diego, I got TAD orders to VR-32 and ferried an F4U-5N from the factory in Dallas to Norfolk. We ferried a PBY-6A on the return to North Island. I returned to VS-25

in late December and from there went to the Separation Center at the Naval Station San Diego and then left the Navy on 2 January 1950.

I returned to the Chicago area, reenrolled in Northwestern, and joined the Reserve at NAS Glenview. I was assigned a non-pay billet in a VS Squadron and could only fly the SNJ. In July 1950, the Korean War started. I received a pay billet in December. On 26 December 1950, I received a Navy letter from Glenview, which read "You are hereby notified of your recall to active duty as a pilot in VA-728." We reported to Glenview on 1 February 51 and stayed there for two months flying AM-1 Martin Maulers. We also completed instrument training and earned white cards. We moved to NAS Alameda in April and formed Air Group 15 with VF-831 and VF-837 from New York, VF-653 from Akron, and VF-713 from Denver. The squadron complement was fleeted up; we flew AD-1s for awhile and then transitioned into the AD-4. We did our ordnance work at NAAS Fallon NV, carqualed with 20 landings on the USS *Antietam* (CV-36) off San Diego. In mid-September, we loaded aboard the *Antietam* and headed for Hawaii and an Operational Readiness Inspection.

The ORI flights were my first operational flights from a ship; all previous flying had been carquals. In preparation for some close air support work in Makua Valley, Bob Thomas and I flew a fam hop around Oahu, sometimes rather low. We caused a ruckus that Sunday and thus both of us went into "hack" for 2 weeks.

Upon arriving in Yokosuka, Japan, we got evade and escape lectures, water survival suits, 38s, charts, and other stuff. On the way to the Sea of Japan, we had a refresher flight. On my first launch, the engine was running rough, so I aborted, dumped most of the bombs, and then landed with two 1000# bombs hung up. On my first strike, I was surprised how inanimate enemy territory appeared. We did not see smoke, trains, trucks, people; nothing was moving. On another strike, leader Jim Walley was directed to land at K-3 after the strike to repair his tail hook. The Marines treated us well, especially at the Club. We walked in every mud puddle so we would have the only muddy boots back on the *Antietam*. The ship would be on the line for 30-33 days, then off the line for 14 days including about 10 days in Japan. Our flights were usually 6 ADs and 6 F4Us. There were 3 launches each day for 3 days, followed by a replenishment day with no flying. The ADs normal load was 1-2000#, 2-1000#, plus 8-250# on the wings, and several hundred rounds of 20mm ammo. The F4Us carried 1-1000# bomb, plus 6 smaller bombs on their wing racks. Our main effort was railroad interdiction. We encountered enemy fire on most strikes, even in the boonies. Small arms fire was the greatest threat, and we saw few tracers. On many targets, we set up a racetrack-bombing pattern and made multiple runs.

We did not do this on such hot targets as Yangdok and Wonsan. Sometimes we'd drop the 250s flying straight and level at 100-200 feet; we also got bomb blast when flying this low. On our first tour, we had several flight deck

crashes, and one pilot, Glen Geho, ditched near the task group and was picked up by a destroyer.

On our first R&R in Japan we visited the shrines in Nikko; on all subsequent R&Rs I went skiing at Akakura. I flew 10 strikes on the first tour, 12 on the second including 6 in 7 days, 9 in the third, and 10 in the fourth and last deployment. We had one group grope: 8 ADs, 8F4Us, and about 12 F9Fs. The props launched first and flew at normal rated power 40" and 2400 turns to Yangdok, the target; the jets still got there much earlier. CAG led and I flew on his wing. We climbed to 13,000 feet and then CAG radioed, "Switch blowers". Not remembering how to switch and knowing we had to switch back before diving on the target now in sight, I didn't switch. All the ADs passed me by, however they needed to make a right 90 to reach the target and so I rendezvoused with them in that turn in the #3 spot. I watched 3 big bombs leave CAG's plane, then 3 from Dwyer's, then I pickled my three; this all happened in a few seconds. The bombing run felt good, and looked good, but the photo recon advised only damaging hits from our 20 plus big bombs. Experienced hydraulic failure on one strike that lead to a no flap landing with a closed canopy; the emergency canopy system failed. I had a tendency to land to the right on the ship, a bad habit I never corrected.

After returning to the States, Joe Voda and I got orders to FASRON 7 in San Diego. Then TAD orders to Seattle squadron VS-892 for a checkout and carquals in the TBM. In September '52 we embarked on the USS *Rendova* (CVE-116) for Eniwetok Atoll and the first hydrogen bomb test. We were assigned as liaison pilots to the ship and in reality we had little to do; it was a boring assignment. For test day, 1 Nov 52, the atoll was evacuated and we were steaming about 10-15 miles away. We had our backs to the blast and our eyes in our arms, at detonation. Still we very much felt the heat from the blast and also were very cognizant of the light, both were extremely intense. Because of the partly cloudy sky, we didn't see the big mushroom cloud, but we saw and then heard the shock wave. On 16 Nov we witnessed an air drop and detonation of an A-bomb. We were seated on the beach of Eniwetok Island. Shortly after the blast, we were directed to fly all the planes aboard. I led the TBMs and after take-off, kept 40" & 2400 turns on to rendezvoused with the lead Corsair flying downwind at 2000' and indicating 180; it was a very good joinup. When I got the cut, I was heading left and landing left, felt I was going into the water. However, I caught an early wire and stayed on the flight deck. It was my last carrier landing and my worst carrier landing.

After we returned to San Diego, I left the Navy and returned to Northwestern University. I rejoined the Reserve at Glenview in 1953 in a VF squadron flying F8Fs, then F4U-5s, and then into jets and the F9F-7. The aircraft assigned to the Reserve were frequently Fleet discards including the above.

Took my first 2-week cruise at NAS Willow Grove flying F4U-5s in 1954. After getting a BSME degree, I moved to Seattle to work for Boeing and flew AD-5s with VA-892. Returning to Chicago in 1956, I started flying the F9F-6. After several years, the reserve command got a new mission – ASW warfare, and I moved into the S2F program. Really enjoyed the StooF, all 2000 hours therein.

We flew night and day, rain, snow, fog, sun, but no sleet. And we flew all over the USA. On 1 Oct 61, VS-721 went on active duty and we spent most of a year at NAS Seattle flying close in ASW patrols. It was fun and we got to enjoy the World's Fair in 1962. Returning to Chicago, I flew the stooF another 7 years including a tour as CO of VS-721. My final flying assignment was instrument instructor in VS-724 and I relished that role. I hung around Glenview in a non-pay status for awhile, was selected for Captain, and retired. The NAVY, a great, great adventure, oh to live it again.

Memorable and Humorous

Memorable experience: I survived. Never lost an engine. Didn't meet an accident board. Stayed out of the water and the barrier. Didn't get caught busting FARs or playing poker.

Humerous experience(s): Getting nailed for buzzing Oahu. Somebody dropped a sonobuoy on Disneyland.

