

## “THE NAVY’S FLYING MIDSHIPMEN”<sup>1</sup>



Forty years ago, surely inspired by those Naval Aviators who survived the massive ocean operations of World War II, some 3,600 young men signed contracts to become a unique group known as “Holloway’s Hooligans”. Some of them became the only U. S. Navy flyers to enter combat as Midshipmen. Their story begins in 1946, when Congress approved the Holloway Plan, perhaps the most innovative and productive reorganization in the history of Naval Aviation training.

As the veterans of WW II returned to civilian life in 1946, the corps of experienced Naval Aviators was thinned considerably. To confront this personnel problem, VADM James L. Holloway, Jr. (“Gentleman Jim”) devised a plan to recruit high school graduates – as well as flight cadets already in training who were to be released from duty – into a new program. It proved successful; in the next four years, of 3,600 candidates who entered the Aviation Midshipman syllabus, about 58 percent earned their Wings of Gold.

The first class started in the fall of 1946, composed of former cadets who were well into the flight training program and chose to be redesignated Aviation Midshipmen rather than be released from active duty. The last Pre-Flight class was in 1950 when the program was terminated in favor of accepting college graduates, mainly from the Naval Academy and Naval ROTC courses, as aviation candidates.

The main difference between the Midshipman Program and other aviation training schemes was that the Midshipmen were commissioned Regular Navy whereas Aviation Cadet (AvCads) were always Naval Reserve. However, Mid-shipmen were not commissioned when they received their wings, but two years from the date of warrant when they entered Pre-Flight. Thus, they were scattered over the earth in squadrons for periods varying from four to fourteen months as “Flying Midshipmen” with BOQ / shipboard mess bills they could not afford to pay, uniform requirements they could not possibly purchase and TAD assignments that incurred even greater debts for their meager means of \$112.50 to \$132.50 per month.

But all that was in the future when the aspirants signed on. The attraction for 1946 high school seniors included a two-year guarantee of full tuition and book costs and subsistence payments of \$50 per month while attending college as Airman Apprentice. After completing two years of an engineering or science curriculum, the future Aviators were sent to Pensacola – still as Airmen Apprentices. On arrival they were ordered into a four-week period of humiliation training in an Officer Candidate Training Unit (OCTU) where they marched, mustered and matriculated under the ever-present critical eyes of Chief Petty Officer Instructors. It was not a pleasant interlude.

When all physical examinations and OCTU training requirements were successfully completed, the new candidates were issued khakis to replace their

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<sup>1</sup> CAPT Walter “R” Thomas, USN (Ret), in *THE HOOK*, summer 1967, pp. 16-20.

dungarees, and passed into Pre-Flight. Once knighted there as Aviation Midship-men, the still-confused students encountered impeccably-uniformed Marine Corps Sergeants who assumed the gentle duties of daily drills, frequent inspections, and an even more orderly life than the CPOs had imposed in OCTU. Now church attendance was mandatory, liberty nonexistent and physical training almost abusive. Pre-Flight was, if possible, less joyous than OCTU.

By September 1948 Pensacola was understaffed, heavily burdened and mostly overwhelmed by the mass of students who descended on Training Command from their two years of college. Logistics collapsed, food was short and uniform sizes subject to availability and each supply clerk's disposition. Many Reserve Officers were ordered in to help coordinate the chaos.

As the early summer arrivals completed Pre-Flight and crowded the Basic Flight Training classes at Whiting Field, a "back-up" occurred at Mainside. The late summer students who finished Pre-Flight in November and December could not be accommodated at Whiting. Never at a loss for solutions, the Navy sent these latter groups on board USS *Wright* (CVL-49) for intensive training in deck chipping, red lead painting and watch-standing. CAPT C. A. L. "Cal" Swanson, USN (Ret) was one of those unfortunate souls. The emphasis was on "standing", as Cal recalls, "There was no place to sit down on that ship!" These "student pools" were long stagnant, and life was not improving.

However, the rigors of the Midshipman program served a useful purpose. Cal Swanson (Class 20-47) recalls the cohesive effect of those days. "The spaghetti feeds, the beach parties, the same group of girlfriends, really developed a bonding of the Midshipmen. Those who remained with the program through CQ and into fleet squadrons seem to have a special relationship."

As in other hierarchies, the Aviation Midshipmen were forced into a pecking order. Fourth Class Midshipmen included all those in Pre-Flight; Third Class were in Basic at Whiting Field; and Second Class were either at Corry Field (instruments and night flying) or Saufley Field (formation and gunnery). The differences in status were negligible and almost invisible, consisting merely of locating collar anchors here or there. Hard liquor, cars and marriage were strictly forbidden.

Eventually, after 10 to 12 months, Basic Training ended. The culmination of Pensacola penance was Field Carrier Landing Practice (FLCP) at Barin Field ("Bloody Barin"), followed by CarQuals on either *Wright* or *Cabot* (CVA-28). Qualifying aboard was the true and blessed passage into "Midshipmanhood."

Once carrier landings were completed, the fledgling became a First Class Midshipman, a rank considered equivalent to Arabian prince. This title permitted the student, for the first time, to wear Aviator greens, brown shoes (half-Wellingtons preferred), an anchor on each collar and a half stripe on his uniform sleeve. Most importantly, liberty was now unrestricted and hard liquor – even for those who hated it – could be consumed, preferably in the company of those lesser-ranked Midshipmen gathered around each CarQualified hero.

In every way Pensacola life was balmy for those First Class Midshipmen who spent their last few basic training days in the bar of the San Carlos Hotel, or were semi-permanent denizens of the AMVETS Movie Theatre.

The prestige quickly ended as the new Middies left Pensacola for Advanced Training at Corpus Christi, Texas, and outlying fields. One episode at Cabaniss Field during F6F phase in 1949 involved an extremely religious individual who was not the best Aviator of his class, and an ex-Catholic who flew like a swallow. In the briefing room awaiting a hop the devout flier was seen praying on his knees. Irreverently, his classmate said, "If you gotta' pray, then pray for me. I gotta' fly your wing today!"

Thus, in single and multi-engined aircraft, the final stages of Flight Training soon were completed and each Midshipman received his coveted Wings of Gold.

Why weren't these Aviators commissioned as Ensigns? Because, in all innocence, their initial "warrants" as Aviation Midshipmen specified they would be commissioned two years after their date of rank, and many completed flight training in 15 to 18 months, some even less if they had been Cadets in 1946. CAPT Bill Stuyvesant, USN (Ret), who many claim to be the shortest Aviator in history, received his warrant in December 1946 and was designated a Naval Aviator in February 1947. Commissioned in February 1948, Bill was given a date of rank as of June that year – almost 18 months after he joined his fleet squadron.

In June 1949 all Aviation Midshipmen in Basic, at Pensacola, and in Advanced, at Corpus and environs, were sent home on 30 days leave because the Navy ran out of money for aviation fuel. Remember, these were the days of SecDef Louis Johnson, no friend of the Navy and Marine Corps.

Some of those designated Aviators before the Korean War were released from active duty and encouraged to join the Naval Reserve. The Regular Navy, it seems, did not want to increase the number of Officers between 1948 and 1950 on financial grounds. Quite expensive, don't you know.

Former Midshipman CDR Bob Bennett, USN (Ret) recalls a succession of invitations to get out of the Navy. As the program evolved through 1948 and 1949, at each stage the first option always was leaving the service. "We imagined two big guys with a pitchfork standing by to toss us out," Bob says. But most of the aspiring Aviators stuck with it.

Then the shoe fell. On 19 May 1950 BuPers announced that fewer than 40 of the 450 or so Middies from the Class of '49 had been selected for retention. The others were to be released to inactive duty the last day of June.

When the Democratic People's Republic of Korea invited itself southward 25 June, most U. S. Navy budgetary restraints disappeared overnight. The foresight of VADM Holloway's plan became apparent, but not without a glitch or two. Three days later, 28 June, SecNav decided Aviation Midshipmen could remain until 31 July if they wished. This is noteworthy. Within two days of legally avoiding the new shooting match, only one Midshipman opted out. And that had less to do with avoiding combat in Korea than with avoiding matrimony in San Francisco. As for the others, one Aviator spoke for many when he said, "We wanted to do what we'd been trained to do."

The SecNav dispatch was amended 14 July when AirPac authorized retention for former Midshipmen for 12 months. That fall the "Forty Nines" were notified they could remain on active duty "indefinitely," but no amendment to pay scale or seniority was forthcoming in the bargain.

Meanwhile, a former Flying Midshipman already had been killed by hostile action far from the new war zone. On 8 April 1950 a VP-26 PB4Y-2 from NAS Port Lyautey, Morocco, took off for a mission over the Western Baltic. Among the ten-man crew was 21-year-old Midshipman USN Tommy Lee Burgess, who had entered the Midshipman Program in 1947 and was designated a Naval Aviator in June 1949.

When the *Privateer* was reported overdue, a search was initiated by VP-26 and USAF aircraft in the assigned patrol area. Eventually debris was recovered which proved that the bird had gone down in international waters. The Soviets claimed it had been mistaken for a B-29 over Latvia, where it allegedly fired upon intercepting aircraft. The Russian version clearly was a lie, but no trace of the crew was found.

The first former Aviation Midshipmen to fly combat over Korea were two Air Group Five pilots, Ensigns Gordon Strickland of VF-54 and Jerry Covington of VA-55, who launched from *Valley Forge* (CV-45) in July 1950. When *Leyte* (CV-32) arrived on the line in October she brought a batch of ex-Middies in CVG-3. There were half a dozen in VF-32 alone, including ENS Jesse Brown, one of the most popular pilots in the air group. He died in his crashed Corsair 4 December [1950], despite the Medal of Honor effort to save him by LTjg Tom Hudner. It so happened that Jesse Brown was Black, the first Naval Aviator of his race, but that was unimportant to those who knew him.

In his last letter to his wife, Brown stated, "Knowing that he's helping the poor guys on the ground, I think every pilot here would fly until he dropped in his tracks." It was a sentiment every carrier pilot seemed to share during the endless, chilling days around the Chosin Reservoir.

Nor was Jesse Brown the only Aviation Midshipman to set a precedent. Joe I. Agaki had become the first Nisei to win Wings of Gold and he, too, flew combat in Korea.

The influence of Flying Middies in some squadrons was astounding. Depending on timing and fleet needs, Midshipmen could be sent in large groups to some units, where they formed a decided majority. A case in point was VA-195 during 1951, which deployed with 18 former Middies in a complement of 23 Aviators. Interestingly, one of these pilots had received his "walking papers" in the May 1950 cutback. Reflecting the doubtful wisdom of BuPers, former Aviation Midshipman ENS Gene Sizemore continued his Navy career and achieved flag rank.

Despite their unquestioned contribution to the effort in Korea, most flying Middies found that their original contracts dogged them for decades thereafter. To add insult to penury, two years of active duty as a Midshipman in training and as a squadron pilot did not count for longevity pay or retirement. This quirk in the law finally was resolved in 1974 when fewer than 100 former Midshipmen remained on active duty to benefit from the revision.

The 2,100 men who became Flying Midshipmen between 1946 and 1950 served their nation well – through Korea, the Berlin Airlift, Cuban Missile Crisis and Vietnam War. They were among the most dedicated and professional flyers in the Navy for three decades. The last Regular Navy Midshipman on active duty was RADM William Gureck, who retired in 1984, while RADM Les Smith and Buzz [Buz] Warfield remain on duty as Reserve officers.

The record would be incomplete without special recognition of former Aviation Midshipmen Howard Rutledge and Harry Jenkins who endured more than six years of horror and torture as POWs in Vietnam. They highlight the courage, sacrifice and valor of those Flying Midshipmen who served their nation so well in peace and in war.

No records long remain unchallenged, but as far as the author can determine, the following are a few significant facts concerning Flying Midshipmen.

Joe Akagi	First Nisei Aviation Midshipman
Neil Armstrong	First Aviation Midshipman on the moon, 1969
Bob Aumack	First Aviation Midshipman to command the Blue Angels 1964
Bob Bennett	Only Aviation Midshipman to drop an aerial torpedo in combat, 1951
Jesse Brown	First Black Naval Aviator
Thomas L. Burgess	First Aviation Midshipman killed in action (VP-26), 1950
Norman Gerhart	Last Aviation Midshipman to complete flight training, 1949
Richard C. Jacobi	First Aviation Midshipman to complete flight training, 1946
Gus Kinnear	Only Aviation Midshipman to reach four-star rank
M.D. "Buck" Nelson	Only Aviation Midshipman to command a destroyer
Earl Rivard	First VR contingent into the Berlin Airlift, 1948
Bill Stuyvesant	First Aviation Midshipman to a West Coast squadron (VF-6A), 1947; shortest Midshipman to wear Wings of Gold
Gene Tissot	First Aviation Midshipman to command a carrier
Gent Tissot	First Aviation Midshipman to command a nuclear warship
Gene Tissot	First Aviation Midshipman to reach 1000 carrier landings
Robert F. Wicker	Only Aviation Midshipman to become a Navy Chaplain
Tom Willi	Only Aviation Midshipman to become a ship's Chief Engineer

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