

THE OLD NAVY HOLLOWAY'S HOOLIGANS ¹

By Walter Thomas, CAPT, USN (ret)

The U.S. Naval Air Training Command in Pensacola, Florida, was the “Annapolis of the Air” – literally – from 1946 to 1950. In those four years, more than 2,000 “aviation midshipmen” earned their wings – but not their commissions – and became some of the best financial bargains in U. S. Naval Aviation history.

Toward the end of World War II, the Bureau of Naval Personnel realized that the Navy would soon face a fleet-wide shortage of officers, many of them naval aviators, when the mass exodus of combat veterans began. To keep the officer billets filled, immediate replacements in huge quantities would be needed. In response, a Navy Board headed by Vice Admiral James L. Holloway, Jr., forwarded a plan that could procure sufficient numbers of trained officers to satisfy the needs of our greatly expanded postwar fleet.

The Holloway Plan, approved by Congress in August 1946, was probably the most successful large-scale reorganization of the U. S. Navy's training structure in its entire history. Essentially, the plan “beefed up” the Navy's recruit officer training program and offered new incentives to prospective candidates, including pay. It was the kind of facelift that the program needed in order to train larger numbers of career-oriented officer candidates.

The Naval Aviation community – anxious to get its officer candidates into the cockpit as soon as possible – was accommodated by Admiral Holloway in his plan, and “Aviation Midshipmen” were born. High school graduates were recruited into the Navy as Airman Apprentices, attended college for two years, then reported to Pensacola for about 12 months of flight training. While there, they were designated Aviation Midshipmen and later went on to earn their wings at advanced flight school at Corpus Christi, Texas. However, not until a full two years from the start of preflight school would these bureaucratic oddities (known as “Holloway's Hooligan's”) be commissioned as *bona fide* Ensigns. But while they waited to become full-fledged Naval Officers, these “Flying Midshipmen” found themselves assigned to operational squadrons throughout the fleet, many of them flying combat missions in the skies over Korea.

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Few now remember the once-active train station at Pensacola, and fewer still recall the lonely depot at Flomaton, Alabama; both terminals have long been abandoned. In the summer of 1948, Flomaton became the transfer point where the fast trains between New Orleans and Atlanta stopped briefly in the dark and at absurd times, usually between 0300 and 0400, to disgorge the future flyers. After waiting about two hours on this drab and dismal platform, a remnant of the railroad industry would stop to reembark the dazed and disoriented trainees on their final milk run to Pensacola.

Because Aviation Midshipmen were not allowed to own cars (nor could they afford them), and since the Navy only authorized rail transportation on a Midshipman's prepaid travel request, the "Flomaton Flyer" was the austere and only route to Pensacola for thousands of future aviators – it was a discouraging introduction. Subsequently, it is reported that no "Flying Midshipman" ever retired in Flomaton.

Between June and September 1948, five battalions of fledglings descended on and overwhelmed the training command's capacity for housing, clothing issue, classroom instruction, and – especially – food services. The men of the Fifth Battalion, known as the "Famished Fifth," because they were fed last, often were lined up in formation for 200 yards awaiting their turn to eat. Members of this distinguished group still recall those many mornings of cold cereal (but no milk), toast (but no butter or jam), and "We just ran out of meat and eggs." Gluttony was not a sin in the Fifth Battalion – it was a fantasy. For the last six months of 1948, the candy bar machines throughout the base reaped unimagined profits and were usually empty by 1000 each morning. In addition, the "gedunk" sales records for the same period at Pensacola have never been broken. It was a hungry year.

Because of the massive influx of students in the summer of 1948, it was necessary for the new arrivals to "marinate" four to six weeks in an Officer Candidate Training Unit (OCTU) where they retained their rates as Airman Apprentices. In OCTU, the prospective Aviation Midshipmen were trained in the fundamentals of abuse, under the oppressive Florida sun and the reproach eyes of marine sergeants. Liberty was never permitted; drill, discipline, and obsessive cleanliness were taught more as commandments than as principles.

The OCTU students also received exceptionally thorough physical examinations, severe exercise schedules, and both routine and surprise room and personal inspections. Demerits were awarded liberally and extra duty rifle drills and marching hours were constant hazards. Those who survived OCTU were warranted as Aviation Midshipmen and ordered to Pre-Flight school. But the inspections and Marine Sergeants remained, thus giving birth to the lament, "Them that flunked was the lucky ones."

The horde of students created a backlog throughout the flight training syllabus from 1948 to 1950. Many Aviation Midshipmen who completed Pre-Flight school late in 1948 had to wait for their initial flight training billets to become available at Whiting Field. This time was conveniently filled by assigning the students to temporary paint-chipping duties on board the Pensacola-based aircraft carrier USS *Cabot* (CVL-28). The stagnant flight training situation was further aggravated in June 1949, when everyone was sent home on leave for a month because the Navy ran out of money to buy aviation gasoline. Then the numbers of Aviation Midshipmen dwindled rapidly as the Defense Department made severe budget cuts in 1949. As a result, many of the earliest students (1946-47) earned their wings and discharges concurrently; it was a Kafkaesque world.

While the coveted title of "First Class Aviation Midshipman" has no counterpart in the fleet today, it once was the epitome of social structure at the San Carlos Hotel in Pensacola. As a student progressed through basic flight training, he advanced through the fourth-, third-, second-, and first-class stages of "Midshipmanship." The first three stages were somewhat meaningless since the student merely switched his collar anchor around, continued to wear his khaki working uniform with *black* shoes, and had very little liberty. But on achieving First Class Aviation Midshipman status, fundamental changes in appearance and confidence became apparent.

Unlike his junior counterparts, a First Class Aviation Midshipman wore his anchors on *both* collars, sported *brown* shoes (usually half-Wellingtons), donned aviation *greens*, was permitted *unrestricted* liberty, and was allowed to drink *hard* liquor rather than only beer or wine. These Olympian privileges, reserved exclusively for those who were carrier-qualified and on their way to advanced training in Corpus Christi, were prestige symbols that have seldom been equaled in the annals of Naval society. Nevertheless, even at Corpus Christi, the rite of marriage was still forbidden. Those who chose to live off base were quickly investigated for evidence of conjugal bliss.

By 1950, the unpleasantness in Korea had erupted, and the Defense Department reversed its practice of sending many aviation midshipmen home after they had earned their wings. Now the flight students were graduated and sent to operational billets.

One immediate problem with the arrival of this new crop of Aviators in the fleet was their title of Aviation Midshipmen. This resulted from the contract that required them to remain as Midshipmen for two years from their date of warrant, although they had completed flight training and joined the fleet. Often, the operational squadrons were undecided about where they should house such a distinguished brood; they weren't enlisted men, and they weren't officers. Money

also was a complication, since the bachelor officers' quarters with its closed mess charged a monthly rate for occupants, and Aviation Midshipmen were always broke. They only earned \$132 a month, including flight pay and subsistence. Many still owed money for such necessities as their aviation greens, and few had any means of transportation. Fewer still had what creditors term "a reasonable means of support."

Another economic facet of squadron life was that Aviation Midshipmen only received three cents a mile for travel to their duty stations, while ensigns received eight cents a mile. Matters were further complicated by the fact that "Midshipmen" were only allowed to ship personal goods between their homes and Annapolis – and none of the Aviation Midshipmen were going to Annapolis.

A final blow for many was that they were given a date of rank as ensigns long after they had earned their wings. Aviation Midshipman William Stuyvesant, one of the earliest graduates, was warranted as an aviation midshipman in December 1946, designated a naval aviator in February 1947, commissioned as an ensign in February 1948, and given a date of rank of June 1948 – almost a year and a half after he joined his squadron. Life most certainly was not easy in the case of Holloway's Hooligans.

Mr. Micawber (one of Charles Dickens' favorite characters), when confronted by a legal contradiction, replied "If the law says that, sir, then the law is an ass." It was soon discovered that the laws relating to "Flying Midshipmen" were quite often "asses." The service time of aviation midshipmen could not be credited for longevity, pay purposes, or even as active duty time. For about a quarter century, despite the efforts of many distinguished congressmen and the multitude of personal letters written to the Navy and Defense Departments, all attempts to change the U. S. Code for Aviation Midshipmen were fruitless. Finally, in 1972, the subject was addressed favorably, and the law was changed to include Aviation Midshipmen with flight officers in the U.S. Code. Pay was adjusted for those still on active duty, but by 1972, few former Aviation Midshipmen qualified and no retroactive adjustments were authorized; less than 100 offices were affected by the "corrective" legislation.

As a result, in addition to recruiting the least expensive Naval Aviators in history at \$132 a month (including flight pay), the government saved perhaps millions of dollars by not authorizing a two-year "fogey" for the Aviation Midshipmen who served on active duty for more than 20 years without credit for

their "Midshipman time." At the first Pensacola reunion of the Flying Midshipmen in April 1982, one of Holloway's Hooligans remarked, "We were cheap at half the

price.” From another quarter came a more apt response: “We never even got *half* the price!”

Captain Thomas entered the Navy at Pensacola, Florida, in 1948 as one of the Navy’s “Flying Midshipmen.” While assigned to various squadrons, he flew many different types of aircraft, including seaplanes and helicopters. He also served tours as a ship’s company officer on several aircraft carriers. His shore assignments include duty as a flight instructor, Special Assistant to the Chief of Naval Personnel, the U.S. Naval War College staff, and the Politico-Military Policy Division of the Chief of Naval Operations. Currently he is the Director of the U.S. Navy’s Anti-Drug program.

Captain Thomas is a graduate of the U.S. Navy’s Line School, The U.S. Naval Post-graduate School, the Navy’s Legal School, the DOD Public Information Officer’s School, the U.S. Navy’s Command and Staff College, and the U.S. Naval Warfare College. He also holds a master’s degree in international affairs from George Washington University.

His previous published works include articles in the U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* and the *Naval War College Review*, as well as two series of weekly articles in the *Navy Times* on “Russian Communism” (1955) and “The History of Weapons” (1963).

Captain Thomas maintains “my most satisfying experience in the Navy has been dealing with people. I have managed to get along well with all of my juniors and colleagues – and with fifty per cent of my seniors. I never expected as much, and I don’t anticipate more!”

