

NAVAL RESERVES

As a direct result of flying to Antarctica on the C-130s and seeing the Navy aircrew, nostalgic feelings from the days that I flew on the EA-3B exploded into my psychic. In 1989, twenty and one-half years after my army discharge, I found myself raising my right hand one more time and swearing to protect the citizens and the Constitution of the United States when I joined the Naval Reserves. I was going to be an Anti-Submarine Warfare Technician (rating of AX2) on P-3s, the navy's anti-submarine warfare airplane, in squadron VP-94 out of New Orleans. However, my initial assignment was to the CV-60 reserve squadron for the aircraft carrier USS Saratoga. I was only with CV-60 for a few months prior to my transfer to VP-94. One of my regrets is that I never did go out to sea on this grand old ship. I managed to have a tour of it, but I never knew life as a sailor aboard an aircraft carrier.



New 43-year old sailor with Karen, his sister

My first active duty assignment with VP-94 was to Rota Spain. Since I was still in training for aircrew, I flew with the ground-pounders to Spain on an Air Force C-141, another of Lockheed's airplanes. While in Spain, I managed to set foot in Africa. Near the Rock of Gibraltar, I took a boat over to Ceuta, a Spanish Colony on the Northern Coast of Africa. This is the only time I have visited that continent. Most of the time in Spain I worked in the avionics shop on twelve-hour shifts, but then one day a chance came for me to go to Germany on an overnight trip. Enroute, we were "escorted" by French Mirage aircraft. That night in Germany there was a lot of drinking and dancing in the street, because Germany had just beat Argentina in World Cup Soccer. On the return trip to Spain, I sat in the jump seat behind the pilot as we landed in Rota. Those P-3s have a lot higher landing speed than Cessnas.

During the nearly two years that I served with VP-94, I trained to become an "In Flight Technician", commonly called an IFT. Somewhere along the way my rating was changed to Avionics Technician (AT2). I flew on several P-3 flights as an observer and began to learn the aircraft fairly well. Once I went to Jacksonville, Florida for a high altitude chamber ride, and spent nearly twenty

hours in the air that weekend. I was picked up at Ellington AFB here in Houston, went to Dallas, Memphis, Birmingham, and then on to Jacksonville. On the return trip there were many thunderstorms, so we bounced all over the Southern states avoiding them. It is really impressive to see lightening strikes for hundreds of miles occurring almost simultaneously from an airplane, as if God was conducting a silent orchestra of light and every burst of lightening painted the sky with the calligraphy of His own handwriting.



French Mirage that escorted us



Stock photo of P-3 from Navy website

In order to qualify for the gold aircrew wings I had to pass certain swim qualifications. I could handle the electronics, but the swimming was something else. The first thing I had to do was to be able to swim 75 yards in full flight gear, inclusive of the helmet, survival vest, flight suit and boots. For the first 25 yards the breaststroke was used, the next 25 yards consisted of the sidestroke, and the last 25 yards were finished using the backstroke. So, without any formal instruction, I practiced for months at a local recreational swimming pool. It's too bad that I never had a photo taken of how I looked! I bought a pair of gray coveralls from Sears, and from a military surplus store, a pair of flight boots and a flight helmet. One elderly lady, unable to conceal the terror in her eyes, asked me if I was going to ride my motorcycle into the pool (I don't even own a bike), and someone else asked me if I tested out astronaut helmets! It was at this pool that I met Joe Tanner, because he was a Navy Aviator, and knew exactly why I wore such strange clothes. This was prior to his selection as an astronaut.

One of the men at the base in New Orleans had the job of signing me off for the 75-yard swim test, so I could go to Pensacola, Florida for advanced training. I barely passed the test, and Glen, the instructor, went ahead and signed me off, against his better judgment. I think he felt pressure from others in the squadron.

In Florida, I had to climb into a life raft with full flight gear, participate in training for a helo rescue, and go through the torture chamber called the Helo Dunker. The dunker is a cylinder about 15-feet long and 8-feet wide, with the type of wire grating seen on bar-b-que grills. It did have openings for one door and a few window-sized exits. The device is used to simulate a helicopter crashing into the water and turning upside down. There are seats for the pilot and co-pilot in front, separated from the back compartment that has bench seats. It holds six or eight people. Once all the people are strapped in, the dunker is lowered into the water and turned upside down. Obviously, it is the rider's job to

escape. Each training session gives the participant six rides, and he or she has to successfully complete four exits, rotating seats and alternating wearing clear goggles or goggles with the lenses painted black, to simulate a night crash.

For my first ride I sat in the pilot's seat with clear goggles and easily swam out the side window. The next time I rode in the co-pilot's seat with darkened goggles, and was instructed to grab the vertical pipe that served as reference point behind the cockpit and swim into the back area and go out the side door, directly behind the co-pilot's seat. I lost my reference point, swam back into the cockpit area, and frantically tried to go through the bar-b-que grating. For the first time that day, a diver rescued me. I forced myself to go on the third and fourth rides, this time in the back section, and did OK. For rides five and six, I had to repeat sitting in the co-pilot's position, and twice more, had diver rescue to the edge of the tank. During one of the times that I could not find my way out, I felt euphoric, and remember thinking, "Drowning doesn't seem like a bad way to go". Not a good day in Dodge.

After I regained my composure, I had a lot of explaining to do. Who signed me off? Glen later took a lot of heat, and for that I am sorry. Back in New Orleans, the squadron flight ops personnel started making noises about sending me to the avionics shop and taking me off aircrew training status. My annual two weeks of active duty was coming up, so I asked them to send me Pensacola for real training, instead of going to Bermuda with the rest of the squadron that year. I had never had navy swim instruction, I had spent my youthful military active duty in the army, and I grew up in Wyoming without ever swimming much.

For nine out of ten days, in Pensacola all I had to do was show up for swimming instruction at 7:30 AM (guess I ought to say 0730!) and at 12:30 PM for an hour session each time. It took me until the 9th day, but I finally swam the 75 yards in full flight gear. One of the officers set off a hand-held air canister that reverberated off the walls of the huge swimming pool. Other aviation cadets and aircrew candidates had to swim a mile in an hour, but I never had to. After I completed my 75 yards, one of the instructors on the other side of the building pointed at me and yelled at the young people, "If that old man can swim the 75 yards, you can too!" I was 45 at the time, probably older than some of their fathers. On the tenth day, I had to ride the dunker again. This time I improved – I only had diver rescue two times! But I only passed three out of the six rides, because I opened my seatbelt too early on one of the rides. At the rate of improvement, had I gone another six rides I would have only had to have diver rescue one time! I rode that Helo Dunker twelve times, about as many times that people who spend twenty years in the Navy have to ride it. It scared me, but I am proud to say, I never quit. After it was all over, the instructors said if I had gone out the window instead of the door, they would have yelled at me, but passed me anyway, since the objective is to escape from a sinking aircraft.

A lot of discussion took place in VP-94 about what to do with me. I guess because Glen had been burned, even though I had passed the 75 yards in Pensacola, he made me do it twice again. The helmets I wore in New Orleans didn't fit me right, because I started taking water and ended up gasping and

floundering, and failed the test both times. After the second time, in October, 1991, I was told that my status would be decided by the November drill weekend.

I have long been a believer that God doesn't close one door without opening another one. I never received gold aircrew wings to wear on my chest, which is a regret. But, there are much worse things that happen to people than not being able to achieve certain goals in life.

NEWS FLASH, MARCH 10, 2003

THIS STORY IS BEING INTERRUPTED TO TELL YOU THAT ON THIS DATE, MATTHEW A. NELSON, ESQ., STS-144, FLEW SOLO IN HIS OWN AIRPLANE, THE 1947 STINSON 108, FOR THE FIRST TIME IN THE NINE MONTHS THAT HE HAS OWNED IT. DETAILS MAY BE FOUND LATER IN THIS STORY WHEN THE STINSON IS DISCUSSED. WE NOW RETURN YOU TO THE REGULAR STORY IN PROGRESS.

A few months earlier I had read about the Naval Space Command and a reserve unit commanded by astronaut Steve Oswald. I had nothing to lose, so I gave him a call. On Halloween evening, I met him and Bill Readdy in their office, and requested that I join the Space Command. During this period of time, CDR Oswald and CDR Readdy were in training for their upcoming space shuttle mission, STS42. I told them that I was an engineer working on the shuttle's Ku-Band system, and they asked me if I knew anything about the Electronic Still Camera (ESC) that the navy sponsored. The previous August we had tested the ESC and interfaced it to the Ku-Band system in the ESTL. I don't know if this camera was the very first digital camera ever made, but it certainly appeared near the beginning of digital photography.

Also, the Det Houston of the Naval Space Command Reserve Unit 0166 was in its early stages. CDR Oswald called up the detachment's officer-in-charge, LCDR Hawks Abbott, and asked CDR Abbott and Lt. Harold Moffitt to meet with me the next day. LCDR Abbott had himself served in VQ-1, flying on the EP-3s, and had also been a swim instructor at Pensacola. By December, with many thanks to the hard work of Lt. Moffitt, I officially transferred to NR Naval Space Command 0166, Det Houston. This unit provided support on the Electronic Still Camera to NASA for several space shuttle missions, including STS-42, STS-49, STS-53, and STS-56. I was with the unit for three years, and thoroughly enjoyed it. Two other astronauts, Ken Cockrell and Joe Tanner, joined the Houston unit. Additionally, I served with other good officers, such as John Gilbert, Rick Oswald, Dave Lorenz, and Darrell Talley. As the only enlisted person, I felt like Radar on M*A*S*H. Somebody had to give this bunch of free-spirited officers some guidance! Ya, right!



L-R: Dave Lorenz, Joe Tanner, Hawks Abbott, Rick Oswald, and Matt Nelson



STS-56 crew. L-R: Ken Cockrell, Steve Oswald, Ken Cameron, Ellen Ochoa, Mike Foale



Joe Tanner at Ellington Field after return of STS-82. His face is in the shadows, but the American flag shines through.

[March 19, 2003. Tonight, the war with Iraq started with F117s leading the first assault.] I will be glad when I can write that the war is over.

NEWS FLASH AGAIN! MARCH 21, 2003.

TODAY, ANOTHER NEW POTENTIAL PILOT CAME INTO THIS WORLD. KAROLINE AND I NOW HAVE A NEW GRANDDAUGHTER, CAMYRN DAWN LARSON. CAMYRN IS THE DAUGHTER OF OUR DAUGHTER CHERI AND HER HUSBAND JOHN LARSON. EVER NOTICE HOW MUCH THE WORD DAUGHTER LOOKS LIKE LAUGHTER? SO GRANDDAUGHTER MUST MEAN A LOT OF GOOD LAUGHTER COMING UP. WOW! THIS IS EVEN A GREATER STORY THAN ME FLYING THE STINSON SOLO, WHICH I DID AGAIN TODAY TO CELEBRATE. I TOLD CHERI THAT I WILL HAVE TO TAKE CAMYRN FLYING, AND SHE TOLD ME THAT SHE COULD JUST SEE ME HAVING TO FEED AND CHANGE HER EVERY TWO HOURS. THE USEFUL RANGE ON THE STINSON IS ABOUT TWO HOURS, SO WHILE THE PLANE IS BEING FUELED I CAN FUEL CAMYRN. CHERI SAYS I HAVE TO WAIT, PERHAPS UNTIL THE BABY TURNS 21! OH, WELL, YOU CAN'T BLAME A NEW PROUD GRANDPA FROM TRYING TO TAKE HIS GRANDDAUGHTER FLYING.



Grandma Beverly and Dennis



**Cheri, Camyrn, and John Larson,
Proud Parents**



**Camyrn Dawn Larson, one hour old
March 21, 2003**



**Left: Aunt Michelle and Grandma Karoline
Right: Grandpa Matt**

Ok, I will go back to the story, and if I remember correctly (after all I am officially an old man now), I was writing about the Naval Space Command. My two weeks of Active Duty in 1992 were spent working on a satellite-tracking antenna at the Naval Academy. Impressive, that place! Shortly afterwards, it was time for me to reenlist. People who knew me from the army days would have been very surprised to find me back in the military, even if only the reserves, but then for me to say the words, "reenlist" is almost beyond belief. But that's what I did. And I did it in the lobby of Building 44, where I work at JSC, with CDR Oswald giving me the oath, and CDR Readdy and LCDR Abbott looking on. Later, each of the three men listed in the previous sentence made Captain, and Captain Oswald eventually was promoted to Admiral. The photo was taken by Lt. Moffitt, who unfortunately passed away two years ago.



Reenlistment 1992: L-R: CDR Bill Readdy, AT2 Matthew A. Nelson, Esq., CDR Steve Oswald, LCDR Hawks Abbott. Photo by Lt. Harold Moffitt

In 1994 or 1995, I went back to Edwards AFB for a couple of weeks of Active Duty, where I flew on another P-3, supporting a Navy Project with the acronym of MATT, which I thought was OK, since that's my name. While flying on the P-3, I saw the B-2 take off at Edwards. I don't remember the man's name, but a few years later one of the men flying on the P-3 with me came to ESTL for a space related test.

For reasons I don't understand, Det Houston was deactivated, so I had to find another unit. With the help of Captain Randy Nees, in May, 1995, I transferred to NR SPAWAR 0366 based out of Andrews AFB in Washington, D.C. Captain Nees flew the EA-6B, and sent me a photo of it for this story.



EA-6B, photo provided by Capt Randy Nees

I had more Active Duty that year at Ellsworth, AFB, South Dakota, working around the B-1Bs. I had to laugh, because Captain Nees almost apologetically told me that he had to send me there. I grew up in Wyoming, so I had no problem going to South Dakota. In fact, I really enjoyed it. While there, I saw the Black Hills Passion Play, and went to Mt. Rushmore. (This is why I inserted the photo of the KC-135 flying in front of it.) Somewhere in years past, as a joke, I started saying my name as “Matthew A. Nelson, Esquire”. Later, I found out “Esquire” means gentleman, so it is more ironic that I give myself that title. After I left South Dakota, I had to go back to Andrews AFB. It was also time for me to reenlist again, so I asked Capt. Nees if he would do the honors. The ceremony took place in the lobby of his office. Only he and I were present. After I said my name while taking the oath, Capt. Nees threw in the word, “Esquire”. I am probably the only man in the US Navy that ever reenlisted with the name “Esquire”!



KC-135, flying near Mt. Rushmore, from USAF website



**Bet most of you guys never flew with a crew that looked as good as this KC-135 crew!
Somebody sent this photo to me on e-mail.**

The same weekend that I joined NRF SPAWAR 0366 I also had a job interview with Allied Signal at Wallops Island, Virginia for the Winter-Over engineering position to track satellites at McMurdo, Antarctica. I was only actually with 0366 until December of 1995. Prior to my departure for the Ice, I had requested that I work in my rate of an Avionics Technician and be on temporary assignment with the active duty Navy Squadron VXE-6 to work on the radios of the C-130s, and then work as a Radioman after the last planes had left the Ice. One of the Navy personnel senior chiefs that I had to go through refused to process my request, rudely insisted that I submit a request to go on unpaid status into the IRR, which is the Individual Ready Reserve. I knew that he was wrong, but didn't know how to go around him. (Of course, later I realized how it could have been done, but by that time it was too late.) He said to me the most stupid words I have ever heard: "It is not the duty of the reserves to support the active duty Navy". So I went into the IRR, Wintered-over in McMurdo in 1996, and lost interest in the reserves. After I came home in 1997, there were no slots available for me in NR SPAWAR 0366, and I didn't pursue it any further, and quietly let my enlistment end. In some ways I have regrets, but then on the other hand, it is much easier for me to be home with my new granddaughter and flying my Stinson than eating sand in Iraq.

One cannot talk about Naval aircraft without at least showing photos of the F-14 and F-18. Like the SR-71, I never had any association with these, but I like the sleekness of the airplanes. So, here are some photos of the F-14 and F-18 obtained from the official navy web site.



Upper photos: F-14s

Lower: F-18

These were on the official US Navy website

Today is May 1st, the 43rd anniversary of the shooting down of the U2, flown by Francis Gary Powers, by the Soviets. That was during the Cold War. Another war is going on now, but this afternoon, President Bush flew to the USS Abraham Lincoln, an aircraft carrier that is on its return voyage home from the Persian Gulf. This is the first time a U. S. President has ever landed on an aircraft carrier while the carrier was at sea, and while the president was in office. The first President Bush flew the TBM Avengers off carriers during WWII, and I think he should have been on-board today. President Bush flew in a S-3B Viking, built by Lockheed. Tonight, he gave a speech saying that the major combat operations in Iraq are over. It will be a while before all the troops come home, but I am sure glad to hear this news, as are the military people and their families.



USS Abraham Lincoln in Alaska

A few months ago Hawks Abbott sent me some photos of the USS Abraham Lincoln in Alaska, and it seems appropriate to include one of them. Also, the ES-3A, an earlier version of the S-3B, was used as a replacement for the EA-3B like I flew on in Squadrons VQ-5 and VQ-6, sister squadrons to VQ-1.



ES-3A from Squadron VQ-6