

Opportunity Knocks Every Day - Answer It.

Jacksonville Naval Air Station 1962

*"No Problem Is Too Small To Baffle Us"*

*08-29-2016 by Harry Zirkelbach*

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In the first five years of the 1960's, Week End Warriors sailors from Denver and Albuquerque gathered monthly, Friday night, were flown to Dallas Naval Air Station, for a week-end Naval Air Reserve Training. Their Squadron VP-883. On Saturday and Sunday as Pilot and crew, they flew the Lockheed PV-3 anti-submarine twin-engine prop aircraft. Yearly, Squadron's performed a 14-day continuous training, usually summer months. Not in 1962; that was Oct 1-15th.

Peacetime Naval Air Reserve Training consisted in simulated exercises. United States remained at Peace following WWII. The only serious threat in our hemisphere, the Cuban Missile Crisis October 1962, coinciding with their Training, NAS Jacksonville. Florida.

About these men.

On the Dallas Airlift to and fro, plenty of bonding time for those on each three hour flight. At Dallas, sailors bonded as crew, developing trust beyond friendship. They were flying in a aged aircraft that forgive few errors. And, excepting Air Line Pilots, each flight refreshed not-too-recent active duty skill.

Trust developed so easily, remarkable.

Denver furnished the only Air Line Pilots, its crews tended Anglo. The Albuquerque gathering was equally divided between Anglo and Mexican heritage, plus American Indians. These men offered skill, levity, wit, spontaneousness at all times; in flight, at the Mess, Ground work, on liberty.

One imaginative ABQ sailor created the Squadron "Off-Limit" motto, "No problem is too small to baffle us." And they were cheerfully tireless Saturday night Training Flights, their only week-end hours available to sample Dallas night life. Each brought skill from their regular life. Wherever they were, abundant laughter, joy, bonding, learning, friendship.

The October 1962 fourteen day training.

This "Cruise" more than usual. Russia was suspected of landing Soviet Ballistic Missiles in Cuba, not that many miles south of Florida.

For United States this was unacceptable.



On arrival, without fanfare, the Navy assigned VP-883 surveillance flights into the Atlantic. The Classified object, detect Soviet merchant ships destined to Cuba with any cargo. VP-883 augmented active duty surveillance, long range Atlantic search, to detect, identify, track, photo, report suspicious ships. Flights launched daily.

At Jacksonville NAS routine training continued. One such P2V training flight struck an ubiquitous sea gull that circled the airfield. This shattered the upper window above the pilots' left seat. The crew returned; the window was replaced. But not before an artist crewman from Albuquerque had painted, outside fuselage below the pilot position, a smiling seagull, then added a slanted red stripe; that "kill", unique to the Training Command. It bought smiles; also hinted at the peril Navy Air Reservist faced as volunteers.

Their couple hour flight to get to station, searching another four hours, then return, tended to the tedious. But this was the real; training seldom offered Reservists. A genuine mission. VP-883 crews identified every ship encountered. It can be noted that one intercept was of a previously unknown Soviet ship destined to Cuba. These men, a small cog in the cat-and-mouse game the Kennedy Administration resolved peacefully after their cruise was complete, in a world of ambiguity, deceit, lust for power, doubt, intelligence, misunderstanding and probabilities.

The covert Soviet decision to place nuclear missiles on Cuba had begun July 7. 43,000 Soviet troops accompanied that summer buildup. On inquiry, Soviet officials denied everything. By September the first missiles launch sites were complete. A U-2 flight of 14 October disclosed the still secret Soviet deployment.

Further secret negotiations with Russia failing, President Kennedy addressed the nation on 22 October. Invasion plans and negotiations continued until October 28 1962. Then Russian President Khrushchev ordered all nuclear weapons be removed from Cuba, returned to Russia.

The Cuban Missile Crisis had one American casualty; U-2 pilot Major Anderson died when his plane was shot down over Cuba.

Yes, in these complexities, VP-883 had made no difference.

On return home these men proudly saw their time differently.  
Gave Thanks, Opportunity knocked, they stepped up;  
war had been averted.



In gatherings, or alone, these Airmen might recall their first Squadron 14 day continuous duty in Los Angeles; the skipper pushing them day and night to reach competency as crews. There too, on classified search missions, they flew day and night to locate, follow, annoy, Soviet submarines that were using the Pacific Ocean off Southern California as a training area to monitor the American fleet. Again

Reserve Training that was real, dropping sonar devices to listen and locate submarines, doggedly follow these ships, mimic attacks dropping "mock" weapons on the secretive Soviet. Day after day, great training in real time, not simulation, developing respect for shipmates of their crew.

Then obligated not to mention this classified duty to friend or family.

And those same days, the Democratic party gathered in downtown Los Angeles, pounded out the team that would become President Kennedy, Vice President Johnson, later, that cold, clear January 1961.

There was no magic lantern available to any, thankfully, where they could foresee that the forth Friday of November 1963 they would gather in Denver and Albuquerque, muster, fly to Dallas, on the eve of the very day President Kennedy had been shot and killed on those Dallas streets.

Again, training flights become unique, when the Nation mourns.

Then later, only one would be involved in a final fourteen day ACDUTRA as Navy Reservist, this at Quonset Point, Rhode Island, 2 to 14 June 1968. This would have been another of the routine days in any life, except for a moment, again one in Los Angeles, where of the earliest hours of June 6, fellow Navy man, Robert Kennedy, brother of the late President, was assassinated, died.

Senator Kennedy's body was taken to New York City where the funeral Mass was celebrated in Saint Patrick's Cathedral 8 June 1968. Later that day his body was taken by train from New York to Washington D.C., the that journey witnessed by thousands along its tracks, and millions on television. The 9:10 pm arrival did not delay burial near his brother at Arlington. That ceremony began at 10:45 pm.

Robert Kennedy, New York's junior Senator, remains the only night burial at Arlington National Cemetery. Equally noteworthy, only Bobby. of the two thousand who have served as United States Senator, remains the only one to have been assassinated, though that fate has fallen to four of the 44 Presidents, Abraham Lincoln, James Garfield William McKinley, and Bobby's brother, Jack. There are many blessings to military life. In years as Reservist, and today, I treasured many such moments.