

DENVER NAVY RESERVISTS IN KINETRA MOROCCO, AFRICA 1958

11-05-2013 By Harry Zirkelbach

Following WW II Buckley Air Field, east of Denver, Colorado, became Denver Naval Air Station. This continued until decommissioned in 1959, the land and facilities became Buckley Field again, this time under the Air Force Reserve.

During the 13 years as Denver Naval Air Station, monthly training was conducted for Fighter, Patrol, Transport, Ground Support Squadrons. In a typical year 1100 officers and enlisted personnel trained one week end each month, plus a 14 day continuous training, usually in summer.

In all those years only one Squadron completed the 14 day training overseas. This would be the Transport Squadron VR-713 in 1958, commanded by CDR John Reno, a United Air Line Training Officer in his civilian role.

Routine training was constantly conducted in Rate-specialty and aircraft coordination. Officer and enlisted Crewmen were former fleet personnel, with a scattering of newly enlisted Reservists with no fleet training, who began their education in the selected specialty from the first moment as Reservist. It was not uncommon to have these new personnel never to have flown anywhere, and occasionally never having been outside Colorado.

When it was learned that the 14 day training in 1958 would be to Port Lyuautey, Africa, a casual review disclosed that none of the Squadron had ever been to that continent. Guaranteed adventure in this "new" continent would begin 11 August 1958, include friends met because of joint Navy Reserve commitments.

The adventurous flight began when three C-54 aircraft left Denver early on 9 August. (The Cruise was augmented to 16 days by incorporating the drill week-end prior.) They would stop in Minneapolis, joining up with a Patrol Squadron from that Navy facility. Some of that Squadron's material would be carried on VR-713 aircraft. In addition a prize ram sheep, plus pen, water and food, handler, were passenger of one C-54. That Ram, a gift from that Reserve Squadron and the mayor of Minneapolis, given to the King of Morocco during that Cruise.

Loading completed, the crews flew to St John's Newfoundland, remaining there overnight. Canada, the first of a dozen countries visited by these Reservists in two weeks.

Early departure from Newfoundland headed south east into the Atlantic. Many of the Navy men had not seen a body of water where the opposite shore was not visible. This leg of their journey would end later that day in Lajes, the Azores. Early arrival there allowed modest visitation to this Portuguese Island whose terrain was not unlike the ruggedness of the Colorado Rockies.

Here too the hospitality and facility was a delight to these visitors.

+ + + +

VR-713 arrives in Africa 1958

The following morning, another early departure again headed southeast for the remaining leg of the journey to Port Lyuautey (Kinetra) Morocco. This city and U.S. Naval station and Air Base was a former French facility. The city lies northeast of Morocco's capital, Rabat, and famed Casablanca.

That days' early departure allowed a mid morning arrival in Africa, a welcoming by the host command, introduction of VR-713 to base facilities and personnel, to African and Moroccan customs and culture, for consideration on and off any U.S. Navy property.

The flight crews reorganized the daily flight schedules between Port Lyuautey and Izmir Turkey, and U.S. Navy facilities en route. Here too the hospitality and facility was a delight to these strangers.

Long range scheduling had proved premature, for President Eisenhower had reacted to tension in Lebanon far to the east of Morocco. Executive Orders placed US forces in the Mediterranean on an a 4 Hour Alert status. This lasted in varying degree from 15 July to 25 October 1958. VR-713 was unaffected. Their aircraft were assigned duties that would normally be completed routinely by the Mediterranean Fleet aircraft.

The military facility at Poet Lyuautey was fully secure. This was not the fact at the Izmir Turkey airfield. There VP-713 personnel were assigned to stand guard for transport aircraft, cargo and content that remaining overnight, preventing looting. This and other precautions enabled the two weeks to be flown like an established airline, completed without incident.. The crews averaging more than 85 hour flight

time in those 14 days (equivalent to the monthly max allowable flight time for commercial pilots state-side.)

Being creative, young, tireless, those who travelled these air routes, still found time to shop, buy trinkets, explore at most cities/facilities visited. Each visit treasured with lifetime memory building moments; a sharing with native, tourist and military personnel who became lifelong memories.

Buy with local currency a problem.? Meet the money exchangers, often no more than children possessing a cedar-chest full of monies from Mediterranean countries, making exchange for the tourist coin. And at fair exchange. It amazed that such a treasure box was in the possession of one so young, secure from local or foreign harassment.

And these wide-eyed Denver boys learned to haggle over prices at shops and bazaars. Never exchanged enough to become gifted, but making enough purchases to feel they had not been cheated everywhere. Purchases returned home had a story more valuable than the merchandise. VR-713 flight crews honed many skills those two weeks. At completion, the Med Navy Command wrote glowingly of assistance given by these Navy Reservists.

+ + + + +

Vr-713 Office Personnel Get to Tangiers, Gibraltar, Malaga Spain

For VR-713 Denver Reservists in Morocco Africa, 1958, there were no holidays. Toward the final days of the Cruise, Captain John Reno commended the Office personnel, suggesting they use their ingenuity, obtain a land journey to Gibraltar. There Squadron C-54 would pick them up on the last flight through the Med, on that Friday morning, return them to Port Lyuautey in time for final report preparation, farewell dinner, photos, and departure early that next morning.

Six accepted. A mountain of work was completed the 12th day of cruise. That eve they trekked to the local bus stop seeking an overnight bus ride to Tangiers, a 130 miles journey.

The six, now in civilian clothes, joined a sizable crowd of locals. Then when the bus arrived, only a few exited the full transport. The same number of locals were boarded. That leg of the Denverites journey was immediately broken.

A local Taxi was located Barter with the driver, a price set for the ride, one-way to Tangiers, six and driver. Over what would have been a marginally maintained dirt road in Colorado, the Taxi driver followed the path set by nomads for generation, northeast passing oasis after oasis to the port-city Tangiers.

It became apparent after dark that the taxi owner-driver had worked all the day. Keeping him awake that night became the obligation of whoever shared the front seat. That meant a difficult conversation with a man of limited English, his tendency to doze on any straight roadway. The salvation, none on that road travelled above 30 MPH. Outside that, the trip was unrewarding. Little on those miles was lighted. Then about one AM, they pass their intended bus, broken-down, passengers mingling to study of their immovable transport. The gods had blessed these Denver voyagers without their intercession.

At first light a safe arrival appears, downtown Tangiers. The city asleep at 05:00, whatever local time that was. One lighted inviting sign "Cafe" welcomed. Six coffees were ordered. Stares greeted their arrival. The cups were large thimble size. Communication indicated this was coffee, Tangiers. Talk about bitter, strong!! Only the two older men ordered refills. However all found the assortment of filled rolls for which French bakeries are famous.

The morning was devoted to sightseeing, souvenir purchasing, location of the Ferry to Morocco. Lack of sleep was not a concern. We would never return here.

Thus began two days of pointing to one another and "Do you see that!!". We were magically transfixed into tourist. Jaunty strut, know-it-all attitude yet humble, boys in a "make believe" land from their youth, intent on memorizing every scene.

The Ferry to Gibraltar proved their first challenge. The fare was reasonable, the space plentiful; but to become a passenger, identification had to be given to the management who would disappear with it for a time then return it.. The only IDs acceptable, Passport or Military Identification. No Passports had been obtained. The Navy's firm instruction, **Never** let you I.D. Card out of your possession. The senior officer in the group had never learned to walk on water, determined to dine that night to Gibraltar, took the responsibility for any violation of Navy Regs; Identity Cards were submitted, disappeared, then returned, and shortly all were boarded, left Africa for Europe, on the Mediterranean Sea, another memorable first.

That Friday was a beautiful day for sailing. Water flowed into Mediterranean from the Atlantic, a light breeze, a following sea, the few cotton ball clouds were high. Some of the six had never been to sea, enjoyed the motion as the ship made the journey. Passage, a blip on the world map, but a two hour journey on this ferry into the Sanctuary that is Gibraltar, that piece of England, that Spain then, and now, lusts for.

For the purpose of this Cruise the border between Gibraltar and its large neighbor, Spain, was open. Gibraltar is but a city and larger rock, once the point from which entry into and from the Mediterranean Sea could be controlled.

Daily through the open border to Spain men and women came to Gibraltar for employment, returning home that night. Shops with Spanish and English names and employees would not exist in the same fashion should the border be sealed, but that day would come later.

Arrangement was made for rental of a mini-bus with Spanish driver, to take the six Colorodans to Malaga Spain for the night.

But this day, first, shop the small confine of Gibraltar, visit the Rock fortress and the famed Barbary Masques (monkeys) who inhabit all of the Rock.

DNA reveals these Barbary Masques are not related to any of the monkeys who lived throughout Europe and Ireland; those died with the ice age. These masques have a lengthy history in Gibraltar, were here when the Moors conquered Spain in the 12th Century. They survived because they are friendly, excitable, opportunistic and confident, not unlike this six man expedition that viewed them that Friday afternoon, not all that long ago in geological time.

Two of the Sailors visiting a Spanish Tailor were measured for a English tweed suit, vest and two pair of pants, placed an order, arranged for delivery via mail to America when complete. A first for both! Buy something, pay for the unseen product. To be delivered to a continent unknown when the Masques were reported to run through the streets of Gibraltar before the Moors' arrival.

There were other stores to invade, items to buy not seen in Denver.
Another day for the adventurers from Kinetra, far off Morocco.

Time to enter Spain. But before, Witness the End-of-Day Border ceremonies;

first the British, spotless in uniform, troop twelve strong march to the border, ceremonially lower the Union Jack to piped Regimental music. That completed, there appears a ragged troop from the Spanish side. Almost indifferently, then take down the Spanish flag, return to their barrack completely indifferent to the visiting Colorodans.

That moment indelibly in their mind, they approach the border, submit identification, the barricade removed, their Spanish driver takes them into Spain. Now with no concern for auto safety, travel the paved roadway that hugs the Mediterranean southern Spanish coast, northeast, then east the 85 miles to Malaga, also on the Med. Malaga, famed ah home for the greatest Bull Fighters - Hemingway wrote, "there are no great Bull fighters born north of Malaga."

Bullfighters, and their quarry would not be the quest this night. Instead it would be the chosen restaurant, its finest Spanish meal, and the fantastic, flamingo dancers. Ah, the majesty of thumping feet in high heels, the swirling skirts surrounding slim hips, the castanets and the tempo instilled, continuing piece after piece, customer drink after drink. Each of the six returned to their room separately, exhausted, having been without sleep two days.

The next morning each searched the back streets of Malaga for more trinkets to charm folk at home. One began with 06:00 Mass at the Cathedral, then shopping its adjoining craft stores. The 09:00 agreed gathering was subdued compared with the nervous hilarity of yesterdays introduction to this souther strip of Spain.

Even crossing the border into this strip of England was uneventful, the six in a quiet mood, knowing that at noon they would be flying the short hop to Port Lyuautey and the rigors of preparing last reports, packing for an early morning flight back home, refueling at some of the same airfields. That made the remainder of this day a blur of laughs, fun, party, departure preparation.

Final Days in Kenetra, Morocco, Africa for the 1958 Cruise
Navy Reserve Patrol Squadron VP-713.

And the Go-Away party, courtesy of the Navy Mess and Bar at Port Lyuautey. The liquors all seemed extremely reasonable. Shot of the best Scotch or Liqueur, fifteen cents. Mixed drink with any soda or the like, add fifteen cents. Such moments encouraged the hard stuff.

Photo Personnel

Top Row Frank Young, *Jim (?), *Doug Smith, Ayd Spanyard, Jim Sidwell,
(Doc) Dick Leander, Don Madole.
Center Dick Eaton, Marv, Solberg, Paul Rayburn. #John King, #Unknown.
Front. Harry Zirkelbach, Curt Spencer, *Ted Hallack (Command NAS Denver),
John Reno (Squadron Commander), Al Butler (Executive Officer),
Jack Ver Lee
Front, Paul Houston, J.P. Morgan.

*Station Keepers from NAS Denver.
Intelligence Officers from NAS Denver Reserve.

+ + + + +

The Commander chose to land Stateside at the Niagara Falls Naval Reserve Air Station, for a Custom Inspection, warm meal, refueling and the final leg to Denver Naval Air Station. Flight time to Niagara Falls was given to listing articles bought, description, origin, cost/value, all in duplicate. Only on arrival was it learned that these documents were for Inspectors to file, no thought for completeness, accuracy or truth. The Inspection was completed with a pat on the back, well wishes, and their hope to visit wonderland Denver sometime soon.

Denver was a delightful sight for these sojourners. All had visited two continents, seen more cities than they would remember. Had worked continually 16 days, bonded with buddies and the Navy, found this home city to be very clean, and handsome in early fall colors. And those with families were a bit amazed at how little had changed in wife, children, relatives, and those they would work with Monday morning. To some, they had not been missed, had negligent interest in a journey that one century earlier few had ever contemplated, much less done. Really appreciated was hearing "Welcome Home" from those who had been aware of a journey that no Reservist from Denver had accomplished, and as it developed, would ever consider, for in a few months, word from the Navy Department disclosed that Denver Naval Air Station was being decommissioned in March 1959.

It was after the last drink that John Reno arranged the Squadron photo. There are no blood-shot eyes in the back and white photo, but some do have a rather silly smile of contentment.

