Tom’s Navy Anthology

A candid summary of my experiences in the U.S. Navy from March, 1959 to March, 1963. Tom Fisher

In the Beginning

It was early 1959 and deep into winter as I neared my 21st birthday. I was in my sixth semester at Purdue University but without purpose or much sense of direction. The military draft was on and I knew that if I simply quit school and did nothing, it would be only a short while and I would be drafted into the Army. I decided to go have a "look - see" at the Air Force recruiting office in downtown Lafayette, Indiana. The recruiter was gone to lunch. So, I walked down the street to the Navy recruiting office. (This is no bull!)

The Navy recruiter was a nice enough guy – but he kept insisting that I would have to go to the Great Lakes training center near Chicago (he wasn’t moved by my saying that I hated cold weather). I had insisted that I go to basic training in San Diego. We bantered with each other a bit and it looked to me like he wasn’t going to budge – so I said, “Thanks, but, no thanks,” and headed for the door. As I was reaching for the door handle, his voice boomed behind me, “Hey, fellow, if I fix it up so you can go to San Diego, will you sign the papers?” I turned around with a grin and said, “Show me where to sign!” The rest was history – I signed up for four years. **

March 1959: Was sworn in at Indianapolis and soon found myself on a big plane to San Diego, California and the recruit training center (a.k.a.: boot camp).

Boot camp was a lot like you see in movies - lots of drill instructors exerting their authority while showing us how to do it “the Navy way!” Early on in boot camp, we spent a day taking a comprehensive written test battery which then became the basis for further training and assignment. I did real well and was actually identified as a prospect for NAVCAD training - this was the Navy fighter pilot training program at Pensacola, Florida and completion of that would carry with it an officer’s commission.

Boot camp really was a bunch of “Mickey Mouse” (necessary, to be sure but, nevertheless, a tribulation to be endured!) and the prospect of getting into this NAVCAD program was very appealing. I passed all the preliminary aptitude and oral screenings and only had a thorough physical exam left to complete. The physical covered several different days as I had to be seen by separate specialists. Everything went fine – and the eye exam was the last thing on the agenda. “Look out, Pensacola – here I come!” – or so I thought. Alas, the look on the ophthalmologist's face said it all. He said, “Son, you have a very slight astigmatism. It’s not bad and you may never actually have to wear corrective lenses. However,

the rules I have to go by are very strict and we only take the cream of the crop. Sorry."

Man, that was a blow. I left that office with tears streaming down my face and a lump in my throat.

The saving grace, however, was that I had done so well on my basic test battery that I literally had my choice of any "A" school the Navy had to offer. Fortunately, my career choice interview was with a seasoned chief who was pretty savvy. He asked what specialty I wanted to be in and I said, "Guided Missiles." He looked at me and said, "Do you really plan on making a career of the Navy? Because, if you do, fine. But if you get out in four years, you might have trouble finding a job as a guided missile technician." (You must understand that this was long before NASA and the space program. Guided missiles were still thought of as "weird science.") He then suggested that I go into Aviation Electronics – which meant going to school for nine months at Millington, Tennessee (near Memphis). That sounded good to me and I signed up.

June 1959: The training in Tennessee was actually very thorough. We were told that it was costing the U.S. taxpayers about $10,000 for each of us to attend the Aviation Electronics School. The first 6 months was basic stuff – and then we each went into a separate specialty that, in my case, was Radar. Memphis was a good liberty town and, of course, Elvis Presley was cranking toward the big time – and while I do remember going by Graceland, I never managed to actually see him. After passing the final exams, our first real duty assignments were posted – mine said I was to report to AIRASRON 31 at Quonset Point, Rhode Island.

The Fleet

March 1960: VS-31 (as it was more affectionately known) was one of several anti-submarine squadrons. We flew the Grumman S2-F which was a straight wing aircraft that was specifically designed to fly slow with good maneuverability in close quarters and at low altitudes. It was powered by two big Pratt & Whitney engines, one on either wing. The rear of the plane was full of state of the art electronics equipment for locating , detecting and identifying submarines. The wings folded and it had a tail hook – which meant we operated off a carrier – in this case, the USS Wasp (CVS-18). Here is the insignia and here is a photo which shows some (but not all) of our squadron as it was in the early 60's. I'm on the right end of the top row (scroll over to the extreme right for a complete listing of all the names).

(Note: Here is a link to the present day VS-31 squadron - which is much different than when I was there. The squadron now flys the S3-B Viking and operates out of NAS Cecil Field, Florida. When they deploy to sea, they usually go aboard the USS JFK (CV-67) or the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower (CVN-69)).

The Wasp was home ported at Boston, Massachusetts and was actually in dry dock undergoing three more months of refurbishing at the time I checked into my squadron. That being the case, the squadron operated out of Quonset Point until the ship sailed. Squadron activity was minimal during this time and I along with two other new guys was temporarily assigned for three months duty at the base commissary store. There, I was assigned to the meat department where I learned to cut up and package chilled chicken. When that was done, I sliced cold cuts and ham. In view of the electronics training, I really felt degraded by this assignment. I remember writing my mom and dad and asking them to complain to our congressman. Fat lot of good that did! I gained about 20 pounds while on that assignment.

June 1960: The Wasp finally was ready and it was announced that she would make a shake down cruise and have gunnery practice at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. I rejoined my squadron and we were all herded onto busses for Boston. I will never forget my first look at the Wasp as she sat at the berthing space in the Boston harbor. I had never seen anything that big in my life! And after I was aboard for a while, I actually got lost. That's when I learned that all you have to do is go up – eventually, you'll come out somewhere.

On the way to "Gitmo," we stopped at Norfolk for two days to load up ammunition for the gunnery practice. We noticed that the berthing space opposite us was empty but never gave it much thought. The next morning, there was a buzz quickly going around. Guys were saying, "Wait til you see what pulled in opposite us during the night."

I got dressed and, along with a couple of buddies, we made our way to the flight deck to get a better view. When we walked out from behind the island structure to see what was next door, we nearly fell over backwards with awe. There sat the carrier USS Enterprise (CVN-65) – and we later found out that it was exactly twice as big (in terms of displacement) as the Wasp. I still get goose bumps thinking about that ship – and marveling that such a hunk of metal can actually float! They say that Jack Nicklaus tried to drive a golf ball from one end of the flight deck to the other – and came up short. Nicklaus was known as a 300 yard plus driver – if that tells you something!

We left Norfolk, got out into the Gulf Stream and headed south for Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The Gulf Stream is a huge north bound band of warm water that skirts the east coast of the U.S. and eventually goes all the way to Europe. This warm current is actually responsible for the mild weather conditions found in the United Kingdom. Over the next three years, I grew to love the Gulf Stream and I really think I could still identify it simply by the smell and feel of the air. Many a night I would go up on one of the open decks and just watch the stars. There were no city lights to pollute the sky and I think that's where my interest in astronomy started.

The Caribbean is simply awesome! There is simply no other way to say it. The water is a deep purple and it almost mezmerizes you. And those stories you hear about dolphins riding the bow waves of big ships are true! I just loved watching the dolphins cavort about and, occasionally, we'd see flying fish. (They don't actually fly – instead they just jump several yards.) Guantanamo Bay is really an interesting place. Of course, ever since Castro took over, the Naval Air Station, which occupies the entire southern tip of Cuba, is isolated and surrounded by a chain link fence topped with barbed wire. Several Cubans work on non-military jobs at the Naval Air Station and I think they and their families have some kind of exemption and were probably "grand fathered" there when the revolution started. I talked with several of them on different occasions at the EM club and found most of them to be quite conversant and engaging in light chit chat. I always did regret that we were never allowed access to the main part of Cuba.

Darkest Africa

The ship's crew did their gunnery practices during the next few days which was really kind of boring for us airdales as we didn't really have a lot to do during these exercises. However, after a few days of this, something very unusual happened. It was mid 1960 and a rebellion was brewing in Leopoldville in the Belgian Congo (it is now known as Kinshasa in Zaire), Africa. There were several missionaries and American Nationals in Leopoldville and our State Department became concerned for their safety. So, an unprecedented decision was made – the Wasp would go, unescorted, on a mission of mercy to the vicinity of the mouth of the Congo river. From there, our planes would fly 200 miles inland (over uncharted territory!) to Leopoldville and evacuate the endangered missionaries and nationals. Since this would not necessitate all our squadron personnel, only certain qualified volunteers would be necessary. Those who did not wish to go with the ship would be flown back to Quonset Point.

It's funny how you view things when you're young and "full of vinegar." I remember thinking this might be exciting and the chance of a lifetime. I think it took me all of two minutes to make up my mind and volunteer. Besides, I had recently been promoted from the line crew to the electronics shop (Finally - now the taxpayers investment was paying off!). I also had been tagged for aircrew status and I was really wanting to score some brownie points and show my stuff!

So, off we went for Africa. I think it took us about a week to get there. Along the way, we did pause at the equator to have the traditional initiation ceremony for those who were making their first crossing. Those who have never crossed the equator are known as "pollywogs." The initiation ceremony consists of having the old timers put the pollywogs through a series of humiliating (but all in fun) paces such as crawling through garbage while being sprayed with hoses. Neptune (played by the ship's Captain), of course, oversees all of this – and when these fun and games are all over, the pollywogs are then declared trusted "shellbacks" and are accorded honors along with a certification card.

We took our jobs quite seriously as we planned for the mission that lay ahead of us. Each day we had briefings and training sessions in the squadron ready room. Our planes weren't really designed for hauling passengers so we had to do some improvising. As I recall, we took out some equipment from each plane so that we could squeeze another person in. The idea was that we would take off from the carrier, fly to Leopoldville, pick up two or three people in each plane, and fly back to the carrier. The territory that we would be flying over really was uncharted so we had to be indoctrinated about the flora and fauna that we might encounter in the event of a forced or emergency landing. Again, this was very serious – you could feel the tension in the air.

We actually did get to within sight of the mouth of the Congo river. But, instead of proceeding with the original plan, the powers on high decided that the U.S. Air Force could more expeditiously do the evacuation mission from a land based staging area, the location of which we were never told. However, since we had come all that way, the Wasp was directed to go north to Accra which is in Ghana and once was part of the "British Gold Coast." Once there, we were to transfer most of our supply of aviation gasoline into a pipeline which the U.S. Air Force had access to. So, this is what we did.

Having done that, it was then decided that we should proceed on north and have a few days liberty in Dakar which was the capital of French West Africa (now known as Senegal). Now, Dakar is way off the beaten path for most ships of the U.S. Navy. It was only because of our unusual circumstances that we near there when it was time for liberty. And since it had been a long time since a U.S. Navy ship had docked there, they literally rolled out the red carpet for us (which is a short way of saying, "Come on down – and bring your money!"). Dakar was a neat place and there were lots of street vendors selling their wares. It soon became lots of fun to haggle with these guys over the price of their stuff. I have two ebony statues – busts of a native man and a woman – that I treasure to this day. After a few days in this fine port, we pulled out and headed for home.

The Nature of the Beast

You may be wondering by now what I actually did on my work assignment in the Navy. Well, as I said earlier, my specialty in school had been radar. However, when I was first brought into the squadron electronics shop, the section chief told me they really didn't need any radar technicians. Instead, he asked if I would be willing to learn how to troubleshoot and maintain the ASW gear. ASW literally means Anti-Submarine Warfare - and this meant all the equipment used for detecting and identifying submarines. This typically included the MAD (magnetic anomaly detection gear), Julie gear (sonar buoys and explosive echo location equipment), the ECM (electronic counter measures equipment), the Sniffer (a piece of equipment capable of detecting traces of combusted diesel fuel in the air that would be left by a snorkeling submarine), and Jezebel gear which was a new system that could actually analyze and identify the direction, distance and signature of a ship's propeller noise

and tell us exactly what ship (and whose) it was. The inner workings of the Jezebel system was so secret that a "Secret" security clearance was required simply to operate the equipment. A "Top Secret" security clearance was required to be able to actually open up any of the Jezebel black boxes to troubleshoot and/or fix a problem. At any rate, I agreed to learn the ASW gear and actually got to attend a few supplemental "short course" schools. Then, as an air crewman, I operated all of that equipment plus the radar. An S2-F (or S2- D) crew consists of a pilot, copilot, and two electronics crew men.

For practice and training, we would typically fly out to a predetermined point and rendezvous with one of our submarines. Our plane commander and the submarine captain would contact each other by radio. The two of them would decide on the rules of the exercise. Typically, the plane would fly out of the area and agree to be gone for, say, 15 minutes. In the meantime, the sub would go hide somewhere – it really was just a game of "hide and seek." I can't go into all the details as some of this is still classified. But, once we located the sub and confirmed his position, we would mark the spot with a smoke pot and drop a couple of PDC's (practice depth charges). This would be the attack signal and would indicate to the submerged sub that he had been killed and that it was okay to surface.

Taking off and landing on a carrier is quite interesting – and at night, it sometimes REALLY gets wild. On takeoff, the plane is hooked to a steam powered catapult via a special harness attachment on the bottom of the plane. Once loaded, the launch officer signals the pilot to go to full throttle with his engines. However, the plane doesn't go anywhere as it is held in place at the rear by a special link to the flight deck. This link is made of a special metal alloy that has a very critical tensile strength. The pressure from the propellers at full throttle alone is not sufficient to pull the link apart. At this point, the launch officer bends down and points his arm and finger signaling the take off position. The catapult is then released and the combined pressure of the catapult and engines at full throttle overcomes the tensile strength of the link at the rear of the plane – the link pulls apart - and away you go! In about 2 seconds, you have gone about an eighth of a mile and you are airborne. It's better than any E-ticket ride at Disney Land!

Landing on a carrier is a real treat – especially the first time. When the plane is far out of the landing pattern, the pilot is under the control of a radar flight controller on the ship who is in constant radio contact with the pilot. Then as the plane gets into the landing pattern and approaches the rear of the ship, the pilot starts looking for the "meatball." There is a proper glide slope that the pilot aims for and tries to keep his plane lined up on. This is accomplished with the aid of a Fresnel light system. If the plane is on the proper slope and heading, the pilot will see a big orange ball (just left of and about half way down the landing strip in the picture). This is affectionately know as the "meatball." The LSO (Landing Signal Officer) stands off to the side of the flight deck holding paddles in each hand – he is also in radio contact with the pilot. There are four arresting wires that stick up about a foot from the surface of the flight deck. The ends of all these wires are wound on inertia

reels. As wire is played out, the tension on the cable is gradually increased. Consequently, when a plane's tail hook grabs one of the wires, the plane is gradually (but quickly) brought to a stop. Then, and only then, does the LSO signal the pilot to pull his throttles back from the full "on" position. "Why is that?" you might ask.

Well, once in about every 50 landings, a peculiar thing happens - that is, the tail hook bounces and skips between each of the four wires – this is called a "bolter." When that happens, and since the engines are already at full throttle, the pilot simply takes off and gets back into the landing pattern to try it all over again. And now you know the reason for the angle deck! In the days before the angle decks, it wasn't possible to do this – because the plane would invariably run into the planes parked on the front half of the flight deck. In those days, there was a barricade (or net) that a plane would run into if it missed the arresting wires.

It's easy for me to talk about all this now. There was a time when I didn't know a thing about a bolter – and that was just before my first carrier take off and landing. The take off was neat but uneventful. The landing was something else, however. Remember – I didn't know what a bolter was, then! And, you guessed it – that's exactly what happened on our first landing attempt. The rest of the crew, of course, knew that this was my first time up from the carrier. I was all braced for the landing and was waiting for the big "quick stop." Instead, we kept going and then I saw we were going past the end of the angle deck. Lt. Markham (the pilot) hollered out over the intercom, "Hold your nose, Fisher – we're going in!" Well, I nearly had a heart attack on the spot. Then I glanced at my fellow crewman who was sitting across the isle from me. I could immediately tell from the grin on his face that something was up and that I was probably getting my chain jerked real good. Of course, we had just experienced a bolter and it really was not a problem. But what an initiation – and on my very first flight!

Med Cruise

Sept 1960: The Wasp goes on a Med cruise. The trip across the Atlantic was uneventful. As we went through the Straits of Gibraltar, there were those dolphins riding the bow wave and acting as our personal escort. Our first port of call was Barcelona, Spain. In all the Mediterranean ports, we actually had to drop anchor well away from the shore line and then go ashore via a small liberty launch. Barcelona turned out to be probably my favorite of all the Mediterranean ports. The city is laid out well with lots of streets radiating out like spokes on a wheel. And there are lots of neat plazas with fountains. Many of the downtown streets are boulevards with nice shade trees running down the center divider. As you pull into the Barcelona area from the Mediterranean, there is a distinct spicy aroma in the air. I really think I could return to Barcelona blindfolded and identify it simply by that smell.

One of the neat things that always happened when we pulled into a Mediterranean port was that the ship's supply officer would send out a procurement party to

immediately provision us with fresh milk and bread. The bread, of course, would be whatever the bakers of that particular region produced – and there always were some variations and interesting differences.

Next was Cannes, France. This was nice but a little pricey. This was when Brigitte Bardot was in her prime and I think she had a private villa near here (or perhaps next door at St. Tropez). But of course, I never saw her. The marina at Cannes was neat and full of nice expensive looking sloops and motor boats. Had a distinct James Bond look and feel about it.

Then came the Italian ports of San Remo, LaSpezia, and Genoa. I honestly don't remember a lot about San Remo except that it is very picturesque and clean. And there have been some world chess matches there. LaSpezia is also one I don't remember much about, except that it is a jumping off place for seeing the Leaning Tower of Pisa (which I did not choose to do – sort of regret that!). What I remember well about Genoa is really forgetful – it was one of the filthiest and dirtiest places I've ever seen. In all fairness, it was a beastly hot day when I was there and maybe that influenced my recollection. I remember being in a fish market and seeing scores of smelly fish covered with flies – and, of course, no ice or refrigeration. I was glad to get back to the ship and take a shower after seeing Genoa.

(Note: We also participated in task group exercises and dropped anchor at Augusta Bay, Sicily and Aranci Bay, Sardinia. But, these were just short stops for shipboard meetings between the ranking Admiral and ship captains. Because we didn't actually go ashore at either of these two places, I make mention of them simply to acknowledge that we were in the vicinity.)

Finally, as we were departing the Mediterranean, we stopped at Gibraltar. This was not on our original agenda and it turned out to be a pleasant surprise. Gibraltar is small and very hilly offering many spectacular views of the Mediterranean. There are lots and lots of small boutique and accessory shops. And, yes, there really are Barbary Apes – a species of tailless monkeys called Barbary Macaques.

More Gitmo, New Outfits, and I see the President

Dec. 1960: We go back to Guantanamo Bay for more gunnery drills. Only, this time, on the way back, we made a side trip to St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands. We had actually been scheduled to stop and visit the Dominican Republic but, due to some sort of civil disorder that had broken out days before, it was deemed prudent that we alter our plans. St. Thomas was a real jewel of a place. I think we spent a total of four days there which meant that each one of us got to spend two days ashore. Typically, when a carrier pulls into a foreign port, half of the crew is required to stay aboard at all times – this a precautionary measure in the event of some unforeseen emergency. I spent lots of time on the various beaches and one of my favorite spots was a place called Megan's Bay. I got a beautiful tan which I sported unabashedly while on leave after we got back to Quonset Point.

Fall 1961: I was transferred to a newly commissioned anti-submarine squadron at Quonset Point, VS- 42. The original squadron consisted of one officer (a commander) and a handful of enlisted men. We were initially given one plane and hangar space at the naval air station. We were not originally assigned to any particular aircraft carrier.

The captain (we called him that even though he was really a commander) spent the first few weeks going over all our records and familiarizing himself. I had just recently been promoted to 2nd class petty officer. One day, the captain called me into his office and we had a long chat. The upshot was that he offered me the assignment of leaving the electronics shop and running our operations department until such time as we had an officer to be in charge, at which time I would stay on and oversee all the day to day administrative and clerical duties. He especially wanted me to evaluate the overall capabilities of each particular enlisted air crew personnel and assign training flights as I deemed necessary. In those early days, the captain would sometimes pick one of us enlisted men to fly in the co- pilot's seat as an observer just so he (the captain) could get his minimum flight time in. One day when I was flying with the captain, I spotted a submerged submarine that was snorkeling with only its periscope sticking out of the water. The captain was impressed and from then on he always called me, "Hawkeye!"

As time went by we gradually picked up more officers, enlisted men and airplanes. One of the neat things I remember about VS-42 was that we had a contest to design a squadron insignia. The one adopted (I forget who submitted it) was a design with the slogan, "E Navi Ad Astra," which translated to, "From the Sea to the Stars." Here is the winning entry. In spite of all the posturing and training, however, we never did get assigned to an aircraft carrier. I got married in the fall of 1961 and my wife, Lillie, and I set up residence in nearby Wickford, Rhode Island. Finally, after several months of operations, the powers that be decided that our squadron really wasn't necessary after all. Just as quickly as we had been commissioned, we were now de-commissioned and all the men and equipment were parceled out to different places in the fleet. I was sent to VS-34, yet another anti-submarine squadron at Quonset Point. VS-34 was attached to the carrier USS Essex (CVS-9) which was home ported right there at Quonset Point. In VS-34, I was immediately assigned to the operations department – I guess they liked what they saw in my recent background at VS-42.

It was now the summer of '62 and I had the duty desk watch at our hangar one Saturday morning. The phone rang and it was our C.O. He said he had just received a phone call from the NAS duty operations officer. President Kennedy, Jackie and their two children were soon going to be arriving at Quonset Point on Air Force One and transferring to a waiting helicopter. Their ultimate destination was Hyannis Port, Massachusetts which wasn't far away. That is where the Kennedy family compound was and JFK frequently took his family there for weekend retreats - especially in the summer and fall.

A detail of men was needed to transfer baggage from Air Force One to the waiting helicopter - that's where I came in. Our C.O. then authorized me to leave someone else in charge at our hangar and for me to report immediately to the NAS Operations Office where I would be in charge of the President's baggage detail. I did so and found a crew of about 10 men waiting for me.

Air Force One was right on time - only it blew a tire upon landing. The secret service guys aboard the plane, of course, were obliged to check everything out to ensure that it hadn't been a sniper's bullet that caused the blowout. The newspapers at the time tried to make a big deal of this but, in reality, it was quickly determined that no foul play was involved and I was given the go ahead to proceed with my crew to move the baggage. There was one secret service guy, however, who I will never forget. The whole blown tire episode must have unnerved him greatly because he was as fidgety as a mouse in a room full of cats. Ha, I think if someone would have popped an empty popcorn sack, he'd of had a heart attack on the spot.

It didn't take long to move the bags. And of course, we were less than 10 feet away as the President, Jackie, Caroline and little John (who was being carried by a secret service agent) went walking by to the waiting helicopter. JFK wasn't wearing a hat and his hair blew about in tassels just like I'd seen in pictures. And Jackie looked just as trim and demure as she did in her photos of the day.

That was in 1962. You can imagine my thoughts over a year later on that fateful day in November when the news came in from Dallas. That wind blown look is the way I will always remember JFK.

F4-Phantom

The F4-Phantom jet fighter was one of my favorite planes. It's because I was "real close" to a couple of them once - I'll explain:

(But first, a bit of necessary background information for those who may not be familiar with the plane. The F4-Phantom was manufactured by McDonnell-Douglas for the US Navy and was first flown in May 1958. It quickly established itself as an all weather tactical "mean machine" and it became part of the USAF inventory in 1962. The Phantom was a fighter plane with two jet engines and, in its air-to-air interdiction mode, was usually configured with air-to-air missiles and 20mm cannon pods in various combinations. Its wings were swept back but its "signature" identifier for which it became famous (and feared) were the horizontal stabilizers which pointed down in an inverted "V" fashion. The Phantom later became one of the "work horses" of the war in Vietnam.)

One day, we were on a single plane mission out of Quonset Point. We had flown to a designated spot about 70 miles out over the Atlantic ocean, had rendezvoused with a US submarine and had completed a training exercise.

The coastal borders of the United States are surrounded by an imaginary line several miles offshore called the ADIZ. This stands for Air Defense Identification Zone. The United States Air Force has the responsibility for monitoring all incoming aircraft (both civilian and military) that cross this line. Now, the idea is, if you are flying a plane and you know you are going to cross this line (referred to in military parlance as "penetrating the ADIZ"), you have to contact the nearest US Air Force Base by radio and request permission to do so. The Air Force is, of course, monitoring everything by radar and they already see you (as a blip on their radar screen) and, having now heard your radio request, they will readily give you the necessary permission. It's when they see a blip and receive no corresponding radio contact that they get nervous. They are then obligated to send out interceptor aircraft to investigate.

Well now, back to our training mission. We had completed our exercise and were inbound about 10 miles offshore. It had been a good mission and we were all pretty "loosey goosey" as we each talked about what we were going to do that night. When, all at once and out of nowhere, there were two USAF F4-Phantoms out in front of us - one on either side - rocking their wings - missiles in full view. This is the universal signal which roughly translates to, "Identify yourself on the universal radio frequency immediately or we will shoot you out of the sky!" Our plane commander immediately realized that he had forgotten to radio to Otis Air Force Base and request permission to "penetrate the ADIZ". Of course, he immediately switched on his radio and told the Phantoms who we were (ha, as if they didn't already know...;-). Boy, was he embarrassed! And, boy, did I become an instant believer in learning the importance of how to correctly play the military version of "Simon says.....". What an awesome sight! They were close enough that we could smell their jet exhaust fumes which is that burning "kerosene smell" (which is exactly what jet fuel is - kerosene - bet some of you didn't know that!).

And that is how I know what an F4-Phantom looks like - up close and personal!!

VS-34 & Cuban Missile Blockade

Late in the fall of 1962, we made a cruise to Guantanamo Bay. We had just dropped anchor in the bay and I was actually ashore at an EM club in the first liberty section. One of the guys in my party looked out and saw smoke coming from the exhaust stack of the Essex and remarked, “Wow – something must be up!” And just a minute or so later, an SP (Shore Patrol) came over to our table and looked at our shoulder markers which told what ship we were assigned to. When he saw we were all from the Essex, he said, “Okay you guys, put your drinks down and high tail it back to your ship. Your orders have been changed and you’ll be pulling out in less than a half hour!”

This was a first for most of us. When we got back aboard, all we could tell was that there seemed to be a lot of tension and different people kept checking to see if everyone who was supposed to be there was back. And, just as the SP had said, in

less that a half hour, we pulled anchor and headed out. No one in our outfit could find out anything about what was up. For the better part of the next 24 hours we were all in the dark as to what was going on. Finally, the captain of the ship came on the intercom and told us that President Kennedy had just ordered a blockade of the entire island of Cuba and that we were en route to our assigned station. It wasn't until much later (after we got back to the states, actually) that we found out the full scope and extent of the Soviet missile buildup, etc.

We immediately started flying our planes around the clock and searched for Soviet submarines. These were heady times. Our squadron actually did detect one and we tracked it for some time. It turned out to be an older diesel type and, eventually, he had to come up to recharge his batteries. The Soviet sub commander was photographed by one of our planes. He was standing on the conning tower shaking his fist at us. Ha, this was, of course, considered to be a great moral victory for our squadron.

After the blockade, we stayed in the Caribbean area for a month or so – I presume as a precaution. It was the only time I ever missed the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays at home or with my family. Not much else happened from then until my time was up. In the back pages of newspapers there were occasional references about political unrest in a funny sounding place called Vietnam - but we didn't pay it much attention at the time. In early March of 1963, without too much of a backward glance, I said my goodbyes and headed for home in Indiana.

****(Several readers have expressed concern over my having dropped out of college. For the record, I returned to Purdue after my Navy tour and received a B.S. degree in 1966.)**

Addendum: This story is also on file at the Library of Congress American Folklife Center Reading Room. Ask for Collection AFC/2001/001/37699. Here is a reference link: http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cocoon/vhp/bib/37699/