Memories of WW II Training

By Captain Matt Portz, USNR (Ret.)

The following is extracted from Sagi Maru, Stearman, Too, a memoir (not yet published) by Captain Matt Portz, USNR(Ret.).

This account focuses on his days instructing at NAS Livermore, Calif. (now the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory), and NAS Bunker Hill, Ind. (Now Grissom AFB). He was a lieutenant then.

Protocol demanded that new NAS Livermore instructors report to the executive officer, Lieutenant Commander George Walker. This I did in early December 1943. Walker brushed aside pleasantries with, "Do you know how to guard a control stick so your student won't kill you?"

He directed me to sit in the chair beside his desk.

As I searched for an answer to his question, the exec reached behind his desk and brought out an old sword. He got up, weapon in hand, walked to where I sat and plunked the sword — fortunately sheathed — into a vertical position between my knees.

"Now," said Walker, "think of this sword as a control stick. Show me how you would guard it so your student couldn't kill you."

I tentatively put my hands on my knees and eyed the 'control stick.'

"No, no, that's not good enough," Walker protested. "Put your right hand loosely around the base of the stick where you can grab it if you have to. Too many people are getting killed because they're not quick enough."

Walker then let me speak.

"Yes, sir, I see what you mean," I responded weakly. With that, I was dismissed with a curt, "And don't you forget it."

One didn't have to guard the stick the exec's way. On the other hand, an instructor could never relax in the air. A student never got me into trouble, but that wasn't always the case.

Lieutenant Jack Stackpool, a senior instructor, and his cadet spun in while slipping to a landing. They slammed into the ground upside down but happily survived with injuries. The disaster happened because Stackpool was demonstrating his confidence in the student by hanging both elbows over the cockpit during the approach to a planned touchdown within a circle.

The cadet, concentrating on the slip and approach, spotted another Stearman N2S turning toward a second circle on the same field. The field was designed for simultaneous landings into two circles approached respectively from left and right. Confused by the other plane, the student jerked back on the stick. Already near stall and slipping with top rudder held in, the Stearman whipped onto its back and crunched.

Livermore was completed in the fall of 1942 and in the next two years more than 4,000 cadets took primary training there. The station's 225 planes flew from a rectangular 3,000-by-2,700-foot blacktop mat. There were no conventional runways. Some 225 officers and 1,700 enlisted personnel manned the base. Captain Carleton Champion, Jr., was skipper.

Close to San Francisco and with a benign climate, Livermore was something of a Camelot. Lieutenant Junior Grade Joe Stein, an instructor long on words and with a touch more dedication then most, voiced his feeling. "The concentrated work schedule, the discipline of a 10-hour day, 10 days work then two days off, plus a three-hour stint of night flying about once every three weeks enables me to hone my proficiency. One month I worked 89 flights, over 130 flying hours, and about twice that much time in ground work with my students."

Like Stein, I felt that this was a place where each person was a part of a well orchestrated effort. People played their roles well, and they knew it. Livermore's production of pilots and the safety record were the best in the primary command. Instructors flew two to five 1.5-hour sessions daily. I averaged more than 80 tough instructing hours in the air each month, a more normal rate than Stein's, Many hours teaching on the ground went unrecorded.

Cadet lives were ordered by demanding rules.

"Cadets are to form details and return to barracks following noon chow," was one.

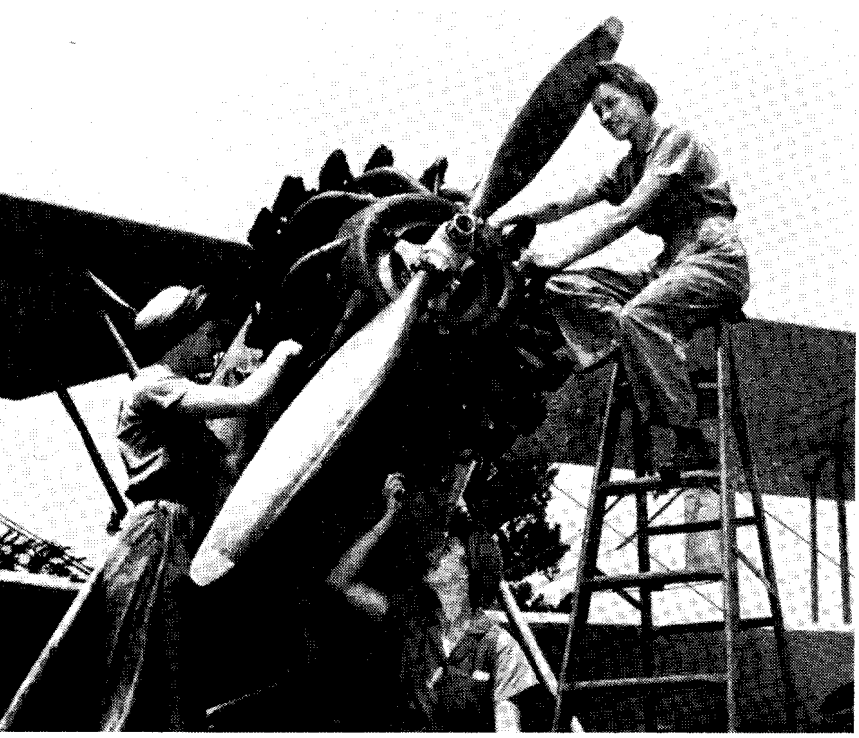
"Cadets are required to attend all musters for meal formations. They must be in full uniform and will be marched to the mess hall. It is expected that gentlemanly conduct will prevail in the mess hall at all times. Cadets are required to have regulation haircuts," were among the dozens of rules they lived by.

A contingent of Waves, as women in the Navy were called, served as mechanics, tower operators, link trainer instructors and hospital corpsmen. The almost 200 women in uniform at Livermore held about every kind of nonflying job.

Several Hollywood luminaries were at Livermore. The biggest was then reigning matinee idol Robert Taylor. As a lieutenant junior grade and a flight instructor, he came from NAS New Orleans a few weeks after me. His arrival, however, caused much larger fanfare: most of the Waves, newspaper reporters and even the skipper assembled to greet him.

Taylor flew cadets like the rest of us, and seemed to enjoy the flight and ready room routine. He was accepted by his peers, but orders soon moved him from the cockpit into movie-making for the Navy.

N2S practicing a landing.



Wave aviation mechanics work on a Stearman N2S at NAS Grosse Ile, Mich., in 1943.

Ltjg. Robert Taylor, movie star assigned to NAS Livermore, Calif., in 1944.

Military organizations thrive on "being best" and work hard at this. The approach that "I am better than you and we are better than they" can inspire esprit de corps. It also can be counterproductive.

Livermore people fit into a well defined order. Other distinctions sometimes got out of hand. Officers were "black shoe" or "brown shoe," according to the shoe colors of nonaviation or aviation types; USN or USNR designated regular or reserve. Officers were Naval Academy graduates or from NROTC, directly commissioned or "90-day wonders." The wartime mix of people were unconcerned and unaware of such distinctions except for an immature, insecure few who extended the "being best" syndrome to absurdity.

Almost everybody at Livermore was reserve and brown shoe. There were AV-(N) aviators, those commissioned after cadet training, and AV-(T) aviators commissioned by some other route. Some individuals of each kind, wearing the same uniform and doing the same job, thought the others inferior and attempted to prove it.

A friendly encounter occurred late in the war. Jack Stackpool, an AV-(T), was now a dive-bomber pilot aboard the new *Yorktown.* During a recreation period at a fleet anchorage in the Western Pacific, Stackpool met Al Glassow and Fred Winkler, both AV-(N)s and former Livermore instructors, now assigned nonflying duties aboard the light carrier *Independence.* While hosting Glassow and Winkler at dinner in *Yorktown's* wardroom, Stackpool took pleasure in reminding the pair that an occasional AV-(N) at Livermore had boasted that AV-(N)s would fly combat while AV-(T)s, like Stackpool, would stay home instructing.

Precision, the most overworked work in Naval Aviation, was always demanded in flight training. A course of 090 degrees meant 090 degrees, not 089 or 091; an altitude of 1,500 feet was nothing less, nothing more; and a two-turn spin was not two and a quarter. The litany went on and on.

Precision is essential to hook the arresting wire on the flight deck. It was a long way from primary training to carrier landings, but all students were considered potential carrier pilots. Precision landing fundamentals were taught through S-turns to a 200-foot circle, slips to the same circle, and small field procedures using a combination of them both.

A pig farm adjacent to one auxiliary field was designated for circle work. The stench of the hogs kept use of this facility to a minimum. Instructors never used it for goofing off while students practiced solo as was sometimes done at others of the 12 Livermore outlying fields.

One instructor at a field with good air sent his student off with orders to make six landings, then return for him. The teacher joined his buddies lolling near the circle and lighted a cigarette. In time, the cadet returned, landed and stopped near the group. His instructor climbed in front, took the controls, and poured on the coal. Only when airborne did the dauntless instructor realize that there was insufficient distance to clear the trees at the edge of the field. Two battered flyers and one less Stearman went into the records.

Another instructor on another day returned to the station after a routine flight. He picked up the next cadet, but didn't refuel because the gas truck wasn't handy and the visual read that his tank had sufficient fuel for another flight. Instructor and student did their thing. Later, they landed at an auxiliary field near a circle where the instructor got out giving the student the routine orders to "do six" and return. On the cadet's fifth takeoff, his engine quit. The N2S bounced into the fence out of gas. The gauge had been stuck when viewed earlier. After that, no flight went out without a full tank.

Old friend Lieutenant Ralph Nichols was a practical joker. While teaching slow rolls, Nick would mutter into his gosport about a faulty seat belt. After a series of such complaints, he'd order the student to do a slow roll. While the cadet concentrated on the roll, Nick ducked out of sight below the cockpit combing. Finishing the roll, the cadet would miss his instructor and make steep turns looking for an opened chute. Nichols would then sit up and demand to know what was going on.

He tried the drill once too often when instead of an excited student doing turns, the Stearman rolled, started the expected turns, then fell into a spiral. Nichols took control, leveled out, and growled at the cadet. Only then did he notice the empty rear seat and his student's open parachute.

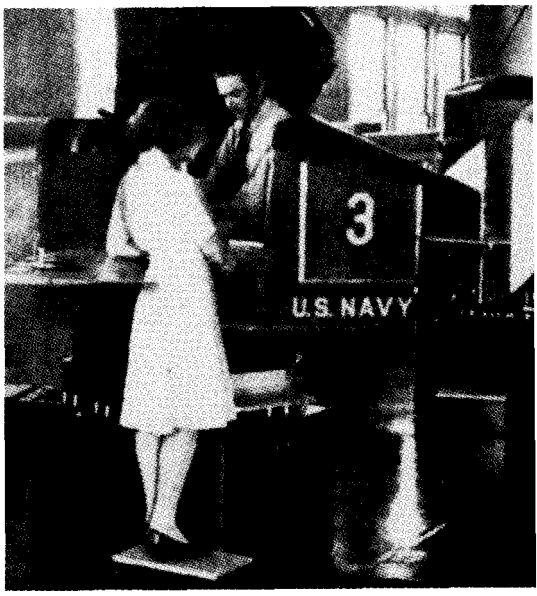
Lieutenant Junior Grade Neal Kaye owed his life to a parachute and to incredible luck. An instructor at NAS Memphis, he was scheduled to give a student check when he picked up his mail in the ready room. Late for his flight, he jammed the mail into the leg pocket of his flight coveralls and ran to the flight line.

Kaye and waiting cadet climbed into the Stearman, whereon the student was ordered to take it up to 5,000 feet allowing plenty of time for Kaye to read his mail. Engrossed by his reading, Kay neglected to fasten his seat belt.

"Let's see a slow roll to the left," he ordered after reaching altitude. The cadet entered the roll. Kaye fell out of the Stearman. Cursing his neglect, he pulled the rip cord and the chute popped open. For reasons unknown, the cadet did a split-S out of the roll to bring the Stearman roaring back at the falling instructor. A wing entangled the opened chute canopy jerking Kaye partially out of his only partially hooked-up harness.

Kaye's time hadn't come. The chute slipped off the wing, the canopy billowed open for a second time. Kaye dangled by his knees from the harness until dumped into a soft, plowed field. Unhurt, he bundled up the silk, walked to a nearby road and hitched a ride back to the base. There are days when a guy can't lose.

After some months, instructing could get boring, but the Stearman was fun to fly upside down. Unfortunately, after a few seconds inverted, the engine would



Link trainer room at NAS Livermore, Calif., in 1944. Trainer operators were Waves.

Vultee SNV-1 "Vibrator" near NAS Bunker Hill, Ind., winter 1944-45. Lt. Matthew H. Portz, USNR, is at the controls.

quit when gas flowing from the tank in the upper wing obeyed the law of gravity to starve the carburetor. A half roll or split-S into upright position would make the fuel flow again and restore the engine to life. A favorite spot for the upside down game was at the east end of the Livermore Valley above U.S. 50, where air traffic was sparse. One half rolled onto his back while dropping the nose to maintain speed. Life seemed brighter looking up rather than down at the California countryside.

An unforgivable sin was "flat-hatting," whether by cadets or bored instructors. "Hot pilots" liked to be seen, not caught. Those with bad luck, or stupid enough to make a second low pass, frequently had their numbers reported. Those with no luck became fatalities after encounters with wires, trees and box canyons.

In an attempt to control flat-hatting, some training stations placed stories in nearby newspapers asking citizens to report in writing the time, place and number of any sighting where the large number of planes could be read from the ground. Presumably, the time and place information would separate legitimate flyers from flat-hatters. I don't know if this system worked, but it did generate more circumspection and fewer passes.

In 1944, the Douglas SBD *Dauntless* dive-bomber was being replaced by the Curtiss SB2C *Helldiver* in the fleet. Some SBDs were sent to Livermore for instructors to fly to help relieve the routine. The *Dauntless,* hero of the Battle of Midway, had flown from the decks of *Enterprise* and *Yorktown* on June 4, 1941, to bomb and sink the Japanese carriers *Akagi, Kaga, Soryu* and *Hiryu. No* plane could have been better suited to make primary instructors feel like fleet aviators.

Checkout procedure was simple. First, one read the handbook, then sat in the cockpit with the book until he felt familiar with instrument and control locations. He then scheduled himself to fly.

Powered by a 1,000-horsepower Wright Cyclone engine, the SBD was a low-wing monoplane with cockpits for pilot and gunner. A wide landing gear made the SBD easy to set down. *Dauntless* checkoff lists were typical of single-engine operational aircraft of the period. The pilot concerned himself with the propeller pitch control, fuel mixture and fuel tank selection, trim tabs, wheel position up or down, tail wheel lock, cowl flaps, oil cooler scoop, blower speed, and carburetor air.

Also available was the Curtiss SNC-1 *Falcon,* a handsome little airplane with the trim lines of a combat trainer. Its 450-horsepower Wright Whirlwind engine and weight, only 3,200 pounds, provided performance which made the SNC popular with instructors.

Each primary training base had its share of seamen awaiting cadet status. Called "tarmacs," these eager beavers flew as passengers whenever possible. A tarmac was in the seat behind me in an SNC when we taxied from the flight line, performed the usual run-up and magneto check, and moved into takeoff position. When cleared by the tower, I poured the coal to the Whirlwind, took off and raised the wheels. Easing back the throttle and prop pitch control to normal climb, the *Falcon* performed normally until about 400 feet where things turned sour. Engine power dropped and white smoke billowed through the cockpit.

Instinctively, I lowered the nose, added throttle, and looked for a way to get around the eucalyptus trees ahead and into the hayfield beyond should the engine stop. The open cockpit canopy kept the smoke moving outside. I shouted "Mayday," my shaking feet beating a tattoo on the rudder pedals. The engine continued to pour smoke, running rough, but running. I elected to try a landing back on the field. On the downwind leg, I dropped the wheels and cranked down the flaps. Fire trucks and an ambulance streaked toward the landing mat with their lights blinking and sirens screaming.

The engine kept going. I turned base leg and onto final approach, made a smooth landing, and cut the switch. At the end of rollout, the tarmac and I scampered out to the ground while the firemen smothered the fire. The tarmac, a cool model of correctness, stepped up and with no attempt at humor said, "Sir, that was a great flight, but too short. Will we be able to go up again soon?"

"With guys like this, we're bound to win the war," I thought, sitting down to stop shaking.

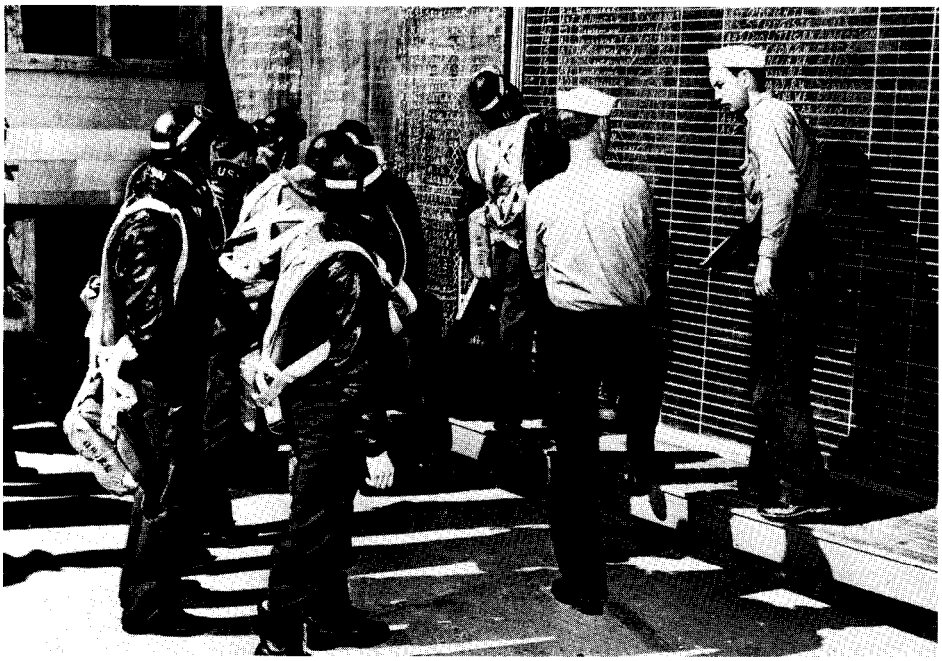
Livermore's sister base at Grosse Ile, Mich., on the Detroit River had a Grumman J4F *Widgeon* on its flight line. This light, twin-engine amphibian was flown by instructors as a relief from teaching chores. The *Widgeon* was never, repeat never, to be landed on water.

Lieutenant Junior Grade Jim Gibbons had other ideas and had a Celtic distaste for rules. After enough flights to feel confident, he headed over Lake Erie beyond where anyone would see him. He did what he came to do; he landed on the lake.

His was a beautiful demonstration of flying skill, but water came squirting into the hull through loose rivets and countless other holes. Prompt application of full power to both engines got Gibbons airborne. Had he taken on much more water, he and the *Widgeon* could have established permanent residence in Lake Erie.

Lieutenant Jim West, the operations officer at Livermore, headed a committee which selected me to attend the Instrument Flight Instructors School (IFIS) at NAS Atlanta. This was a welcome change. After four weeks in Georgia, I would return to Livermore to teach instrument flying to other instructors. I reported at Atlanta a week after D-Day in Europe.

Theory and practice of instrument flight, daily workouts in the Link trainer flight simulator, and accumulation of air time in the Howard NH-l and the North American SNJ *Texan* left no time for other activities in Georgia. The three-place, 4,350-pound Howard, built as an instrument trainer, had the feel of a



Cadets at flight assignment board, NAS Memphis, 1943.

heavier aircraft. This high-wing monoplane was a derivative of the "Mister Mulligan" which before the war had won both the Thompson and Bendix Trophies. The SNJ was a two-place, low-wing monoplane powered by a 550-horsepower Pratt and Whitney Wasp engine. Gross weight was 5,300 pounds. Like the Stearman, this was another plane that was enjoyable to fly with few restrictions on what a pilot could do with it.

With an IFIS diploma and an instrument card in my wallet, I departed Atlanta for Livermore in a commercial Douglas DC-3 airliner. In Birmingham, I was bumped from the flight by others with higher priority, but was soon on my way again with help from the Birmingham Army Air Base. At Army flight operations I hitched a ride to Wichita with a pilot flying a twin-engine Douglas B-18 bomber, very much like the DC-3 but built for bombing. The pilot, a Lieutenant Colonel Paul Tibbets, enthusiastically told me about the Boeing B-29 *Superfortress* he regularly flew. Remembering him was easy more than a year later when the newspapers announced his delivery of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima.

I hitched another ride aboard a North American B-25 Mitchell bomber and enjoyed helping fly it to the West Coast. Back at Livermore, my business was instructing instructors. Howards and the Vultee SNV-1 *Valiant,* better known as the "Vibrator," were my tools.

The SNV-1 was a single-engine, two-place, low-wing monoplane equipped with fixed landing gear, and manually operated wing flaps. The Vibrator was powered by a 450-horsepower Pratt and Whitney engine. Gross weight was 4,600 pounds. It was a "blah" airplane.

My instrument instructing at Livermore lasted but two months and little more than 100 hours in the air. During those months another 100 hours were flown flight checking primary cadets and making two aircraft delivery flights to Oklahoma. Livermore was to close as a primary base in October 1944 because of lowered quotas for new pilots. Instructors over age 30 would be assigned other duties. Younger ones who hadn't completed a Year and a half of instructing would be transferred to other primary stations.

Autumn leaves in farmland woodlots were past their peak when I checked into my new station, NAS Bunker Hill, Ind. Thousands of miles away near the Philippines the greatest sea battle in history was being fought. At the Battle of Leyte Gulf, we traded six warships for 34, including three battleships and four aircraft carriers, lost by the Japanese.

In contrast, life in Indiana was almost serene and presented a resemblance to normalcy punctuated by not infrequent Stearman crashes into the cornfields. The base, until the war, had been 2,158 acres of prime agriculture land, five miles south of the Wabash River.

Bunker Hill was larger than Livermore with four 5,000-foot concrete runways in addition to a mat and 19 auxiliary fields, Three hundred planes, 350 officers and 2,300 enlisted men and women were assigned. There were 1,000 cadets, 400 from the British Royal Navy.

British cadets had nine months of preliminary training in the United Kingdom before arriving at Bunker Hill. The English selection process after four years of war was not as discriminating as ours. The British students washed out at almost three times the rate of Americans and twice as many as ours were killed in accidents during my tour.

Statistics about training accidents compared to those in the fleet are unavailable. My guess is that there were more of the former. The sheer size of overall Navy flight statistics for 1945 is impressive. That year, 15.5 million hours were flown. More than 13,000 major accidents occurred; half resulted in destroyed aircraft. The more than 3,000 fatalities were at the rate of 20.5 per 100,000 hours flown. In the jet age 40 years later, Navy flying is much safer. As of December 1, 1985, during more than two million flight hours, there were 75 major accidents with 75 aircraft lost and 88 fatalities — a rate of only 3.75 per per 100,000 hours.

During the frigid 1944-45 winter, I averaged only 41 hours instrument instructing monthly. There was time to check out in the Beech GB-2, officially the *Traveler,* but always called the GB or *Staggerwing.* This clean little five-place biplane, with upper wing aft of the lower, climbed 500 feet with chopped throttle from cruising speed of about 150 knots before a glide attitude had to be assumed.

Indiana's winter demanded all possible attempts to keep warm. Some new N2S-5s were winterized without much success with pexiglass canopies. Pilots and students dressed in boots, wool-lined gloves, "iron pants and jacket," and helmet — all heavy sheepskin with the wool inside. The combination restricted the wearer's movement much as the armor on the knight of old.

In spite of precautions, winter added hazards to flight. Frost, snow, sleet, ice and rain made accidents happen, and the instructors curse the politicians that put a primary base in Indiana. Carburetor icing could cause engines to quit and ice on wings destroyed airfoils. At least one N2S crashed after takeoff because frost had not been removed from its wings.

In February, the base was inspected by the Assistant Secretary of the Navy for

Air, Artemus Gates, and Vice Admiral Aubrey Fitch, Deputy Chief of Naval Operations (Air). Perhaps as a consequence of this visit, I was assigned four initial A-stage cadets, my first since reporting to Bunker Hill. I put on cold-weather gear and was back in a Stearman cockpit. Instructor training was deemphasized to make up for lost flying time. Spring more than doubled January's flight hours to almost 31,000 in March and to 26,000 each in April and May.

The closing of Livermore and subsequent events at Bunker Hill signaled that the war was winding down. Those of us at my level didn't read the signs. We could be excused. At this time, fighting in Europe and the Pacific was at its bloodiest.

March 1945 saw Japanese resistance on Iwo Jima crushed. U.S. fighter planes from the island and fast carrier task forces operated at Japan's front door. Tokyo was incinerated by B-29s and, at month's end, the invasion of Okinawa had begun. In Europe, U.S. Army troops crossed the Rhine at Remagen to swarm into Hitler's disintegrating Reich. President Roosevelt died in April.

The shortage of pilots for the war had now been eliminated. Attrition among students had been increasing by plan for a year. With the end of the war in sight, cadet washout rates climbed. The granting of extra instructional time to those who flew downchecks was severely restricted. Extra instruction to smooth out flight deficiencies formerly had been routine. This had changed drastically; many who earlier would have completed the course no longer made it.

In April, I flew to Patterson Field near Dayton, Ohio, and took a bus to Wright Field a few miles away.

"I saw my first helicopters," I wrote home, excited about the new machines. "These things look like dragonflies in flight. Most amazingly they can hover in the air and land right in their parking spot! I also saw a captured Messerschmitt 109 fighter plane which I'd love to fly." As an afterthought, I added, "Flying weather was beautiful, but a bit windy." The instructor in me revealed itself again.

Events continued to overtake even flight instructors. In early May, the base shifted to a work schedule of six days on with Sundays off, rather than the more strenuous 10 and two.

On May 7, 1945, the Germans surrendered to General Eisenhower at Rheims. A week later, the last group of British cadets entered Bunker Hill. The war was running down.

At 0830, May 8, the executive officer, Lieutenant Commander Roscoe White, called all hands together to observe VE Day. He read expressions of gratitude from our national leaders for the victory in Europe and of their determination to quickly defeat the Japanese in the Pacific. I flew as usual with Cadets Harris and Dupuis that day, and joined the many toasts to victory that evening at the officers club.

A few days later, after 17 months of instructing, I received orders to a "refresher" course for my return to the fleet, this time as an aviator. I thought this was as promised when I left my old ship *Elliot.* But, with others such as me, I was put into a holding pattern at NAS Dallas until it was clear whether or not we would be needed against Japan. Those of us on hold were experienced, young and eager.

Years later when top secret war plans were declassified, I understood what the holding pattern was about. The Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington had plans to invade southern Japan the first of November 1945, and four months later, the Tokyo Plain was to be occupied. Some 2,700 ships would have participated, more than 100 of them aircraft carriers. Young flight instructors could easily and quickly have been trained as replacement pilots to meet the invasion schedule.

At Dallas we were assigned to busy work flying 10 to 15 hours a month in the miserable Vultee SNV "Vibrator!" I had time to watch an impromptu dogfight between a North American P-51 *Mustang* and a Ryan FR-1 *Fireball* over Hensley Field. The heretofore secret *Fireball* was powered by a reciprocating engine with propeller up front supplemented by a jet engine in its tail. The Ryan introduced itself to onlookers with a high-speed, low-altitude pass, its prop dramatically feathered. It took a while to comprehend my first look at a jet.

By now, I too realized that the war was nearing an end. Hiroshima was struck with the atomic bomb on August 6, 1945, by the *Enola Gay* piloted by the same Colonel Tibbets I had hitched a ride with from Birmingham to Wichita in July 1944. Nagasaki was hit on August 9; most hostilities against Japan ceased August 14; and Japan signed the surrender September 2. I celebrated VJ Day, August 14, by sharing a bottle of Southern Comfort with friends. We did not go downtown where four years of repressed joy neared riot proportions.

Captain Leonard Dow, Dallas skipper, called people on base together August 15 for an official announcement of war's end and to pay tribute to the dead. North American Aviation closed its plant at Dallas that same day. Since June 1941, 4,500 SNJs had been delivered to the Navy from this plant. Between country music tunes, local radio stations instructed employees where to pick up final paychecks. The Bomber Cafe, across the street from the plant, was packed with happy ex-plane builders. Peace was delightful, possibilities unlimited.

Like the airplane builders, thousands of Naval Aviators would soon make career changes. The U.S. Navy trained 64,770 of its own and Allied aviators during the 1941-1945 war years, Few would be needed now that the fighting was over. Unemployed Naval Aviators were introduced to a system in which points were assigned for age, service and time at sea. Those with a specified accumulation were expected to go into the inactive Naval Reserve at once. Some applied for regular Navy commissions and kept on with their flying until their applications were processed. Aviation cadets in the preflight stage of the system were offered the options of continuing training or going to inactive duty. Those in primary or intermediate training could continue, take immediate inactive duty, or complete the course and then go inactive.

I went home with 73 days' accumulated leave wearing my "ruptured duck," a brass lapel badge displaying a stylized eagle which was issued to all demobilized U.S. servicemen. Soon after arrival, I received a personalized letter as did all demobilized officers from Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal. His letter summarized the satisfactions and beliefs of most about his or her participation in the war.

"You have served in the greatest Navy in the world," wrote Forrestal. "It crushed two enemy fleets at once, receiving their surrenders only four months apart. It brought our land-based air power within bombing range of the enemy, and set our ground armies on the beachheads of final victory.... No other Navy at any time has done so much. For your part in these achievements, you deserve to be proud as long as you live."

We were proud indeed. I was to fly many more hours and to wear the Navy uniform for more years, which brought adventures at sea with the fleet and in the air, but never again as a flight instructor. ■

Women in the Training Command

By JOC Bill W. Love

A new chapter in Naval Aviation history was written in 1973 when Secretary of the Navy John W. Warner announced a test program to train female student Naval Aviators.

The program was initiated to test a woman's performance as a Naval Aviator once assigned to a helicopter or transport squadron in a noncombat flying billet. The eight women selected completed 18 months of training and served six months in flying billets,

Four of the women were already Navy officers on active duty and began flight training on March 2, 1973, at NAS Pensacola, Fla. Four civilian college graduates were also identified. They were commissioned on May 16 after attending Navy Officer Candidate School (OCS) in Newport, R.I., and reported to Pensacola on June 4 for flight training.

Six of the eight women received their Wings of Gold. They were Lieutenant Junior Grade Barbara Ann Allen Rainey originally of Bethesda, Md.; Lieutenant Junior Grade Judith Ann Neuffer, Wooster, Ohio; Ensign Jane M. Skiles O'Dea, Ames, Iowa; Ensign Joellen Drag Castro Valley, Calif.; Ensign Anna Marie Fuqua, Williamsport, Pa.; and Ensign Rosemary B. Conatser, San Diego, Calif.

Barbara Ann Allen entered the program as a Navy officer. She had served on the staff of the Supreme Allied Command, Atlantic in Norfolk. Her father was a Navy commander and she was a graduate of Whittier College in California. She was the first of her class to win her Wings of Gold, becoming the first female Naval Aviator.

Judith Ann Neuffer came to the Navy by way of Ohio State University. She was also a Navy officer on active duty when accepted for flight training. Her father had been an Army Air Corps combat pilot in WW II and taught her to fly a Piper Cub when she was 16. After becoming a pilot, Neuffer was the Navy's first woman member of the *Hurricane Hunters* at Jacksonville and the first woman to fly into the eye of a hurricane.

Jane M. Skiles was recruited from civilian life after graduation from Iowa State University with a degree in political science. Her father was a Naval Aviator in World War II and her mother was a reserve Navy Supply Corps officer during the war.

Joellen Drag's father was a Navy commander. She came into the program as a civilian, a graduate of California State College with a degree in political science.

Anna Marie Fuqua came from a strictly civilian background. Her father was a civil engineer. She had graduated from the University of California and already had a private pilot's license when a Navy recruiter interested her in the opportunity to become one of the Navy's first female aviators.

Rosemary B. Conatser's father had been in the Air Force and her mother in the Navy Nurse Corps during WW II. Rosemary earned her private pilot's license at 17 and graduated from Purdue University with a degree in aviation technology. She had FAA flight engineer and pilot ratings.

After the original group, flight training was discontinued for female student Naval Aviators until the success of the program could be evaluated.

In 1975, the Chief of Naval Operations authorized a second class of flight training for women. Out of this class of eight, one student dropped out and one continued in flight training. The six who earned their wings were Catherine C. Mills Gehri, Mary C. Giza, Mary L. Jorgensen, Jean F. McCaig Rummel, Donna L. Spruill and Linda E. Vaught.

These women and the others who followed came from varied backgrounds, as did the first group. But background and college education do not transform civilians into capable officers. Military and specialized training, and experience, are the tools which make the transition a reality. What the women had in common were motivation, character, competence plus adaptability, dedication, and lots of perseverance.

The third class of women in flight training was different. It was the first class at the Aviation Officer Candidate School (AOCS) in Pensacola to include women. The school had previously been open only to male candidates. Instead of making the transition from civilian life to basic aviation at Officer Candidate School in Newport and then progressing to Pensacola for flight training, as in the past, the women candidates reported directly to the Naval Aviation Schools Command, Pensacola for 16 weeks of aviation officer candidate training.

The first six women to graduate from AOCS received their commissions on February 18, 1975. Barbara C. Habedank, Sue Ann Mason and Patricia Welling remained in Pensacola to begin flight training; Cecilia Frau and Denise Ackley became air intelligence officers after attending a 20-week course at the Armed Forces Air Intelligence Training Center at Lowry AFB, Colo.; Marlene Simmons attended the Naval Air Technical Training Center, Memphis, Tenn., and Naval Supply Corps School, Savannah, Ga., prior to her first assignment at NAS Whidbey Island, Wash.

Women successfully completing flight

Above, Ltjg. Joellen Drag sits in the cockpit of a CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter. Opposite page: left, Ltjg. Barbara Ann Allen, the first woman to be designated a Naval Aviator, receives part of her flight equipment; right, Lt. Colleen Nevius, the first woman graduate of the U.S. Naval Test Pilot School.

training are assigned a 131X designator and are required, as are all aviators, to serve four and one-half years on active duty after designation.

Opportunities are limited by Section 6015 of Title 10, U.S. Code — Women Members, which states that "The Secretary of the Navy may prescribe the manner in which women officers appointed under section 5590 of this title, women warrant officers and enlisted members of the Regular Navy and the Regular Marine Corps shall be trained and qualified for military duty. The Secretary may prescribe the kind of military duty which women members may be assigned and the military authority which they may exercise. However, women may not be assigned to duty in aircraft that are engaged in combat missions or assigned to duty on Navy vessels except for hospital ships and transports. August 10, 1956, c. 1041, 70A, Stat. 375."

Recently, Congress changed the code to allow women to deploy aboard combatant ships temporarily for up to six months. Nevertheless, female aviators are generally assigned to noncombatant fleet logistics support squadrons and to training squadrons as flight instructors.

Though the restrictions remained, other opportunities became available. In 1973, for example, the Air Traffic Control Officer School at NAS Glynco, Ga., admitted its first woman student, Lieutenant Junior Grade Shelley Robinson.

In 1976, Lieutenant Sharon McCue became the first woman designated an Aviation Maintenance Duty Officer (AMDO). It took three tries and three years' effort to change her 1100 surface warfare designation to the 1520 AMDO. Her third application was approved after the maintenance designator and several other restricted line specialties were opened to women.

When Janna Lambine, a geology graduate and daughter of a retired Navy commander, was admitted to the previously all-male Coast Guard Officer Candidate School, in Yorktown, Va., she had no idea that she would become the Coast Guard's first female pilot. While at OCS, she applied for flight training and was accepted. On March 4, 1977, she was designated a Naval Aviator at NAS Whiting Field, Fla., and was assigned to fly helicopters for the Coast Guard.

Brenda E. Robinson was another woman who attained "first" status in Naval Aviation. She received her commission through the Aviation Officer Candidate program and on June 5, 1980, became the first black female Naval Aviator.

In 1983, Lieutenant Colleen Nevius, became the first woman to graduate from the U.S. Naval Test Pilot School at Patuxent River, Md., and afterwards spent two years as a rotary-wing test pilot.

The daughter of Captain William B. Nevius, USN (Ret.), Colleen attended Purdue University on the ROTC Scholarship Program (which had then recently opened its membership to women). She graduated with a degree in management in 1977 and was commissioned an ensign.

Ensign Nevius went on to Corpus Christi, Texas, for flight training. She did her primary and advanced training in the T-28 *Trojan* and later went through the helicopter pipeline. Her first tour was with Helicopter Combat Support Squadron 6 at NAS Norfolk, Va. While there, Nevius applied for TPS because it "sounded like a challenging tour."

She added that graduation from TPS requires "time, perseverance, desire to survive, talent, dedication and dozens of other qualities and intangibles much too complex to list.

"TPS was very difficult, especially when patience was required," said Nevius, "but it was most satisfying to complete."

Whatever the future holds, women will continue to prove their ability to train and perform just as well as men. And, when the laws are changed, female Naval Aviators will be ready to fly with their male counterparts in the world's finest Navy. ■