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Sociology
(1970-1996)



U. S. Navy
Korea
(1950-1955)

After graduating from high school in Cranston, Rhode Island, in 1949, I had two short-term jobs. The first was as a truck driver with the Salvation Army solicitation program in Providence, which for me lasted a year. The second was in the print shop of the Blue Cross of Rhode Island. The Blue Cross was much more satisfying than the Salvation Army. I learned a great deal there.

In the late forties and early fifties we were involved in the Korean War. In that conflict we still had national conscription into military service. I believed in 1950 that my number was coming up and that I would soon be drafted into the Army. I wanted nothing to do with the infantry, so I enlisted in the Navy. Before I knew it, I had been sworn in and was learning the ropes in boot camp at the Newport Naval Station, Rhode Island.

Good fortune shone down on me. In a few months, I was enrolled in a school for aviation electronics at a Naval Air Station just north of Memphis, Tennessee. I really enjoyed that curriculum. When the course was completed, even though I was all thumbs dealing with the electric service in my house, I was able to analyze and repair a million-watt airborne radar system. Very satisfying!

One day at muster, the barracks leader read an announcement that the Navy was seeking volunteers for Naval flight training. My buddy, who already had a civilian pilot's license, became ecstatic. He turned to me and said, "Let's go down and apply." I wasn't all that excited about heading to another school, so I held back. In the end, my buddy prevailed, and we both had applied for flight training in Pensacola, Florida. As time went on, I actually forgot all about it. Then one day I was told to report to the base personnel office for a message. The message turned out to be my orders to report to Pensacola to begin flight training. That was one of the biggest doors I had ever been invited to enter — going for Navy wings and a commission. Almost unbelievable! It became a major determinant of the rest of my life. I finally caught my buddy's excitement.

I enjoyed every minute of flight training. The pre-flight phase was 16 weeks of class work. Even that was interesting. I was a bit uneasy at first, because with but a high-school education, I was competing with men who had completed two to four years of college. At the outset, I wasn't sure that I belonged. At the end of the 16 weeks, I had the highest academic average in my class, and I was appointed Regimental Commander, the highest military rank for a cadet. I belonged.



Then we moved from one regional naval air station to another as we progressed through the various phases of flight training. First it was basic flying lessons in the SNJ (AT-6) at one base. Then we moved to another field for night flying and instrument flight (which I nearly bombed), on to formation flying, and to gunnery. The final phase of basic training was carrier operations. To pass on to advanced training, we had to make six safe landings on an aircraft carrier. We practiced the routine on a runway first. Then it was on to the ship — the USS Monterey. I found that it was a piece of cake!

Advanced training focused on flying operational military aircraft — real fighters and bombers. My choice was anti-submarine flying, so I spent advanced training in Kingsville, Texas, a few miles from Corpus Christi. The aircraft we used was the Grumman TBF torpedo plane, the same plane that George Bush Senior was flying when he was shot down in the Pacific in WW-II. It was not as fast or maneuverable as the smaller fighters, but it would carry a very heavy load, and it was as stable as a parked car. It came aboard the carrier as though it was on railroad tracks — a pleasure to fly.





With advanced training completed, it was on to the commissioning ceremony when we would get our wings. I had completed flight training in the Navy! Wow! It was early May 1953. We wore our dress-white uniforms as the base Admiral made a brief speech and then congratulated each of us as he awarded us our gold wings. I'll be totally honest. As the blue-collar kid from Rhode Island, I was never more proud in all my life. I did it!

After commissioning we all went to Corpus Christi, Texas for intensive all-weather flight training. That school gave me another chance to master the blind-flying skills I had had difficulty with in basic training. (Subsequently I became an instrument-flight instructor while in the squadron. Weird.)

There was one important interlude between commissioning and all-weather flight school. I got married to Johnnie Verna Walker, my life-long partner ever since. I bought a car and drove to Portsmouth, Virginia, where Johnnie was living at the time. It was a small wedding with only close friends and family involved. We had to forget about a honeymoon. Uncle Sam had other ideas.



Our trip to Texas involved one unique experience. When we were driving across Louisiana, we encountered a flash flood. The local authorities created a novel solution to the problem of getting cars through the flooded highway. We lined up on the highway first with a truck or a bus, which was followed by three or four cars and then another truck or bus. The message was simple; if your engine stalled, you were still going to the other side with the aid of the vehicles behind you. I did not stall. Upon exiting the flood, all I had to do was open the car door, allow the floodwater to pour out, and drive on my way. Ugh! Fortunately I found an all-night gas station near the motel where we spent the next night. I told the attendant what had happened, and while we slept he went through the car from stem to stern and made us ready to depart the next morning. I never did see his angel wings, but I have often wondered how we had been so lucky to find him there.



Following all-weather flight school, I reported for duty to anti-submarine squadron VS-24 at Quonset Point, Rhode Island. Wow. I had arrived. I was a pilot in an operational Navy squadron, a situation I had never even dreamed of before entering the Navy. I settled into my assigned organizational tasks, got to know my comrades, and thoroughly enjoyed daily life in the unit. Once or twice a year we boarded a carrier to spend a few months at sea honing our skills for locating and engaging submarines. We worked with our own submarines, of course, as they were also practicing their skills at avoiding detection. We were the cats, and they were the mice.

By far the most difficult thing I had to learn was flying from the carrier and going back aboard AT NIGHT. That activity was probably the most significant aspect of our work, because at that time submarines routinely took advantage of the cover of darkness to surface, charge their batteries, and fill the ship with fresh air. We had to be able to do our job when the submersibles were vulnerable — on the surface at night.

Our aircraft crews involved the pilot(s) and one or two crewmen. As usual we had to make eight safe landings alone at night before we could undertake operational missions with crewmen aboard. The only accident I ever had flying for the Navy was my first night carrier landing. When I made my first try, as I approached the ship there was an aircraft on the deck in the landing area. He was slow getting forward and out of the way following his own landing. So I had to take a “wave-off” which meant aborting my

approach and flying past the ship. I had to go upwind and try again. That sequence of events happened three times. I was rather frustrated.



Finally, on my fourth approach, the deck was clear, and the landing signal officer on the ship gave me the command to cut power and land. I knew I was a little high and a little fast, so I pushed over a second time to hit the deck. Unfortunately, I was still high, so I floated down the deck. Luckily my tail hook caught the LAST arresting wire and slowed me down. But it was too late. My momentum carried me into a set of cable barriers strung across the deck. I cut the engine. Bright lights came on, a horn started beeping, and crewmen began climbing onto my plane. What a sick feeling. Total embarrassment. The result was that I filled out an accident report. Two days later I was sent back ashore to practice night approaches before I could try again aboard ship. I practiced every night for a week. I went back to the ship, and in one night I completed eight safe landings, and I was declared qualified to fly from the ship without risking crewmen's lives.

The very next night I was assigned to a mission to play cat and mouse with our submarines. That assignment, of course, meant that I would take up crewmen to operate the detection equipment. Before the flight when I entered the ready room, I noticed that a crewman assigned to my airplane was a guy who had just completed anti-submarine school and had just joined the squadron. It was to be his first night flight from the ship. As he looked up at me, his expression resembled that mournful look of a basset hound. His face said, "Why me? Why am I assigned to Lehman's plane--the only guy to have had an accident?" At that point all I could do was smile.

Anyway, we suited up, catapulted off the ship, rendezvoused with the sub, and headed back home. When I made my approach to land on the carrier, I do not recall being extra careful or thinking of the terrified crewman behind me, but that night I made a perfect pass and landing on the ship. The landing-signal office didn't give me any corrective signals during the process. Life was good!

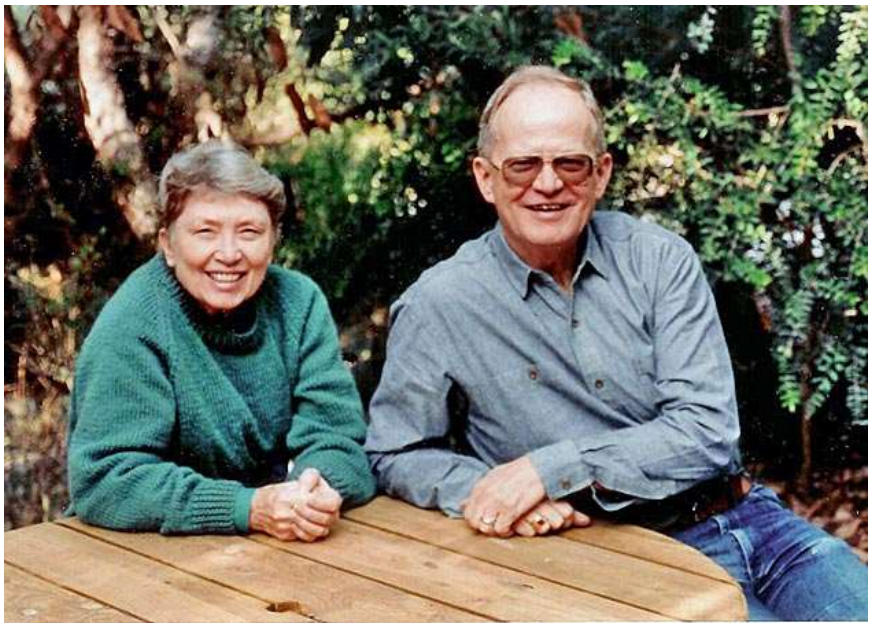
After about a year in the squadron, the Navy invited me to switch to "regular Navy." Cadets completing flight training earn a commission in the Navy reserve, not the regular Navy. The switch long-term would mean that I would not be involved in a four-year commitment but instead would involve a twenty-year career. The offer was very attractive to me, so I applied for the change in designation.

In just a few months, I was told by my commanding officer that the transfer to regular Navy was approved, and all I had to do was sign it. At that point, I had misgivings. One concern was the fact that in terms of formal education I was still but a high-school graduate. What impact would that reality have on any hope of promotion and career? The second factor was the realization that I was becoming near-sighted. Will I have to stop flying? What kind of assignments would follow? I loved the flying I was doing

under present circumstances, but how would the Navy view me and use me after my time was up in the squadron?

I decided not to sign the redesignation and to go on inactive duty at the end of my four-year obligation. My blue-collar parents thought that I had lost my mind. In the end they realized that I had made the better choice for me. I took advantage of the GI Bill and went right to undergraduate school. Following that I completed a theological education at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina. Upon completing the theological degree, I was offered a N.D.E.A. graduate fellowship in sociology at Mississippi State University.

I taught at a few other universities, but the longest segment of my academic career was at SUNY Brockport from which I am now blissfully retired.



I did not leave my flying behind, however. I obtained a commercial civilian pilot's license, which I used for private flying now and then. The most important use of the pilot's license was to allow me to spend two summers in Louisiana spraying cotton. That activity was the highest-paying summer job I could find. It helped put bread on the table during student years, and it gave me a unique set of memories to play with in retirement. So thank you, U.S. Navy, for opening opportunities I otherwise never would have enjoyed.

It is true that while I was serving in the Navy, no one ever shot at me, and I never shot at anyone else. As a nation we were not at war. Some would argue that in the absence of direct participation in combat, my involvement in military service should not count as much as for those who fought in battle. That point is for others to decide. Personally I'm glad that I never had to take a life, and I'm certainly happy that no one tried to take me out. All I can boast is that I was well trained and ready for whatever came along. I owe a profound debt to the U. S. Navy for pushing me into manhood. I hope others will judge that the effort was worthwhile.

