
SCENE

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11TH CG DISTRICT HQ, LONG BEACH—1958-1959 (JET FIGHTER QUALIFICATION / ROTATION TO SEA DUTY)

I had successfully avoided staff duty up to this point but Headquarters finally caught up with me. With my family, we were authorized commercial air travel from Puerto Rico to New York and mileage to Long Beach. Yes, we sold the Ford in San Juan, but there was a new, big, Mercury station wagon waiting for us in New York. How come, you ask?

An enterprising Air Force Colonel made a deal with most of the auto dealers in the area to sell new autos at inventory prices plus a small percentage markup for the dealer and the Colonel. The models would be exactly what you ordered. The car would be ready for the road: licensed, inspected, fueled, road maps, and keys. He would meet your arrival with transportation for the whole family. He had a good thing going with returning servicemen and had to be reliable. He was.

Our family now consisted of Mom and Dad, Terry, Christy, Karen, Scott, and Strudel, our dachshund. (She flew under our seats in the airline. But shortly after arrival she became paralyzed in the hind legs. We nursed her to health by rigging a sling under her hind quarters, but after two more episodes we had her put down.)

Our first stop was at the home of Mary's uncle George and aunt Bertha in Montclair, from where we departed for San Juan two years before. That was wonderful.

We took the southern cross-country U.S. Route 90 stopping at **Mesa Verde**, **Grand Canyon**, and **Bryce Canyon** among other places. We rented a cottage in Long Beach

while we house hunted and bought a house (which Mary liked best), but after only one year we were moved on. It was an interesting year, however. Let me tell you about it.

I was assigned to the 11th CG District staff in Long Beach, California, as the Operations Officer. The **Rescue Coordination Center (RCC)** was my responsibility. It was very active finding overdue boats, enforcing motorboat equipment regulations (boarding), conducting safety patrols, and maintaining communication links with other available rescue facilities such as maintained by the Navy and Air Force.

I was still an aviator drawing hazardous duty pay for which I was required to fly at least four hours a month. To get my time in, I would have San Diego Air Station send up a plane, and I would maybe shoot a few touch-and-go landings or visit a nearby military base for lunch at the Officers' Club!

My tour in Long Beach was cut short for this reason: at Coast Guard Headquarters, the left hand didn't know what the right hand was doing. While I was selected for a Transition-to-Jet Training Course for senior aviators in Olathe, Kansas, a Board was meeting to thin out the senior aviators ranks, which over a period of time had gotten out of proper proportion. I was selected for rotation back to sea duty. On learning this, the District Commander asked me if I wanted my orders to jet training cancelled, as I would no longer be flying. I opted for the training because it would be good to have knowledge of jet operations, on which the future of aviation depended. He let the orders stand.

Jet Flight Training. First we were given a Flight Manual to study. Then a look at the **Grumman F9F Cougar** in which we would train. That was a little intimidating. I never dreamed of being a fighter pilot. I am certainly not the "hot dog" type. However, it was comforting to know there would always be the flight instructor in the forward cockpit, except on the final exam, the solo flight.

Now a **disclaimer** for the mistakes I may make relying on my memory. It has been forty-seven years, at this writing, since I took that course, and I was forty-three years old at the time. The age limit for fighter pilots was forty-five. But remember, this course was for senior aviators. The instructors were kind to us old fogies.

First, we were issued anti-gravity flight suits and shown how to plug them in. Then, the flight helmets with connections to oxygen and radio. Then, the parachutes in their ejection seats with instructions on how to eject (*scary thought*).

Next, we got the walk-around inspection of wheels and controls and finally the blind-fold cockpit check.

The flight is smooth without the engine torque trying to take control. It is weird to have only the throttle to push without the other levers of a "prop job."

Maneuvers were quiet (you hardly heard the roar heard by people on the ground). Without the torque, the flight controls moved easily. We did wing-overs, slow-rolls, Immelmans, and loops.

We started the **loop** at about five hundred feet above the ground. Your eyes were glued to the artificial horizon to make a clean climb and passing over the top you were watching the altimeter to make sure you recovered level flight before hitting the ground. Most of us tightened the loop once we saw the earth coming straight up at us and leveled off about a thousand feet higher than we started.

Breaking the Sound Barrier!! If you think doing a loop is scary, you should try going faster than the speed of sound in a slow plane like the F9F. The instructor walked me through this maneuver.

We climbed to forty thousand feet, poured the coal to her, and rolled into a vertical dive towards the earth!!! At about thirty thousand feet, everything went quiet. I didn't hear any boom. We pulled out of the dive at about twenty thousand feet. Whew!!

Landing a Fighter Jet. Here is where I will probably get in trouble for not knowing what I am talking about. Well, here goes anyway.

You went through the landing check-off list, flaps and especially the landing gear down (meaning wheels), and you lined up with the assigned runway for your final approach to a landing. Now you did what we learned to do in our seaplanes—you maintained a nose-high attitude. You established a glide pass to land at the close end of the runway. You used power to control the rate of decent (slope of the glide path). Reduced power to steepen the slope. Added to lessen. Flew that way to touchdown with a three-point landing and down to stay.

I soloed!! I made two touch-and-go's and a final, and not bad ones either. A couple of more flights in a San Diego plane and my aviation career was ended. The last takeoff and landing in my life was in the fall of 1958. I was grounded.



In pressurized flight suit for fighter jet training