

IN THE BELLY OF A WHALE

Mark Sternheimer, VAHS Board Member

It was late summer 1951. I had just finished up the Officers' Training Course at the USMC Base at Quantico, Virginia and had received my freshly minted Second Lieutenant bars. The Korean War was still being hotly contested so it was no surprise that my orders read "For duty beyond the seas". In Marine jargon this meant you were headed to Korea! I was given a 14 day leave to say goodbye to my college sweetheart and to travel across the country arriving at the Oakland Naval Station on the last day of my leave.

The trip across the country was by TWA Constellation aircraft. This was my first long trip in an airplane and I must say I was very much impressed by not only the airplane but the service that TWA provided. Howard Hughes did a great job helping to design the "Connie" and it proved to be a real success as a fast and comfortable airliner for many years beginning in WWII. I arrived at NAS Oakland around 6:00 PM on the last day of my leave which ended at 12:00 midnight. There were 5 other officers headed to Korea that arrived about the same time I did and we expected to take the troop ship carrying the 8th Replacement Draft. Shortly after arriving at the Air Station the duty officer said that our troop ship had left that morning and that the next troop ship left in about 30 days so we would have that time to spend in San Francisco. That was great news since we had heard about the "Top of the Mark" which was

the bar at the top of the Mark Hopkins Hotel. All of the Marines raved about this spot and we were looking forward to having a good time before the next troop ship left.

About an hour later the duty officer came back and said "We understand that Second Lieutenants are badly needed in Korea right now, so we are going to send you over tomorrow morning on the JRM Mars flying boat." I was surprised to hear this as the Mars was known as a cargo carrying sea plane and not for passengers. At 3:00 AM the next morning the five of us were taken down to the dock and loaded aboard the "Caroline Mars", one of the 7 Mars flying boats that the Navy operated. I never imagined that an aircraft could be so large. The interior of the Mars was



bare to the metal and cargo, mostly pallets of 60mm mortar shells packed in wooden boxes, (which was the most important ammo used by the Marines in company sized engagements). These were stacked as far as the eye could see. To me the interior of this

aircraft seemed like the belly of a whale and was larger than a 747 is today. Since there were no seats we had to find room between the pallets as best we could to enjoy the next 13 hours of flying time.



After a takeoff run which seemed at least 5 minutes, we were airborne and flew underneath the Golden Gate Bridge just as we became airborne. Although still dark we could still see the lights of San Francisco in the background. After about 7 hours into the flight, we heard a loud bang coming from the port engine closest to the fuselage accompanied by a stream of white smoke. It took a few minutes to climb over the 60mm mortar pallets and head to the cockpit to find out what was going on. The pilots did not seem to be overly concerned. They said that this aircraft had been equipped with the new R4360 engines which had a spotty performance record and that losing an engine was not a critical matter. If they lost two (out of the 4) then they were in real trouble. We were past the point of no return so we continued on to Hawaii, but if they had to land on the ocean they could probably taxi all the way into Hawaii in the next 24 hours!! Since our fears had been allayed for the time being we settled back between the boxes for the remainder of our 13 hour flight into Barbers Point NAS.

I enjoyed a couple of days in Honolulu before catching the flight on my journey to Korea. The next part of the journey was on a R4D (C-54) which went via

Midway, Johnston Atoll on into Guam. Johnston Atoll was known for its gooney birds and they were everywhere so I wasn't disappointed. In recent years Johnston Atoll has been turned into a nature sanctuary

for the gooney birds and the airstrip has been decommissioned. After a day in Guam we flew to Iwo Jima Island (Mt. Suribachi) which had been a very important airstrip during WWII as it was the closest island to Japan for the B29 missions. We landed at Haneda Airport near Tokyo. Tokyo was still a bombed out city from WWII and devastation was everywhere although there was much

construction going on and the people that we met seemed to have recovered. The next leg of the flight was by C47 (DC-3) which landed at K2 Airfield in Korea. I was then taken by truck up to Inge which was the location of the 1st Marine Division. Upon checking in with the CO, he said that we had beaten our troop ship in by 3 weeks but they were short of 2nd Lieutenants and were glad to have us aboard.

