

pilots must have permission from Yagen to land there. However they enjoy having people come by to see the airplanes. They merely ask that visitors make prior arrangements before “dropping by.”

So what’s the next route for this amazing facility in Virginia Beach? Well, Jerry Yagen says that he’s developing an interest in World War I airplanes and hopes to expand the Fighter Factory’s inventory even more. One man’s strong hobby has become a treasure that will preserve vital aeronautical history for years to come. Thanks to all the great folks at the Fighter Factory!

Sources:

Interview with Jerry Yagen, December 16, 2006

Warbird Digest, September/October 2006, Fighter Factory’s New Home, by Richard Mallory Allnutt

Fighter Factory Web Site, www.fighterfactory.net



A Life in Three Elements: Recollections of a Naval Aviation Cadet

The following is an excerpt from Admiral Dewitt L. Freeman’s book, *A Life in Three Elements: Recollections of a Naval Aviation Cadet*.

THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

I was looking forward to VF-41 (Black Aces) making the upcoming Med cruise with Air Group Seven aboard USS Independence (CVA-62), but that was not to be. The Russians were observed shipping missiles into Cuba, as well as a number of Mig-21 fighters. President John Kennedy called their bluff and the ships were stopped and some turned around. This was a tense time. The Air Defense Command told Secretary of Defense McNamara that it did not have a fighter that could handle the Mig-21s which Cuba was already flying.

Solution? Simple – Mr. McNamara directed the Navy to loan one of its F4 squadrons to the Air Defense Command! And guess which squadron the Navy picked? You guessed it! Soon, a phone call from CinCLant Fleet ordering me and my squadron to NAS Key West, Florida under the command of the Air Defense Sector Commander at Montgomery, Alabama. When the CinCLant Fleet Duty Officer forwarded this directive on the phone, I asked if we were to take a load of missiles (four Sparrows, six Sidewinders), he didn’t know – all he knew was that we were to proceed post haste, but he would get right back to me – Oh, yeah – we WERE supposed to take missiles! Certainly simplified the logistics of the move.

Things happened fast. Within hours the missiles were hung and I had the first division in the air, while transports were arriving to carry the enlisted men, their tools and spare parts. The last airplane, which had to be patched back together out of maintenance, arrived just before midnight that evening, flown by the exec, CDR Oberg.

The Defense Command arrived the next morning, in the form of a major general and several staff officers from the Montgomery Sector Headquarters and they briefed us on their procedures, which we were to use while under their command. A trainer arrived and was staked down at the edge of the taxiway near the west end of the east-west runway at NAS Key West. This trailer was outfitted as a ready room, complete with rows of

chairs and several bunks for the pilots and Radar Intercept Officers (RIOs) who manned the back seats in the airplanes. Usually, two aircraft at a time flew together on the missions. Of course, we had a loud klaxon horn used to signal LAUNCH and a telephone circuit to sector headquarters that was always “hot.”

We were instructed that each crew was to preflight their airplane, perform the entire check list and leave the cockpit completely set up for flight – even our helmets were left on the glare shields with the radio cords plugged in. When we were “honked off” we were to run to the aircraft while the ground crew fired up the starting units, and a plane captain would strap us in, as we were starting engines! Everything took place simultaneously and we were expected to get air borne as soon as possible. I personally got down to less than two minutes from a sound sleep to “wheels up” (airborne).

Soon we were all checked out and ready to go and working smoothly under the Air Force procedures. At night, the two crews assigned were always in the trailer, but so were many wives and kids who would come out to watch the 16-millimeter movies we obtained from the Naval Air Station theatre. Mary, Bill, Gary and Susan came frequently to see the movies. A side show always occurred when we got honked off during the movie – the projector stopped, four of us ran out to the Phantoms, and in less than two minutes, we disappeared into the blackness, standing on four plumes of fire that propelled us almost straight up! Of course, out of consideration for the dependents, the operator always completed the movie, and perhaps we could see the rest of it when we got back.

Several things of an unusual nature come to mind. The Air Force operated a large four-engine airplane with a huge radar antenna mounted on the fuselage which could look out over the Gulf all the way to Cuba and see everything that was in the air. These airplanes were based at McCoy Air Base in Orlando, but operated in a racetrack pattern just north of Key West during their patrols – their radio call sign was “Bully.”

One dark night, my wingman and I were honked off and directed to intercept a target somewhat NORTH of Key West. The target was only at about 10,000 feet or so. Bully took us under his control for the completion of the intercept and identification. Soon, we acquired a large, slow-moving target, locked on and closed in for the identification. Imagine my surprise as I closed on a big four-engine airplane with a huge radar antenna on the bottom. Lights were on inside the airplane. Instead of identifying the airplane to Bully, I said, “Bully, . . . look out the window on your right side.” Sure enough, some of the interior lights were shut down and I could see several faces peeking through the window at me! Then the comment, “Aw shhh. . .!”

The controller found out who was flying that night, and called me the next day to explain that their scopes have the capability of being “offset,” i.e. the center of the scope did not have to represent where the airplane was located. Having done this, and then having forgotten about it, caused him to see his OWN airplane as a target – so he became alarmed and intercepted it!

Several days after VF41 arrived in Key West, the Tactical Air Force began flying aircraft into Key West also. Although I must say I was impressed to see their huge cargo planes fly in and offload two 5,000 gallon refuelers from each plane, I was nowhere nearly impressed with the arrival of an F-104 squadron from Victorville, California. This outfit had flown non-stop from Victorville, refueling enroute as needed, so perhaps they were tired.

In any case, I was commanded to join with the local admiral and the captain of the Naval Air Station to welcome the squadron to Key West. At the appointed time, four F-104's appeared and made a pass over the runway at near-by Key West International, the civilian airport! The fact that the aircraft pitched up and broke

up for landing revealed that they had mistaken which airport was which. Finally the mistake became apparent, and the division reformed and entered overhead the runway at Key West. The runway at Key West is 8,000 feet in length, which is generally considered a tad short by Air Force standards – particularly for the rather fast-landing F-104!

The division broke up and as the Skipper came around, apparently wanting to make sure that he wasn't fast and overshoot the end of the runway, thus wasting what little distance there was, touched down perhaps 50 feet before the runway end. The lip at the end of the runway was enough to wipe the landing gear completely off the F-104 and he proceeded to slide unceremoniously to a stop, thus blocking the runway to the rest of his flock who had to circle while his aircraft was scraped up and removed.

Now, you know that was embarrassing for this young lieutenant colonel, as it was for me. But we had the meeting anyway, and I did the best I could to be cheerful.

That night, shortly after sundown, the last two F-104s arrived. Apparently, the wingman had a navigation radio that wasn't working so he was depending on his leader to get him to Key West. Once there, however, the leader decided that he would keep his wingman in formation and they would land side-by-side in formation – on an 8,000 foot runway at night!

Anyway, after the two had touched down and deployed their two drag chutes, the leader apparently started sweating the amount of runway left ahead of him and stepped on his brakes a little too hard, blowing his right tire, which caused him to swerve to the right. However, his wingman was there on his right! When his wingtip crashed into the wingman's windshield, the wingman opted to swerve away from the leader and ran off the right side of the runway, across a rather deep drainage ditch, which wiped the landing gear off his airplane.

Meantime, vaunted leader had blown his other tire and swerved off the runway on the opposite side. About this time he came to a substantial mound of dirt which constituted a site on which the ground control approach trailer could be placed when used on the north-south runway. When the leader hit the mound, his gear was wiped off. Thus we had two more F-104s disabled on landing. Thank God the GCA trailer wasn't on the mound with people in it at the time!

The F-104 squadron had lost three of their 20 airplanes on arrival. But it was impressive, when huge Air Force transports flew in the next day, loaded up all three of the derelicts and flew them off with them back to Victorville. I was thinking that this outfit wasn't going to last too long. The next day, General McSweeney, Commander of Tactical Air Forces, flew in from Langley, Virginia and delivered a new squadron commander - and gave the previous squadron commander a lift back to Langley.

Eventually, the accident reports arrived at the office of the Air Station C.O. with the finding that the navy did not keep proper facilities. The C.O.'s endorsement on all three amounted to words to the effect, "The Navy believes that aircraft should only be operated on the improved real estate on a Naval Air Station."

We were stationed in Key West for a little over four months on this assignment. Shortly before our departure, I was honked off one night to intercept an "unknown" over the Gulf and intercepted the target between the Florida Keys and Cuba. The airplane was in the clouds at about 25,000 feet. The controller insisted that the target be identified. This is a rather ticklish procedure, because it requires a join-up in the clouds, with the attendant poor visibility, not to mention that it was pitch black.

So I left my wingman above the overcast and descending down to the target's altitude, commenced the slow procedure of joining. As you get closer, you have to reduce your closure rate to avoid running over the target. After what seemed like a long time, with the coaching of the RIO in the back seat, finally the lights of a British Viscount airliner appeared. The lights were on in the passenger cabin and I could see the passengers through the unique oval windows of the Viscount. You should have seen their faces when our bright white Aldis lamp illuminated the tail of the airplane to get its identification numbers.

During the long period while we were joining in on the Viscount, the pilot had turned southward and started a descent. Shortly we dropped out of the bottom of overcast – we were obviously descending directly toward Havana harbor – and we weren't a long way out, either!

Having done my duty, I thought it prudent to perform the "Hotel Alfa" maneuver (haul a**) and turned directly away from Havana, in a rapid descent and with little power in the hopes that my engines wouldn't provide enough heat to guide a heat-seeking missile!

After four months at Key West and flying at a record tempo of about 100 hours per month per airplane, we were relieved of the duty and released to return to NAS Oceana. When the time came to leave, all of the squadron airplanes were "up" and we flew away in one large formation! Recall what I said earlier about my Air Force Exchange Maintenance Officer? This was almost three times the hours the airplane was expected to fly per month, but we had a windfall in the form of all the enlisted maintenance personnel of VF101, the Replacement Air Group training squadron for F3H Demon training that had been moved out of Key West and shut down for that period. The fact that we were loaned that large number of maintenance personnel helped us tremendously, plus the fact that we had special parts support system wherein McDonnell Aircraft shipped any parts when they were needed (even if they have to remove it from a Phantom on the production line!) by air to Miami, where I had stationed a storekeeper who met every airliner and put the parts on the next Greyhound bus to Key West.

This is only a small excerpt from an interesting and inspiring book that details Adm. Freeman's aviation career from his enlistment in the Navy in 1943 to his retirement in 1975. If you would like to read more of Adm. Freeman's adventures, his book may be purchased from Dawn Howard at 540-967-0050. The cost is \$19.95.



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