



From The Mountains To The Sea

By William M. Davenport, VAHS Hall of Fame Member

In the 1930s Gordonsville, Virginia had a total population of about 375 people. The town built one of the first municipal airports in Virginia. The airport is located just north of town at the foot of the Southwest Mountain Range.

How could a kid from a small mountain town learn to fly and eventually fly giant flying boats?

JUST LUCKY I GUESS.

When the airport opened and I started flying there, I started doing odd jobs to earn flight time. When I graduated from high school, the University of Virginia hired me as a flight instructor. From there I went to an Army flight school as a flight instructor, teaching in Stearman airplanes. I taught many hours of aerobics.

The US Navy offered me a commission and I jumped at the chance. The flight school at Pensacola was very easy. They only gave me 24 hours of flight training and pinned Navy Wings on my uniform. I thought that was very foolish until I received my permanent orders. My orders were to report to a primary flight school as an instructor. I had been doing this for the Army as a civilian, now I was doing this for the Navy.

I told my flying friends that I was going to talk with the admiral, who was the top ranking officer there. They said, "Are you crazy – you can't do that!" I said, "Watch me!"

The Wave secretary told the Admiral that I wanted to speak with him and he invited me in. "What is it that you want to talk with me about, Ensign," he asked. I told him my history about instructing for the Army and I felt that it was unfair that I had been assigned instructing in the Yellow Pearl.

"What is it you want," he asked. "I want to fly a single winger with four fans on it," I replied. He leaned way back in his chair with a great big laugh. I had touched his funny bone! "What you need is to be in the Naval Air Transport Service." He called in his secretary and dictated a new set of orders. He said he was sending me to Atlanta to the top Instrument Flight School because I would be called on to fly in all kinds of weather. In my orders after completing the instrument training I reported to VR-6 at Dinner Key Florida.

I worked very hard on my instrument training. I could hardly believe that I was getting this wonderful training and it was free. If there was an opening in the Link simulators I took advantage of it. I think that I flew the simulators about 65 hours. We were flying the Twin Beechcraft.

When I completed the training in Atlanta, my 1941 Ford convertible was pointed at Miami. I was told that is where I would find Dinner Key. On my arrival, I was surprised. It was Pan American's seaplane base.

With luck I found a cute little house in Coconut Grove, very close to Dinner Key. Quite a few friends were made and I enjoyed the area very much.

Dinner Key is very close to downtown Miami at Coconut Grove. The seaplane ramps were used by Pan American Airlines to fly their flights south. Their airplanes were very old and most interesting looking. The Coast Guard was also flying from there, using the OSTU single engine seaplanes to patrol the coast. The OSTU would run forever trying to get off the water. I think that they were heavily loaded with gasoline for their long patrol flights. We didn't have a hangar for our airplanes and all of the maintenance was done out on the ramps. This was not very satisfactory and very soon a beautiful hangar was built. The hangar is now used by the city of Miami as a civic center.

We were flying the Martin Mariner PB-M. The PB-M is a large twin engine airplane that can only land and take off in the water. For this reason we could land on the rivers in the middle of cities in South America and serve the islands that didn't have runways for the land planes. We improved the Pan American launching



Martin Mariner PB-M

ramps and the area where we parked the airplanes out of the water because our airplanes were much heavier and we needed more room.

On my first flight, I could tell that the Flight Commander had too much to drink the night before. He scared the HELL out of me. We had flown out past Nassau to Great Exuma. On the way back as we got close to Miami, we got into a heavy thunderstorm. Instead of staying at our assigned altitude, he dropped down very close to the water. At that altitude in the heavy rain we couldn't see

anything in front of us. I thought that we would see the buildings in Miami just about the time that we hit them. We were very lucky. The rain let up when we were about a mile offshore, looking straight at the city. We landed safely.

I immediately went to the training officer and told him that I wanted to be checked out as a Flight Commander so that I could be in command of the airplane that I flew. I was reminded that I had only been in the squadron a week and that he wouldn't consider anyone unless they had at least 1000 hours flight time. I rushed home, picked up my logbook and took it to him for his inspection. He was completely surprised by the amount of flight time I had. The training officer noticed the amount of instructing that I had been doing. He wanted me to teach the other pilots. I was put through a very vigorous ground school and flight training. This put me in position as instructor for the squadron. I am very glad that I did because I think that teaching other pilots made me much more confident and at ease in the seaplane. I may have learned more than they did. When a pilot was trained and ready to fly the scheduled runs, I flew with him until the squadron was satisfied that he was up to the task. Flying the scheduled runs was very enjoyable. We flew to Cuba, San Juan, and Puerto Rico down through the islands and landed at Guadeloupe, Martinique and Trinidad. From there we flew down the coast of South America. We landed at Georgetown, Guyana and then down to Belem and Natal, Brazil. We had other flights to Key West, Kingston, Jamaica and to the Panama Canal.

On one of the flights coming back from Natal, we were in Belem, Brazil where the Amazon River empties into the South Atlantic. My airplane was on the ramp ready to be launched for our flight back to Miami. One of the other PB-Ms in our squadron had just taxied out to take off. I noticed that the plane was sitting pretty deep in the water. My copilot suggested that they sit deeper because they are in fresh water. That seemed logical until, all of a sudden, they came back to the ramp as fast as they could. They didn't quite make it and the airplane started scraping on its bottom. They had hit something in the river, tearing a hole in the hull. THEY WERE SINKING. They were stuck in the mud. We sent small boats out and brought everyone ashore. The tide was coming in and everything was unloaded. Pumps were sent out to get her floating again with no luck. The tide came in and took its toll.

When the tide went out pumps were started again and this time she floated. The beaching gear was attached and the airplane was brought up the ramp onto dry land.

There wasn't any way to repair the airplane there because there weren't any mechanics with proper tools. As luck would have it, there was a Pan American mechanic there who was wise to the ways of fixing things without tools. He said he will fix the hull so that it would be watertight and it could be flown back to Miami. We all thought he was crazy until he went to work. To our surprise he found the rip in the bottom and isolated it. He then poured concrete into the compartment. The concrete hardened and the airplane was stronger than new. The pilots and crew flew it back to Miami without any trouble. The hull was repaired and the airplane was put back into service.

On one of the flights to Natal I was told to be on the lookout for an Army B-24. The B-24 was a four engine bomber that was on a ferry flight from the US to Africa via Natal and across the South Atlantic. The bomber had gone down in the jungle near the Amazon River. I looked for it but saw nothing.

When I returned to the United States I learned that I had been looking for my close friend, Duke Drum. Duke came to Gordonsville to fly for Graham Cameron and soloed me. I was very close to Duke and it worried me very much knowing that his plane had crashed in the jungles of South America.

I later learned that there was a gas leak and the plane was on fire. The entire crew had jumped out as close as possible to each other so they would be close when they landed in the trees. They all got down safely. The big question for them was what to do to survive.

The only thing they had was the clothes on their backs. They were in the jungle without food, shelter, transportation and no way to communicate with a search party if there was one. They knew they were in grave danger and were very grateful that no one was injured during the parachute jump. After a few days of fear a native stumbled upon them. He was afraid of them and they were afraid of him. Using sign language, they explained that they had been in the big birds he had seen flying over. He realized that they had not come to harm him and started teaching them how to survive in the jungle. He showed them what they could eat and helped them build a bamboo raft with a small shelter on it.

They were all set. He helped them launch their new home and waved good-bye for their long journey down the Amazon River to civilization. Duke and his crew floated down the river arriving in Belem in about ten days in very good health and very happy. Duke was very interested in Civil War history, and became a history professor at Washington and Lee University. After he retired he moved to the Charlottesville area where he lived until his death a few years ago.

Back at Dinner Key we began flying the Martin Mariners at night. This was a new experience. Flying a seaplane off the water at night is very difficult. The water is black and if you use the landing lights there is a lot of glare that will confuse you. Landing on the water at night is like being in a coal bin with the lights off and the door closed. That's dark! The training was very intense. I felt that a big change was on the way. The change came and I was transferred to Naval Air Transport Squadron VR-2. VR-2 was located in Oakland, California across the foggy bay from San Francisco. The seaplanes were the giant four-engine Coronado PB2Y3R. Our flights were all over the Pacific to Manila and in the South Pacific near Australia.

When I arrived at VR-2 they checked my background and found that I was checked out in the PBM Martin Mariner. There was a PBM there that was to be delivered to Honolulu. Guess who was given that job! Very large extra fuel tanks were installed in the bombays behind each engine for the long 16 to 18 hour flight. This made the plane very heavy. The crew was one other pilot, a navigator, a radioman and a flight engineer. (Also a few sandwiches). We knew that if an engine failed, the airplane would not be able to stay in the air.

Knowing that there were no navigational aids along the long over-water flight, we elected to take off in the afternoon so that we would have the stars all night to navigate by. We would then arrive in Honolulu in daylight. I am glad we made that choice.

We were tired, sleepy and hungry when we spotted those beautiful islands. We flew over the island to a Navy base on the north side of Honolulu and circled the landing area. BANG! BANG! THE AIRPLANE SHOOK VIOLENTLY! All of a sudden gasoline started flowing down inside the airplane. The fumes were choking us and our eyes were hurting. We immediately cut off the electrical power and cut off the gasoline to the engines. We were very afraid that we would explode any minute. We landed with no engine or electrical power. Just as soon as we got on the water we climbed out and went out on the wing tip. One of the extra fuel tanks had broken loose and was hanging down. There was gasoline all over the water. The crash boat came out and we yelled not to come close because he may set the gasoline on fire. He stayed upwind from us and put a float cushion on a rope and let it float down to us. We tied the rope to the airplane and he pulled us away from the gasoline that was on the water.

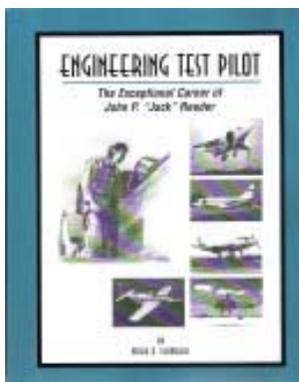
We were then able to get aboard the crash boat. WHAT A RELIEF TO PUT OUR FEET ON SOLID EARTH. If this had happened anywhere else along our flight I don't think that I would be here. When we got back to Alameda I was checked out in the PB2Y3R Flying Boat. I hope to have an article that I wrote about the Coronado published in the *Virginia Eagle* soon.



Engineering Test Pilot

The Exceptional Career of John P. "Jack" Reeder

by
Mark Chambers



Read about the Virginia Aviation Hall of Fame's 2005 Inductee John P. "Jack" Reeder's career as a test pilot at NACA/NASA. To order your copy, contact Jen Melton at (804) 222-8690 or vahs@smv.org. \$20 plus tax and shipping.