In The Beginning

Personal Recollections of the Special Projects Division By Mel Davidow

On February 16, 1949, I arrived at the U.S. Naval School, Preflight, NAS Pensacola, Florida where I joined Preflight class 5-49. Eight days later I was appointed Midshipman, USN. The V-5 program required I remain Aviation Midshipman for two years or until I completed flight training, whichever was longer. I started flight training at NAAS Whiting, Milton, Florida in June, 1949 and received my wings as a Naval Aviator at NAS Corpus Christi, Texas on July 26, 1950. I then reported to Fleet Air Wing Four, NAS Whidbey Island on September 29, after attending a short ASW course in San Diego. It was at Whidbey where I began P2V operational training in preparation for further assignment to a P2V squadron in Kodiak, Alaska.

My training in P2V's was interrupted in late October by receiving orders to begin training to become the lead navigator for the PB4Y-2 Mobile Training Unit MTU). This organization was assigned the task of ferrying twelve U. S. Navy Privateer patrol planes to Saigon, French Indochina and training French Naval Squadron 8-F in the operation and maintenance of the aircraft.

On November 8, the Mobile Training Unit left Whidbey to begin the TransPac to Saigon where I was to be the liaison between the MTU and the Military Aid and Advisory Group (MAAG). On November 18 we arrived at NAS Sangley, Point, Philippine Islands and we departed the next morning for Saigon. December 21 found us back at Sangley en route home. Little did I know that I would soon be selected to return to Sangley instead of going to Alaska. On December 25, 1950, we arrived back at Whidbey at 2:00 AM, just in time for Christmas. This was to be the last day that I would spend with other members of the MTU.

I became aware that many of the pilots at Whidbey were being interviewed for some purpose they could not talk about. Soon it was my turn. This was the first time I heard of the mission and of the P4M aircraft that would eventually form the Special Project Division. One common trait for all those being interviewed was that they must be single, no family men wanted.

On 12 January, 1951, orders were issued to twelve Naval Aviators thus beginning the process that would result in the commissioning of VQ-1 many years later. These twelve officers became the nucleus of the Special Projects Division, Air Operations Department, Sangley Point, Philippine Islands. As I look at my copy of those orders, memories flood back and I recall those years as the highlight of my active duty career. The 12 officers on the original orders were: LT John T. Douglas, LT Ralph Dannettell, LT (jg) James D. Nesbitt, ENS Horace H. Taylor, ENS Richard D. Renner, ENS Duane J. Hofine, ENS Charles R. Lancaster, ENS Warren D. Britton, ENS Marshall P. Hydorn, ENS Edward G. Milway, ENS Ales R. Dunn and MIDN Melvin H. Davidow.

From January 12 until October 16, 1951 we were involved in training that took us to the both coasts of the United States and to the Far East. The training started out with a two-week special electronics countermeasures course at Fleet Airborne Electronics Training Unit (FAETUPAC) in San Diego. At the end of January we were flown to Patuxent River Maryland via government air. From February 3 to May 8, 1951 we were assigned to VP21 and Electronic Test, NAS Patuxent River for P4M-1 training and to wait for the delivery of our four P4M-1Q aircraft from the Martin Aircraft Company. It was on an early familiarization flight that I had the dubious fortune to be in a P4M-1 accident. I was in the NAV compartment as an observer. As we were taxiing, the Plane Commander was informed over the intercom that there was a possible hydraulic leak at the hydraulic control valves (flap, landing gear and bomb bay doors) located on the port side of the aircraft forward of the wing. The navigator went back to check, with me following along to observe. He commented on the amount of hydraulic fluid that was leaking out and before anyone could stop him, he reached down and manually moved the landing gear valve to the down and then to the up position. For a few moments nothing happened. Then the nose of the aircraft started to settle slowly to the taxiway as the nose wheel retracted. Fortunately, the main gear stayed in place and the pilot was able to pull the emergency stop all engines switch in time to take power off of the engines as the props hit. There was no engine damage although the prop tips were all bent. Later, a RUDM (Report of Unsatisfactory or Defective Material) was written up on the IFF antenna located under the nose of the aircraft. It seems that, as the nose descended slowly to the ground, the antenna hit first and bent into a curly queue, like a pig's tail. I don't think the RDUM was actually submitted as it gave the reason for writing it as "failed to support weight of aircraft during accident."

 Some of our pilots checked out in a F6F that Flight Test had. All we were supposed to do was drill holes in the sky putting time on the engine. I had almost completed the check out when our planes began to be delivered so I never got to fly the F6F. Later, for some strange reason, an F6F was assigned to the FASRON at Sangley Point and those who had checked out at Pax River got to fly it for the short time it was available. I recall flying formation on the F6F one day. I believe Bud Britten was flying it while I was flying a civilian Temco Swift that an American in Manila owned.

On May 4 I had my first flight in P4M-1Q 121451, which was to be my aircraft until I left the unit. LT Ralph Dannettell was the PPC, LT(jg) Horace (Howdy) Taylor was PP1P and I was navigator. The other three planes in our unit were; 121452, 121454 and 124369. On May 8, during my second flight in our airplane we had a minor electrical fire that caused an emergency landing at Pax River. There was no damage to the aircraft.

On May 9 all four aircraft departed NAS Patuxent River, via NAS Dallas, for NAS Miramar, California. Upon departing Dallas on May 10, our plane had a fuel leak that resulted in feathering the port engine and returning to Dallas. The problem was quickly repaired and we departed again for Miramar. Our TDY was finally completed with our orders to VC-11, Miramar Detachment, NAS Miramar for operational training. Between May 10 and September 30, 1951, we were busily engaged in operational training at Miramar.

Additional pilots were assigned to our group. These aviators were; LT Kent Alexander, LT(jg) Red Farrell and LT(jg) Robert Bublitz. Our after-station personnel began arriving and they started their training. Additional enlisted personnel were assigned as our group began to evolve as an operational unit.

Original plans were to fly from Miramar to NAS Moffett and then to NAS Barbers Point. However, a trial howgozit showed that a loss of an engine halfway across would result in a ditching with a few hundred miles to go no matter which way we went. So we revised our plans to take a northern route with shorter legs.

Between the first and 16th of October, 1951 we flew our four aircraft from NAS Miramar to NS Sangley Point, Philippines. Our route started out to NAS Whidbey Island where we were required to make practice GCA approaches in anticipation of bad weather at Kodiak. We then left for Kodiak, Alaska. The weather across the Gulf of Alaska and into Kodiak was clear and the flight was without incident. When we departed the next morning Kodiak was living up to its reputation. There was good visibility below the clouds but the cloud base was solid at less than a 1,000 feet. Leaving Kodiak, our destination was Shemya AFB, Alaska but one plane diverted to NAS Adak with an engine problem. After it had departed Adak, the PPC of that plane discovered that one of the crew had adopted an Alaska Husky pup. When we were at Sangley Point the dog spent a lot of time under a leaky water faucet under our operations Quonset hut and seemed to love flying - probably to cool off! Later, when his owner returned stateside, the dog went with him. I believe the Adak plane refueled in northern Japan before continuing on to Atsugi.

Upon arriving at Shemya we taxied into a large hangar for the night. The Air Force bus driver that took us to our quarters said, when asked about the duty at Shemya, “It’s great but not as good as my last station, Johnson Island.” That guy sure liked isolation. The next morning we started engines in the hangar, taxied out and flew on to NAS Atsugi. We left Japan and arrived at NS Sangley Point on October 16, 1951.

On our arrival we were assigned an area that had one large Quonset hut and enough ramp space for our aircraft. Needing more space for our operations and maintenance, our First Lieutenant, Howdy Taylor, obtained another Quonset Point by rather dubious means. Howdy noticed that the Naval Station was transporting Quonset huts to be used for housing on the base from Manila via water to Sangley. They were then transported by truck down the main street that went by our operational area. One day when he was Duty Officer, he stepped out on the street, complete with sidearm, as trucks carrying a disassembled Quonset Point approached. Calmly, he waved them into our area. Quickly the trucks were unloaded. The hut was assembled, the walls were installed and this hut became our supply room and maintenance shop. By the time the station figured out where one of their Quonset huts had gone, we had it fully operational. For those who were at Sangley, it was the hut at the west end of our area, perpendicular to the runway.

My first operational flight was on November 2, 1951 that happened to be my 22nd birthday. On April 22, 1953 the Special Project Division was designated VW-1, Detachment Able. On September 12, 1953 I was detached from VW-1 Det A and returned to the United States on board the USNS Charles D. Barrett (TAP-196) arriving in San Francisco on October 5, 1953.

(About the author--- Mel Davidow started his flying career with his first flying lesson at age 15 and by his 17th birthday he received his private pilots license. Enlisting in the Naval Reserve on April 1947, with the idea of joining the active forces as soon as he finished high school, he was selected for the Naval Aviation College Program, one of three from the state of Florida in that year. After studying Aeronautical Engineering at the University of Florida, he reported for Naval flight training and received his wings as Naval Aviator on July 26, 1950. After his tour with Special Projects Division, he closed out his active duty career in 1954 as flight Instructor at NAAS Whiting Field, Florida. For several years he worked for Puerto Rico Airways as pilot and Operations Manager, flying a variety of aircraft. In 1958 he joined the CAA in the Miami area and he retired from the FAA in 1985. After that Mel joined a private company on contract to the FAA at Atlantic City, New Jersey where he worked until 1995. ----- editor )