

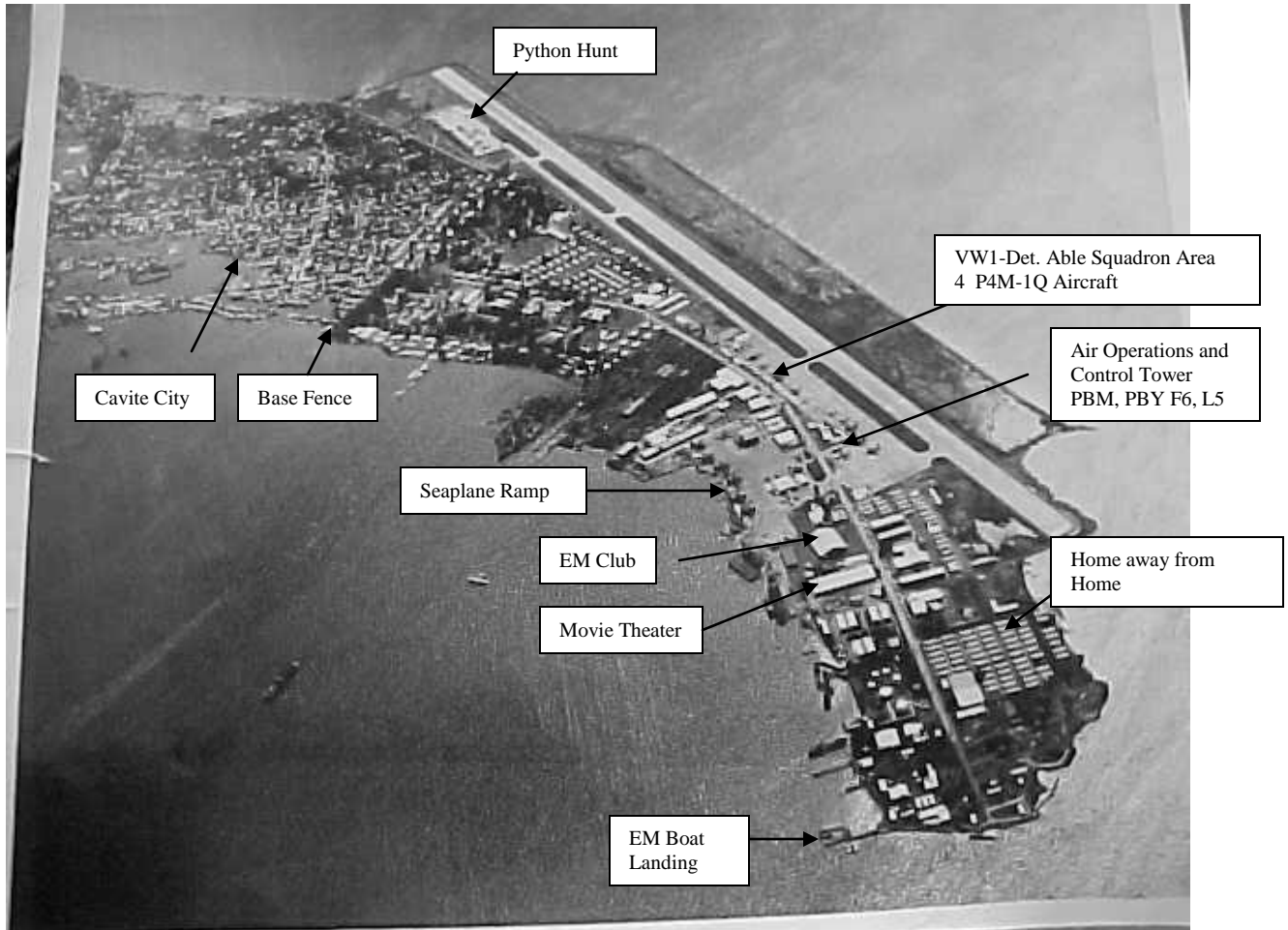
Memories of Sangley Point and VW1-Det Able

September 1952 to September 1954

Sailing from San Francisco in the fall of 1952 aboard the USNS David C. Shanks (AP-180, a 10,000 ton transport carrying about 2000 of us), I remember the bunks stacked 4 high with just enough room to squeeze in and the narrow aisles to get to the Head and the Mess area, the food trays sliding around during rough weather, running the projector showing movies up on deck (and the abuse with every malfunction), crossing the international date line initiation festivities (we never did cross the equator), but most of the rest of it was just a blur. We had stopped at Oahu for a short while but couldn't get off the ship. All in all it took a little over 3 weeks to get to Manila. (After dropping us off, this ship went to Eniwetok where it participated in the nuclear tests held there in November of 1952).



I remember walking off the ship with all my gear (in one big heavy sea bag) on swaying, bouncing planks between other large ships thinking that if I slipped into the water without being seen and didn't come up, it would probably be days until I was missed. A far cry from my hometown of Medina (population about 5000), where almost everyone had some idea of who I was and where I belonged.



Aerial View of Naval Station Sangley Point, Philippines

After a small boat trip to the Sangley Point Naval Station (see Cavite on the map) across Manila bay, no one knew who I was but they knew where I was supposed to be. Why the NAS Sangley Point fire station needed an Aviation Electronics Technician was never explained to me but it was to be my home for the next 8 weeks. Polishing the fire engine, fireman training and reading, and drinking coffee were about the only memories of that duty and I was glad when I was transferred to the base Air Operations group and began doing technician work keeping the electronics gear on a PBY, PBM, F6F fighter and L5 observation plane running.

Historically, Cavite was the site of Commodore Perry's defeat of the Spanish navy in 1898 resulting in the "acquisition" of the Philippines as an American protectorate.

In December 1952 I began to fly as a crewmember on the PBY and PBM for flights to Clark Field AFB to carry passengers, mail and whatever else showed up that could fit in the plane. One of the things that particularly pleased us "white hats" was that the pilot on many of these runs was a "white hat" himself. Petty Officer 1st Class Giles. He may have been one of the last enlisted pilots of that era. It was particularly fun when the Base Commander, a Navy Captain flew as his co-pilot.

One of the perks of this duty was that occasionally they would send a group of us to Hong Kong on the PBM. We spent about 5 days sight seeing and shopping (very inexpensive tailoring) I bought a suit and some other things long lost and forgotten. We also visited Tiger Balm (built by a salve maker) Gardens and I have pictures of the "garden"(mostly concrete statuary), which is located on Kowloon Mountain and reached by ferry from Hong Kong and then traveling up the side of the mountain by tram.

Another very interesting trip was by boat to Corregidor. Not much appeared to have changed here from 1945 when it was retaken from the Japanese. Many large guns with thousands of pockmarks from bullets and shrapnel still in place in their shelters indicated some of what had gone on here. I have pictures of some of it.

I remember going to the movies after eating at the EM club, waiting until dark, as the theater had no walls, only a roof for when it rained which it did very heavily during the monsoon season. I remember the "hot lockers" in the Quonset huts we had as a barracks. This hot locker was a large closet with several light bulbs on at all times to heat the room enough to stop our woolen uniforms stored there from molding. These Huts slept about 30 and contained only double-decker bunks and wooden lockers (no lounge, TV, kitchen area, bathroom, etc.) A Filipino "hut boy" (probably older than I) kept the place clean and shined our shoes for 5 dollars per person a month. I think he supported a lot of his family on that pay, as work was scarce then. I remember buying a bicycle instead of one of those new Lambretta motor scooters that had just become available. I can't remember what happened to it.

Another memory was of standing night guard duty at the very dark and very far end of the runway over some cargo airplanes that had been brought out of China just before the communists took over in 1949 (perhaps belonging to Flying Tiger airlines?). The fence at that part of the base was only a few hundred yard from the planes and was guarded by Filipinos and perhaps the powers that be thought that the locals might convince a buddy to let him climb over the fence to collect some parts so they set up night time Navy guards by the planes. One night one of the Filipino guards reported a Python track leading into the storage area. I remember being somewhat jittery that night on my 4-hour shift and was very happy to see my relief and no snake. The next night the watch PO was driving a jeep down to check on the watch stander and saw the snake,

rolled a wheel over it and shot it with his .45. I never saw it but they said it was about 20 feet long. Recently, I saw a picture of it draped over Don Hoovers' shoulders. Looked more like ten feet to me.

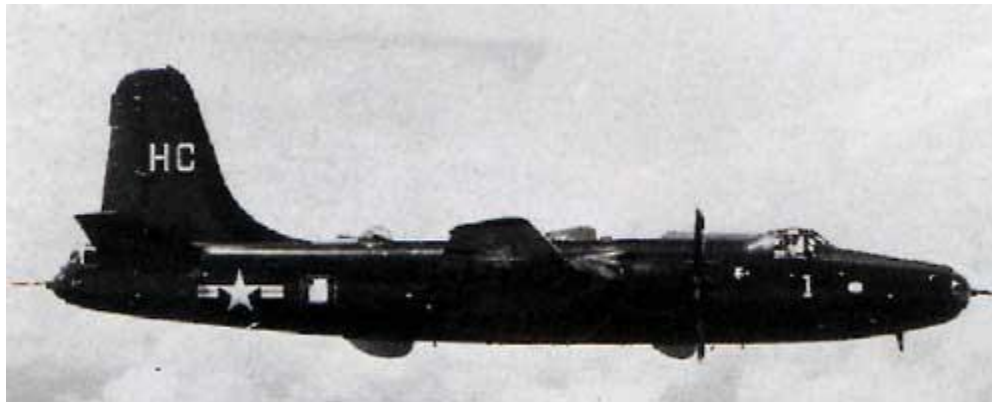
Not long after I made AT3 (October of 52) I started standing Petty Officer of the Watch duty when it was my turn instead of standing the watch (4 hours of walking around being bored) itself. Now I would drive around in a truck or Jeep periodically to see if any of the watchstanders needed anything or had fallen asleep. Don't I look happier?



I got over to Manila reasonably often and always on the "liberty boat" never by bus. I soon learned that travel on land was not considered safe in that area because of bandits called "Huks". These bandits came into being by a complicated process starting with the banding together of Filipino guerilla fighters during WW2, discontentment of the poor and farmers after the war, political intrigue, plus a growing communist influence, and resulting in this small but dangerous remnant that made travel by land a hazardous business. I remember "Jeepney" taxi's, Fried rice, San Migel beer, a statue of a Filipino hero holding a sword standing over a dead Magellan, and the Worlds Fair (in Manila that year).

Off hours pursuits for many were varied but someone built a small boat and found a small motor to make trips out into the Bay. It's a big bay and got quite rough at times and seemed to me not a good thing to do. I remember that it caught fire, but I don't remember if they had to swim for it or got picked up. I believe that nobody went swimming in the bay because of shark sightings and an inhospitable shoreline.

In September of 1953 I was transferred to an operational squadron known by several names while I was there. First, as “just” Special Projects Division, then as Airborne Early Warning Squadron 1, Detachment Able (VW1 Det. Able), then VW3, Det. Able, then, after I left, VQ1. The Squadron was located just down the runway parking ramp from the air operations group where I had worked and I don’t remember the transfer as affecting my non working hours much at all. My working hours however were considerably different. Before joining the squadron we were told that this was a very secret operation and to stay away from the guarded areas and don’t take any pictures. The squadron had only 4 aircraft, but what aircraft they were. The official designation was P4M-1Q and the squadrons’ work was to fly along the China, Korean and Viet Nam coastlines collecting radar and other radiation “signatures” that were being used as these communist countries’ first line of defense from the sea.

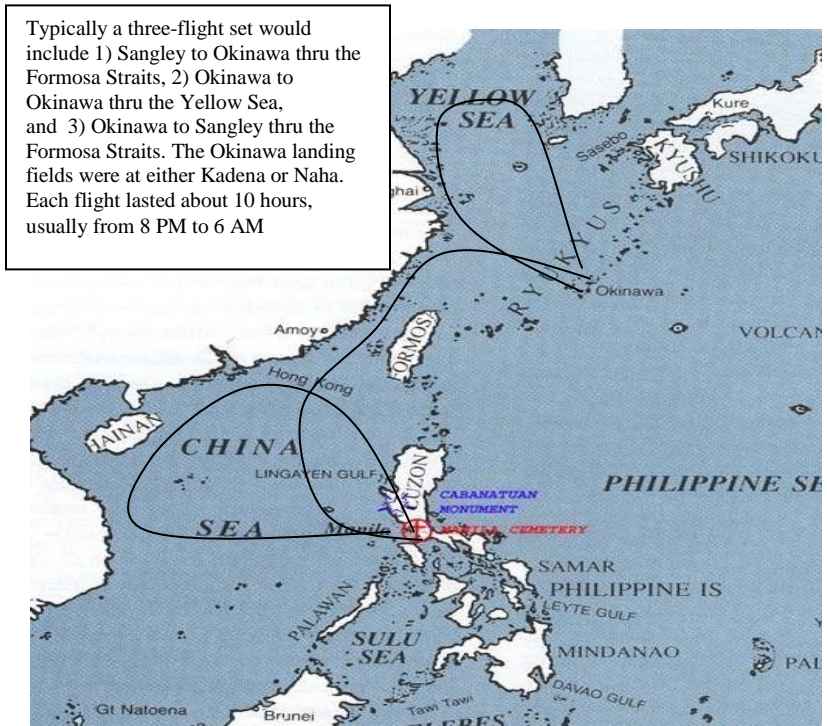


P4M-1Q Martin “Mercator”

The P4M was unique in many ways. It had 2 prop engines (R-4360’s) and 2 jet engines (J33’s) that were mounted in the prop engine nacelles. It also had 2 crews; the flight crew and the data collection crew located in the aft section. It also had three gun turrets, nose (twin 20 mm) top (twin 50 cal) and tail (twin 20 mm). It was also one of the best-looking aircraft of its’ type at the time. In flight the prop engines did almost all the work while the thirsty jets were used only as required. Such an arrangement permitted long patrols with short high-speed dash capability if needed.

I came to the squadron as a half-trained radioman and first flew training flights in September of 1953. I was no longer repairing the aircraft electronics but learning to operate them. Then in October came my first of a set of three operational flights as second radioman. Almost all operational flights were at night and lasted about 10 hours each. We left Sangley about 9 in the evening (BuNo 369 with Lt. Nesbitt in the pilot’s seat) on Monday, October 26th, flew up the China coast (between China and Taiwan) taking measurements all the way and landing about dawn at the Kadena Air Force Base on Okinawa. I remember climbing into the nose turret for my first turn there in a bulky,

thickly padded flight suit feeling like I was stuck out on the end of the front seat of a roller coaster waiting for the turret to pop out of the plane and fall into the ocean. It was cold and dark and windy as the turret wasn't well sealed and I felt very isolated there. The pilot said to report every light I saw which were presumably boats or ships; for what reason I never found out. Perhaps it was to keep me awake and to provide a sense of not being so alone. There were 3 positions that the radiomen covered on most flights. At the radioman's station the job was to continuously monitor our only long range connection



Typical (Generalized) Patrol Tracks

with a ground station (Morse Code only, in those days) ready to receive or transmit operational info as needed. It was worrisome to think that if we went down at sea, that link was the only real way to get help. At the gun station the job was to stay alert. At the radar station not much was required as the radar was used very sparingly and only when needed to check the navigational calculations necessary to get us from one place to another. The idea here was to be as little noticed as possible.

These three stations were rotated about every two hours as I recall.

Before leaving Sangley on every operational flight I was given a parachute, .38 cal revolver, life vest, E and E kit (maps, first aid kit, a "blood chit" [bring this guy back and we'll pay you], a gold piece to use as money in case we were picked up by profit-minded individuals, and other items I can't remember) Along with the parachute we wore a harness to which the chute could be attached if required (heaven forbid), but the actual parachute was stored on the bulkhead by each crew station. Also on board came IF4's similar to K-rations (canned food, mystery meat, etc.) probably left over from WW2, and,

also, fresh groceries which to my delight were turned into freshly cooked steak and potatoes and corn for a “before we hit the hazardous duty zone” feast. The crew included one guy who could actually cook, using the small stove aft of the wing root. Did he also do biscuits? I forget. And of course, coffee was always available. Was it perked or thermos? I can’t remember.

After landing at Kadena, most of the crew headed to a well-built (read non-Quonset Hut) Air Force EM barracks to sleep for the day. Some time later that day I went down to the head and was taking a shower when the door opened and in came a Japanese woman with a bucket which she began filling at the deep sink. Slightly panicked, I froze. She looked at me without any interest or surprise, took her bucket and left. Another lesson in the ways of a larger world than I was used to.

On October 29th (what did we do on the 27th ?-- repairs?) we took off for the Yellow Sea loop segment of the set but had to abort, possibly because of engine trouble. We tried again on the night of October 30th, but had to abort again. Then on November 1st, 2 days before my 21st birthday, we took a direct route back to Sangley. I was probably too green and trusting to worry much about the possible need to abort much farther from land than a normal down-the-coast track. I don’t remember who the Plane Captain was or if he was worried about making it safely. In general, looking back on all those flight hours (about 400) over the year I spent in the squadron, I must have had a great deal of trust in all those who had a great deal of responsibility for making it all work.

By summer of 1954 I was flying as first radio. My first operational flight at this position was, initially, somewhat of a jolt to me when after waiting politely for a clear space on the circuit to tell NPO5 that we were in the air and to give them our departure time the pilot informed me if I didn’t do it soon we’d have to abort. With that I just closed my ears and banged it out. Fortunately the NPO operator was good enough to save my bacon. I got a quick “roger” and off we went.

Another stressful time involving a radio message, was on the night of July 30, 1954 near the island of Hainan. We were flying BuNo 124364 with LCDR Gaibler as pilot when the word was spread that there might be interceptors taking off Hainan to try to find us. Someone said that runway lights had come on and I assume the boys in back had provided further info. The word came to send a distress message, which was probably a “being chased” signal plus a position report and to do it now before heading for the deck with all four engines firewalled. We had to get a roger for that message before we dropped too low. Someone said later that we were pushing 400 knots for a while. Fifty some years later it’s all a bit murky and I keep hoping to find someone who was on that flight to help me fill in some of the blanks. There was some speculation at the time that the interceptors were probably YAK-9’s, prop planes probably not much faster than we were in skedaddle mode. I don’t think there were any good look-down-shoot down fighter borne radars in use in those days so we were probably a good deal safer than we thought. All in all it was an emotionally memorable time.

I've puzzled over the fact that apparently all of the VQ aircraft following the P4M were totally unarmed. What was the thinking here? Were jet fighters too formidable? Would unarmed aircraft be less likely to invite attack? Flying at night how would they know whether or not we were armed? What were the attack statistics after the P4M era?

Another memorable episode occurred after a local gunnery hop. Several of us had been firing the top turret 50's at a towed target and after landing and pulling into the parking area, heard a bang. Apparently one of the 50's still had a live round in the chamber, which "cooked off", went through the vertical stabilizer and into Manila Bay. I don't remember what was said about that but I would imagine that there was a least one red face in the crowd.

For some unknown reason (procrastination?) I never got to the resort city of Baguio or any other "place" in the country other than Corregidor and Manila. I did learn a little Tagalog (enough that 50 years later a native born Filipino could understand what I was saying). I learned about a delicacy called a balut (a boiled chicken egg that was just a few days from hatching. I took their word for it and did not sample it myself. I marveled at the Filipino way of squatting to talk to one another if they talked long.

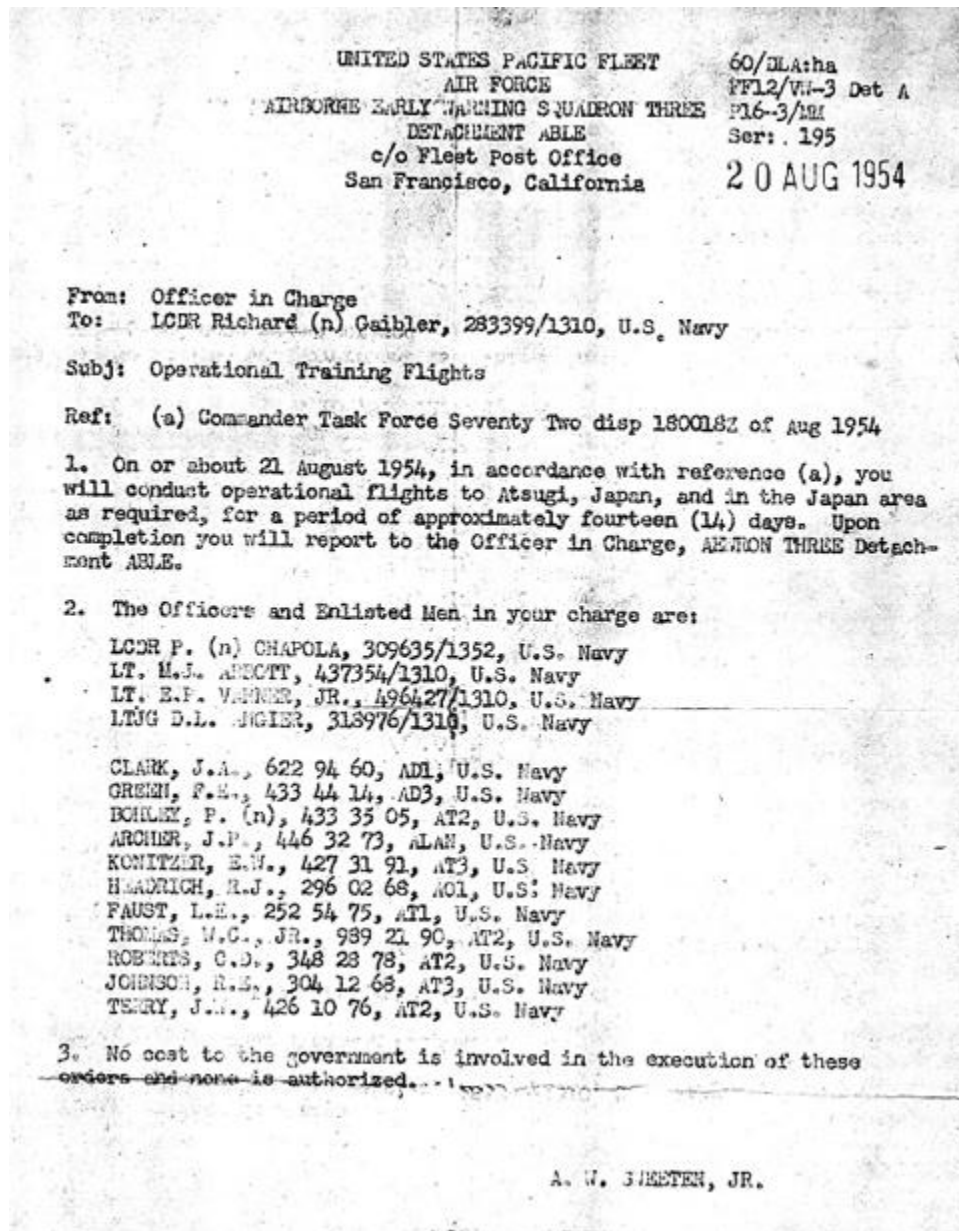
I didn't go into Cavite very often. There wasn't much to do besides drink and/or chase women (apparently they didn't need much chasing). Some of the young guys found "apartments" complete with "wives" and came in most mornings looking very tired. Some in our hut who liked to party late would come in about 2 in the morning with food (shouting buns and beans, buns and beans!) for all. The buns were fresh baked for the coming day. The beans were canned.

U. S. dollars were not used here and "on base money" was called script (like monopoly money" with which we were paid every 2 weeks. Naturally, some of the script came into Filipino hands. Periodically, all the script was physically changed in appearance and had to be exchanged under military control to be destroyed. The effort here I gather, was to minimize the use of it by non military people. As I recall, there was quite a scramble among those who could not legally exchange the script who offered greatly discounted rates to any military person who would give pesos (Filipino money) for script

A first class petty officer made about \$250 per month in those days. I was a PO2 in 54 and was probably making about \$200 a month, but with flight pay (about \$80 a month), and hazardous duty pay (flying in a designated combat zone) of \$60 a month I was pulling in about \$340 a month, most of which I was sending home in anticipation of buying a new red Mustang convertible when I got out. As it turned out I couldn't bear to do it and bought a green "49" Chevy for \$150 instead.

The "orders" shown below sent us to Japan for two weeks to fly tracks along the Korean coast. Our last operational flight there was on Sept. 3rd, 1954. On the 4th one of the "regular" patrol squadron P2V's flying a similar track was shot down. Some of the members of this squadron came to where we were bunking and accused us of flying in a more aggressive manner (closer to North Korean sensitive areas) ticked off the North

Koreans and got their plane shot down. We were glad to leave the next day for Sangley. I knew I was due to come back to the states soon and had bought a set of china and some other souvenirs as had others and we were pretty well loaded down on the way back.



Charlie Roberts, one of the "monitor operators" in the back end of the plane said recently that there were so many set of dishes back there that the plane was flying 3 degrees nose up.

This was to be my last flight with the squadron and I left shortly thereafter by air (didn't miss not going by sea) and re-entered the "normal" world for a short 30 days and

then reported to the Naval Air Station on North Island at San Diego and to Composite Squadron 35 (VC-35). This unit had single engine AD aircraft (Carrier based light bombers) and I was back to work as a technician. Even though there were few flight crew needs here, they were good enough to make it possible for me to continue getting flight pay by arranging for a minimum 4 hours of flight time every month. Most of the AD's were single seaters, but the AD-4N carried one or two back seaters as crew for operating radar or jammer equipment. One month the only flight available was to practice "glide bombing". Did I want to go on this hop? Gliding, thought I, how bad can it be? It was very bad! Seemed like straight down to me. Turned out it was only 60 degrees. I never did that again. It wasn't worth \$80 a month. A P4M was well behaved compared to an AD driven by a "cowboy".