

The Zero-Zero Club

In the waning days of straight-deck carrier operations, a dozen pilots flying from the U.S.S. Philippine Sea (CVA-47) on a June morning in 1955 experienced a Sunday to remember forever. Most of the details are recollections of this writer; however, at a VF-143 reunion in August 1995 the event was reviewed with other participants, who were supportive in recalling and confirming 40-year old facts. They also concurred in the notion of recording the vignette for posterity.

Our VF-143, sporting the sobriquet of "Cougars", was so called because the squadron was initially equipped with the Grumman F9F-6 Cougars. Created from a New Orleans-based Reserve squadron that had been called up for the Korean fracas, hostilities ceased before the Cougars were deployed. The VF-143 patch showed the handsome head of a mountain lion, under which was a banner displaying the squadron's motto in the Philippine dialect of Tagalog: "ANG TANGING GAMOT AY GATAS NG COUGAR". Most Stewards' Mates in those days would translate it as "the best medicine is the milk of the cougar."

In keeping with the cougar motif, when ready for a catapult shot some VF-143 warriors eschewed the customary salute to the Cat Officer, instead reaching out and clawing the side of the cockpit. This was facilitated by the policy of launching with the canopy open, abetted by a general attitude of making large allowances for wild-eyed fighter pilots.

As the Navy's first aircraft capable of exceeding the speed of sound, the dash Six was the source of justifiable pride and some puffery for its manufacturer. The Bethpage crowd dubbed it "the Grumman Cougar Jet, supersonic in a shallow glide." Actually, the glide had to be about vertical, starting from at least 40,000 feet with 100% power. Flamed out, its glide ratio was about the same--90 degrees. It was said that the Grumman Ironworks had planned to build the Cougar out of concrete before learning that steel was heavier! None-the-less, we loved the bird and devoured enormous quantities of fuel struggling to 40 thou to fracture the sonic barrier at every opportunity. Who would have guessed that before long we would be climbing supersonic in the Crusader!

Sleekly good-looking to this day (verifiable by viewing the one on display in the National Museum of Naval Aviation), the dash Six was whistle clean, with nothing marring its dark blue surface except the four small ports at the business end of the 20MM cannons. The Cougar did have a few shocking flight characteristics, not the least being the huge attitude change necessary during flap operation, and the roller-coaster cartwheel 2 that consummated a high-G stall.

The Phil Sea deployed to WestPac from San Diego in early 1955 with Miramar based squadrons embarked. Technically the ship did not have an "Air Group" (so called before they were redesignated as "Wings"). A penurious DOD had limited the number of Air Groups for the Navy; so, ingenious blue-suiters circumvented the constraint by assembling "Air Task Groups" from available squadrons, with no regard for related numbers. Air Task Group Two was comprised of VF-143 (Cougars), VF-123 (F9F-2 Panthers) and VA-55 (AD-6 Skyraiders, more fondly known as Spads). Additionally, there were assigned detachments of Photo Panthers and Night Attack Spads.

On June 5, 1955 Phil Sea was directed by CTF-77 to conduct air operations in an area southwest of Okinawa. Cloud layers extended from a few hundred feet to over 30,000, with numerous scattered rain showers, presenting marginal to unsatisfactory weather conditions for day fighter pilots such as us. The day had already produced one Cougar deck crash and one Spad in the drink. The Cougar failed to negotiate a late wave-off, resulting in a number-12 wire engagement. On that deck anything past the number-9 wire extended the roll-out through the two lower wire barriers and, to varying degrees, into the 21-foot barricade. The water landing by the Spad was an unexplained ditching immediately after deck launch. Anyway, fearless task force staff members on a distant cruiser decreed a continuation of flight operations, contrary to a recommendation by Captain Ray (C.O. Phil Sea).

Thus, the die was cast when two divisions of Cougars and one of Panthers were launched under a low overcast late in the morning. An Air Force C-121 Airborne-Radar craft was operating in the area, and the Navy aircraft were turned over for his control. After an hour of uneventful vectoring in the soup, the three divisions were released to return to home plate.

VF-143 Skipper Flash Gordon's division was the first to head back to the ship. They pushed over from 35,000 in the standard Cougar letdown (80% power, 250 knots, gear down--for a 4000fpm descent). The Skipper's wingman was Ken Ahlgren; Don Brownsberger led the second section; and Bob Honeycutt was number four. Incidentally, Leo Parlett missed the excitement because his aircraft was found to be incompletely fueled, resulting in Brownsberger being launched as the spare.

At recovery time the ship's air controller was reporting weather of 2500-broken. Unknown in the Combat Information Center, the ship had just become enveloped in a huge, dense fog bank while the unsuspecting aviators headed down. Fuel states would have permitted Bingo to Iwakuni (the designated divert 3 field) before leaving altitude, but that soon changed to a choice of home plate or a splash down. C.I.C. continued to report 2500 broken until Flash Gordon later advised them to the contrary

The Panthers, led by Fritz Hansen, with Noa Anderson, J.W. Andriola and J.M Gervais, were next to descend. Finally, division leader Stan Williams pushed over his Cougars, with Mo Hayes (recorder of this story) on his wing, Bill Charles leading the section, and Bobby Lane tucked in tight.

Following standard procedure (although NATOPS had not yet been invented) flaps were dropped at 5000 feet to reduce descent rate to 1000fpm. It was later agreed that all broke into the clear at about 3000 feet, but were surprised to observe a very extensive and solid undercast. Raising the wheels to further reduce vertical speed to 500fpm, clouds were re-entered at around 900 feet. After finding no bottom by 200 feet, the flights climbed back to VFR conditions at 1000 feet.

The only navigation equipment in that era was the ARN-6 low frequency homing beacon, fondly known as the Bird-dog. With this aid, a position overhead the ship was attained, and it became evident that the wake of the ships could be discerned when looking straight down from low altitudes.

This in mind, Flash broke the lead division overhead in the clear, with each Cougar making a 360 degree turn before following its predecessor on an individual approach. The Skipper was the first to encounter what the others would find: pea soup down to 50 or 60 feet. Inching down under 50 feet on the downwind leg, Flash spied the carrier as he approached the abeam position. At this point he heard the ship broadcast "Cougat at the 180 you are low!" "I know", was his firm reply, "I want to be able to see you." Barely retaining visual contact, Flash stayed low until reaching the wake, then climbed into the fog to the "cut" position.

Regarding more specifically how the weather impacted the effort to get aboard: although the reported ceiling was slightly above "zero", and visibility on the surface was not quite "zero", Phil Sea's flight deck was 60 feet above the water, and the "cut" position was another 15 feet above the ramp; so, pilot's eye level conditions in the flat pattern at approximately 75 feet were essentially zero-zero. One's head was in the clouds, though the feet might be hanging down underneath! Even so, looking straight down, the burble of a ship's wake was visible, which largely saved the day.

The Skipper's technique of getting low enough for a little visibility was probably the best idea, but most of us did not discover it. The last of the divisions did not shift to 4 land/launch frequency until commencing the penetration from 1000 feet, thus missing the dialogue between the tower and the earlier birds at the beginning of the recovery. Consequently, we blundered around at 80 to 100 feet where it was solidly Instrument Flight Rules (IFR).

Returning to the sequence: Ken Ahlgren emulated his leader and got his puppy aboard. Next, Don Brownsberger strayed a little long in the groove, and turning on final he inadvertently picked up the plane-guard destroyer's wake. Don had an exciting close encounter of the terrifying kind with the Small-boy's radar mast before realigning on the carrier wake and trapping safely.

Number four in the first division, Bob Honeycutt, had the problem of his Bird-dog homing needle pointing backwards. He disappeared from the scene (radio contact lost as well) for about 20 minutes. Bob's denouement will be detailed last, for that is indeed what he was: LAST.

The four Panthers clambered aboard after Brownsberger, but the details of their experiences are not recalled. I do remember hearing that one of them had a near miss with the island structure that cleared the spectators from buzzard's roost, before trapping on the next pass.

Meantime, someone had the clever notion to throw blue smoke pots off the Phil Sea's fantail, thus differentiating the carrier's wake, to forestall further threats to land on the escort ship (destroyer).

Then the thrills began for the other four Cougars. After orbiting in the clear for a while at 1000 feet, Willie detached Bill Charles with Bobby Lane to take an interval and penetrate separately. With Mo on his right wing, Willie eased into the goo on a course calculated to pass alongside to starboard in the usual "break" position. At 100 feet nothing was visible until suddenly Phil Sea's island flashed by, then was gone immediately. Thereupon, Willie tossed the break-up hand signal and wheeled away into the fog.

Relating my first-person experience from this point: I continued upwind straight and level for thirty seconds to get a one-minute interval behind Willie at the ramp. I then bent the Cougar around a little tighter than was comfortable when flying entirely on the gauges, because I liked the idea of staying close to the only duty runway. Although I did not realize it at the time, my turn was inside Willie; so, I arrived in the groove ahead of him. Happily there was sufficient interval that it did not matter. A too-close position abeam had produced an overshoot on final, but a hammerhead turn brought me back over the wake to a course directly behind the carrier.

On final approach my scan was: ship's wake, airspeed, altitude, ship's wake. The clearly increasing turbulence in the water assured me that the ramp was getting close. I heard the "Angel" (a helo hovering almost on the water a few yards to the starboard quarter of the carrier) report to the Landing Signal Officer (LSO) "Cougar in the groove!" and I knew he referred to me. That call was quickly followed by the LSO's "Cougar-in-the groove you are a little high". As I executed a cautious high-dip, a strong "CUT" call followed in rapid succession. There was still nothing visible except a churning wake below.

Any Naval Aviator knows that the "Cut" signal is mandatory; so, I blindly jerked the throttle to idle, dumped the nose, and then assumed the landing attitude. Instantly I was richly rewarded by the appearance of a large, beautiful, flat surface strung with steel cables, one of which engaged my tail-hook and brought the Cougar to an abrupt halt. The logbook would reflect simply a 1.4-hour flight with one carrier landing -- just another day at the office.

Soon Willie, Bill and Bobby followed suit, and we were ready to sample the "Old Monastery" brandy supplied by the Flight Surgeon, except that Honeycutt was still missing. Meantime, he had diagnosed the reversed-needle problem and finally arrived in the groove VERY low on fuel. Bob got several quick LSO calls as the guys on the platform caught sight of his underbelly rapidly approaching, while he had not yet seen the ship. The calls were something like "you are high, you are fast, you are low, you are slow, CUT". Unbeknown to "Paddles" (the LSO) at that moment, execution of the cut was obviated by the J48's reaction to fuel starvation. The power plant breathed the final whiff of hydrocarbons and was winding down as the Cougar rolled to a quiet engagement of an early wire.

Captain H.L. Ray created the Zero-Zero club the next day, inducting the twelve plank owners with a citation and unique patch. Some of us went on to enjoy nocturnal adventures in F8 "Crusader" fighters (the world's first thousand-mile-per-hour airplane) on small carrier decks, and other religious experiences; however, nothing else ever quite matched that misty morning in the Sea of Japan when the Zero-Zero Club was in session.

Submitted by LCDR Bruce DeWald, USN RET with the following information:

FYI: I was in RENSHAW DDE-499 for PHIL SEA's last two major events: The search for Pan Am Clipper ROMANCE OF THE SKIES and her last WestPac in 1958 before being decommissioned.

P.S. PHIL SEA took the OP HIGHJUMP R4Ds to the launch point for their flight to Little America & was the only Aircraft Carrier to ever deploy to Antarctica.