

Chapter 7 – A Facsimile of Flying

After I graduated from Lubbock High School in 1943, I was inducted into the United States Navy and ordered to attend college in the V-12 program. The navy selected Southwestern Louisiana Institute in Lafayette, Louisiana as the college I should attend. I went to S.L.I. and started my pre-medical studies. While we in the V-12 I wore a sailor's uniform, but I never felt like I belonged to the navy.

One day I fell into conversation with my friend, Jeremiah Joseph O'Driscoll. We called him Jerry. Jerry was from Tulsa, Oklahoma. As we talked, I learned that he had also felt as if he did not really belong to the navy. With him being from Tulsa and me being from Lubbock, we were a pair of seventeen-year-olds who had never been near an ocean. As we talked, we decided we should go ask Frank Crawford for advice. Frank, who was older, had served on the Battleship North Carolina before he was selected for the V-12 program. We knew he could tell us how to get to see the real navy. When we approached Frank, he laughed and said, "So you two kids want to get in touch with the real navy. To do that you need to go to the Algiers Navy Base down in New Orleans. They keep a lot of warships down there."

Taking his advice, we chose a Saturday, donned our

uniforms and hitch-hiked a ride to New Orleans. There we splurged and took a room in the Jung Hotel. After we ate lunch, we walked out on Canal Street, decided to bypass the French Quarters and hailed a taxi. We were eager to see the real navy.

The taxi carried us across the Mississippi River on a high, sweeping bridge. We left the taxi at the United States Navy Base in Algiers. We walked down the street gawking at the ships tied up at the docks.

Suddenly, Jerry grabbed my elbow and said, "Look there." When I looked where he was pointing I saw a large sign that read, Patrol Torpedo Boats. I said, "Hey, those must be the fast little PT Boats we've heard about." Hurrying across the street Jerry said, "Come on. Let's have a closer look".

We walked under the sign and saw a sleek, white boat that looked like a yacht. Its graceful lines swept upward from a low stern to a high bow. Along the gunwale on each side we could see torpedoes held in steel racks. A cannon was mounted on the stern. Two twin-barreled machine guns were attached to its glassed-in cabin.

While we two dry-land sailors stared at that beautiful ship, an officer appeared on her deck. He looked at us, then spoke in the accent of a man from the East Coast and asked, "Would you young men like to come aboard?"

We answered simultaneously, "Yes sir." We had learned enough navy etiquette to know that two salutes were

now called for. Facing the boat's stern, we saluted the American flag that waved there. We then turned to the officer and saluted him. He said. "Welcome on board. We will be shoving off for a spin on Lake Pontchartrain shortly. You're welcome to have a look around then find a place to hang on and go for a ride."

We thanked him and turned to look around. Then we discovered the crew was already on board. Being careful to not get in the way of the crew we eased around and continued to look at the boat. We tapped the hull and found that it was wood. We saw that the cannon was stamped 20 millimeters.

Then we came to a ladder that led to the lower deck. There we looked down and saw two 12-cylinder engines bearing the name PACKARD. Those engines were so clean a person could have eaten off them. While we watched, two crewmen pushed starter buttons, and the engines began to purr. We were startled by the vibrations we felt. Those 12-cylinder PACKARDS were sending off signals that they were powerful.

The captain then rang a bell to inform the crew we were getting under way. The boat moved slowly out on to Lake Pontchartrain. At that moment the captain must have opened the throttle. What had been a kitten's purr by those PACKARDS turned into a tiger's loud growl. The vibrations we had felt before increased. They went up through our limbs and shook every fiber in our bodies.

The stern of that PT Boat lowered into the waves and the bow rose. We were skimming along on top of the water. It was a facsimile of flying. At that moment the captain swung in a wide curve. We were astonished to discover we could see the sand on the bottom of Lake Pontchartrain.

We came out of the curve, and the captain did something I cannot explain. He must have cut the power to one engine and powered up the other. That boat stood on its stern and spun like a top. After that, we straightened out and the captain gave the man at the cannon a hand signal. The cannoneer swung his revolving canon toward the stern and fired a clip of four 20 millimeters shells. They were blank rounds but the bang was loud. The percussion from the shells plastered our clothes against our bodies. The cannoneer fired about a half dozen clips. When we circled again we saw a fighter plane flying toward us. The men at the twin-barreled machine guns zeroed in on the plane and fired at it until it passed over. With the training exercise over, we headed back to Algiers.

Jerry and I had just lived through an exciting taste of the real navy.