Pacific Beach Historical Society
NEWSLETTER

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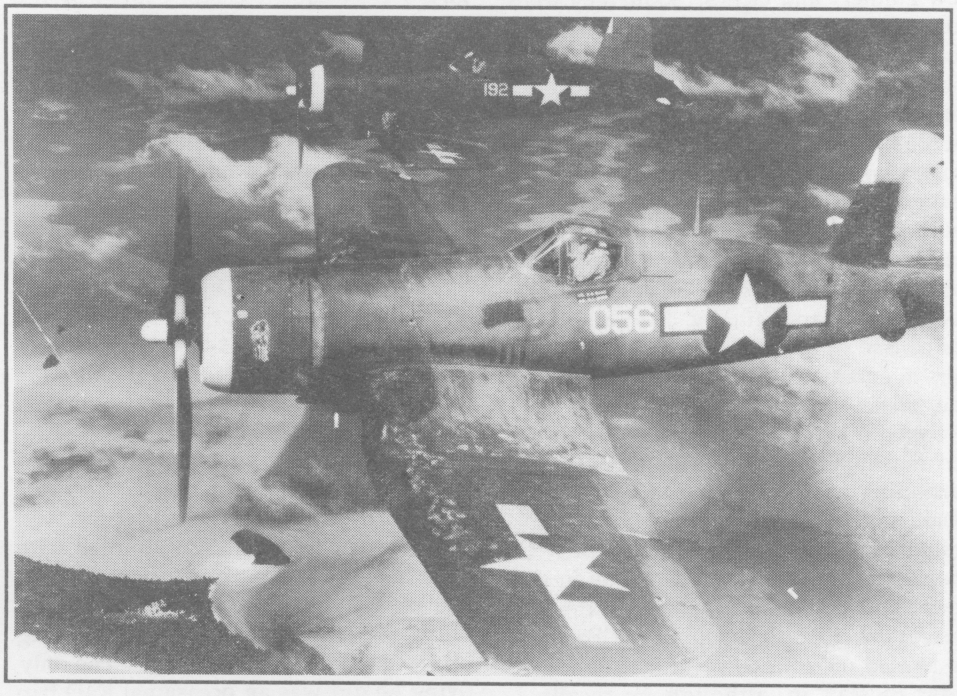
RICHARD RASH -- A MARINE AVIATOR IN THREE WARS

Richard Rash was born at Balboa Naval Hospital on February 21, 1921 and grew up in Pacific Beach. He attended Pacific Beach Elementary and Pacific Beach Junior High, and graduated from La Jolla High. He took a year off to earn money for college, then entered San Diego State College. While pursuing an engineering degree he played football and enrolled in CPT -- Civilian Pilot Training. After Pearl Harbor he waited until he had the required two years of college, then enrolled in the Navy V-5 program as an Aviation Cadet. He soon found himself at Los Alamitos flying N2S Stearmans , then went on to advanced training at Corpus Christi.

Dick graduated from Naval flight school at NAS Corpus Christi on March 10, 1943, and opted to go with the Marine Corps. He tried desperately to get into fighters, but was sent to Cherry Point to fly PBJs. Once again, it was hurry up and wait. There were more 2nd LTs than airplanes, so the newcomers were treated to hikes in the North Carolina swamps. Rash considers it fortunate that he contracted mumps, and spent the two weeks in a darkened room. Suddenly orders came for transfer to Miramar, which was a Marine facility at that time. For a while it looked like he was going to fly the R4D transport.

Within a week there were 500 2nd Lts at Miramar, and Rash was one of 50 men sent to Camp Pendleton for the "Muscle Course". Rash recalls their instructor, an ex-football player from UCLA, making them do "grass drills" in their liberty uniforms. "All aviators are prima donnas," he shouted. "We're gonna make Marines out of you." He recalls extensive swimming in the pool, then hiking to the Pacific for practice taking rubber boats out through the surf. Like all good grunts he was given the opportunity to climb hills, and learn fighting -- "knife fighting, street fighting, all kinds of fighting". Suddenly, out of the blue, came a request for volunteers for fighter training at MCAS El Toro, and Rash made sure he was on the bus.

As the bus neared El Toro the young pilots noticed a brush fire raging on nearby Saddelback Mountain. At the El Toro gate they learned that a Corsair had spun in and started the blaze. Near the runway were the overturned remains of two more Corsairs. Before long they were gathered in front of the group commander who informed them that they were among a fortunate few who would soon be flying the fastest fighter in the Marine Corps arsenal -- the F4U-1 "Corsair"! Rash's thoughts flashed briefly to the three Corsairs he had met on the way in. Then the young men were introduced to the man who would supervise their training. "Come on in, gentlemen," Rash recalls were his first words, as they assembled before him. It was the first time in his military career he had been called a gentleman. "Where did you come from -- Vero Beach, Opa Locka?" "Doc" asked, referring to the two main Marine fighter training bases. "No, we're P-Boat pilots from Corpus Christi," someone replied. Doc nearly swallowed his cigar. The instructor pilots, most of whom had just returned from combat at Guadacanal, were gathered just outside the door must have wondered how they had angered the gods. Still, Rash remembers, they were well treated, and in fact were encouraged to go down to Laguna Beach for some relaxation before the training began.



Richard Rash pilots a Vought F4U-1 Corsair near Peleilu during World War II.

On the following Monday eighteen pilots assembled for familiarization in SNJ trainers, which were also new to them. Their previous experience was in Beechcraft trainers and PBY's. Dick drew Ed Overind as his instructor, a San Diego boy who had flown with the Flying Tigers. Rash took it up, flew it around, and landed it, all the while feeling Overind's hands on the controls. Nevertheless, Overind told him to take it up alone, and Rash "brought it back in one piece". They trained all that summer of 1943, learning firsthand from the combat experience of their veteran instructors, some of whom were their same age. Later they moved up to Wildcats and, finally, to Corsairs.

On 16 October 1943 VMF-114 reported to San Diego, where they boarded a ship bound for Hawaii. For six weeks they trained at Ewa, then trained for two months at Midway. They kept four planes on "squadron alert", and were frequently sent out to intercept friendly submarines and aircraft transports on the way into Midway. They returned to Hawaii and two weeks later went aboard the "Long Island" for the voyage south to Espirtos Santos. There, billeted at Turtle Bay, they flew gunnery and tactics. Soon, they were accompanying dive bombers and torpedo bombers on their missions. The group then moved north to Green Island and continued training. After two and half months, they earned R & R in Sydney, Australia. Rash fondly recalls the quiet beauty of the city, with its many parks. After their ten day hiatus from the war, the men returned to Espiritos Santos, and were soon moving on to Guadacanal and Bougainville and, finally, Peleilu. Over the course of a year Dick lost three Corsairs to enemy fire, but always got back in one piece. One one occasion he was swooped up almost immediately by a PBY and returned to find his roomates already portioning out his belongings. As Mark Twain said, the reports of his death were premature. As the war wound down, Rash knew that he wanted to stay in the Corps and managed to complete the paperwork while still in the South Pacific. He passed on a $1500 severance bonus in order to stay in, although he recalls a couple of individuals that managed to collect the money and rejoin the Corps.

In June of 1945 he returned to the States and joined the Ferry Command, operating out of Floyd Bennett Field in New York. He was in San Francisco, on his first ferry command flight, for VJ Day. As the reality of winter in New York set in Dick requested, and received, a transfer to the ferry command base in San Pedro, California. For six months one of his main chores was to fly over various parades held on Sundays throughout the greater Los Angeles area. From the ferry command he went to MAG 33, a collection of pilots coming from and going to duty overseas. He then went to VMF-452, a carrier squadron operating mainly off of jeep carriers in San Diego. As 1946 drew to a close Dick went to Quantico for a five month ASW school. After completing the school he was offered a chance to return to Hawaii, but opted instead for duty in China, which sounded infinitely more romantic.

It was a crisp fall day when they arrived in Tsingtao, and Dick was immediately struck by the numbers of dirt-poor Chinese coolies. It was later said that you couldn't make a forced landing anywhere in China without killing at least twenty Chinese. He reported for duty with VMF-211, again flying Corsairs. They shared a base with Nationalist Chinese P-51's. Their flying activities consisted mostly of buzzing coolies. The social life was outstanding, most of the squadron occupying the management office of Shanghai Mills for their living quarters. White Russian girls were frequent visitors, lured by the latest movies, good food, and open bar. It all ended in 1949, with the Communist takeover, and the fliers found themselves living aboard the jeep carrier Rendova. For five months they sailed around the Sea of Japan, then went to Japan itself. The squadron officers made the obligatory purchases of pearls, fine linen, and Noritake china. Rash himself bought three 96-piece sets. In Spring they pulled anchor and headed for the states, dropping their planes in Guam. In Hawaii they became the "plague ship" and were not allowed to go ashore because of one sailor who had contacted a social disease that had defied all medical cures. They finally reached San Diego in May of 1949.

At North Island, the squadron received new Corsairs and Dick was charged with delivering planes and pilots to a reactivated base at Edenton, South Carolina. High prices and lack of housing made him long for the good old days in China. The only flying he did was an occasional R4D trip to Cherry Point. He became the base special services officer. When he heard of an opening in a jet squadron at Cherry Point, he wangled a transfer. VMF-224 was flying brand new F2H-2 Banshees, and Dick could hardly wait to go up. Before he was allowed to qualify in jets, he had to accumulated 30 recent Corsair hours. Dick became a tug tower immediately, and a damn good one he points out.

Jets were a whole new experience, and wonderful. On his first takeoff from Cherry Point he nearly got lost, though. He gained three times the altitude in the Banshee and nothing on the ground looked familiar. Dick fell in love with the McDonnell product, but recalls that it had a "weak wing". Unexplained crashes, in which the wing separated, had occurred in the Mediterranean, at Pax River, and then -- suddenly -- much closer to home. In honor of the governor of North Carolina, a special air show was held. Four Banshees -- Dick was number two -- were to streak along the deck and then rocket into the sky. 2nd LT Larry Mason, behind Dick, lost a wing and went in. It was later estimated that he had pulled 11 G's. It woudn't be the last loss, for the squadron soon deployed for a Med Cruise aboard Midway.

All in all, it was a memorable tour, that fall of 1951. In and out of Italian seaports, then back to the romantic south of France. Unfortunately, winter was upon them, and most of the tourist spots were boarded up. About all Dick got out of it was a bowl of French onion soup. The ship then headed back toward the eastern Mediterranean and exotic ports such as Istanbul, Turkey. In early 1952 the ship steamed westward, made their final port of call at Valencia, Spain, then headed for the United States. The squadron left the ship as it neared Norfolk, and headed for Cherry Point. They found a late Christmas present under the tree -- orders to the conflict in Korea.

In April 1952 he reported to VMF115, one of two squadrons flying F9F-2 Panthers. It was heavily laden with reserve pilots, but Rash remembers it as a good squadron. Theirs was a fighter-bomber mission, and they spent there time dropping bombs and napalm on the enemy. He recalls running into MIGs only a couple of times, and without event. Standard procedure was evasive -- drop to low altitude and execute a Lufbury Circle. MIGs usually gave up the pursuit for lack of fuel. One one of his early missions a Corsair managed to shoot down a MIG, an unlikely feat that was the talk of the squadrons for awhile.

Nearing the end of his first tour, Dick learned of an opportunity for a 90-day exchange duty with the Air Force. He applied and was one of two Marines accepted for temporary duty with the 4th Fighter Group, based at Kimpo Air Field. At about the same time, he received his promotion to Major. The group also contained three Royal Air Force pilots and three Royal Canadian Air Force Pilots. Dick reported to the 336th Fighter Interceptor Squadron, flying F-86s. He needed ten hours of check time in the F-86 before he could go on a mission and it took him ten days -- every available plane was being used on an unusually heavy spate of missions. It was a totally different flying experience. The squadron was ordered to stay above 15,000 feet, and to stay south of the Yalu River. There were occasional excuses to go north -- in hot pursuit, accompanying a photo plane. It was a 200 mile trip and the missions lasted about 90 minutes. The planes usually had a tail wing

coming home and they needed it. It was not unusual to hear requests for "flame-out appreach" as the aircraft neared the field. Returning from one mission with a hung-up drop tank, Dick requested the flame out approach, and heard over his earphones, "Roger. You will be #4." Three other planes were flying on fumes ahead of him.

He returned to the 1st MAW in November, flew two more missions, and received orders to MAG-32 at Opa Locka, Florida. Immediately upon arrival he was sent to Puerto Rico, where the group was practicing maneuvers. Rash was assigned as assistant to the Tactical Officer. He did FCLP's with the squadron, then took them to USS Wright for CARQUALS. The groups established a one-day record for landings. Rash went aboard 26 times, and could have gone more but he bent his tail hook. The group transferred to Cherry Point in the Fall of 1953 and Dick was ordered to VX-3 at Atlantic City. He was one of two Marines in the outfit, along with an RAF Lieutenant. For a flier the assignment was heaven. He got to fly the familiar F9F-5, F2H-2, and FJ-2, but also drew time in the F9F-8, AD, and SNB. He passed on the opportunity to fly the F7U-3, rightly concluding that it would not become a permanent part of the Navy arsenal. While stationed at VX-3 he was involved with the development of the TACAN system, the Sidewinder missile, and in-flight refueling from an AJ. He also was one of the first to sample the delights of mirror landings, angled decks, and steam catapults in workups aboard USS Bennington.

After a full tour with VX-3, Dick reported to VMF-312 at Cherry Point. The squadron was just reforming, with new pilots and updated FJ-2 Furies. The squadron then went aboard USS Champlain for exercises in the Mediterranean. At the conclusion of the exercise Dick was looking forward to liberty in Palma, Mallorca, ancestral home of the Rashes and Fr. Junipero Serra. It was not to be. Even as he laced his shoes and prepared to go ashore, the captain's voiced thundered throughout the ship. They were heading immediately to Valencia, Spain to aid the many victims of a brutal flood. After a short liberty in Gibraltar, they headed home.

MCAS Beaufort opened, and VMF-312 transferred there in mid-1957, transitioning to the F8U Crusader. Dick recalls it as great duty. Lots of open sky, and removed from the prying eyes of the Wing officers at Cherry Point. On any given day the contrails of dogfighting Marine pilots could be seen above. On occasion they would motor south to roust the Navy flyboys. Air Force bases were also considered fair game, but a mid-air collision took the fun out of it.

In mid 1959 Dick became the Group Personnel Officer and was told to get 312 ready to go overseas. He started by making himself Executive Officer. He took the squadron aboard Saratoga for CARQUALS. At year's end the squadron was ready to go, but the new skipper had yet to appear. Dick was told to take them to Atsugi, even though he had just been passed over for LTCOL for the third time. He led the squadron through innumerable drills and practices as CO of 312 and during the tour received his promotion. In 1962 he returned to the states, and was ordered to Washington as head of the F-4 desk. It bothered him some that he had never flown the F-4. That omission was remedied at Beaufort. After five years in DC he was promoted to Colonel and ordered to Vietnam.

In Da Nang he took over as CO of MWSG-17, a weapons and supply unit, and also flew 50 combat missions with MAG-11. Later he went to MAG-11 at Chu Lai and flew another 150 missions. At the end of that tour he went to Quantico and participated in a number of study groups pondering the future of Marine Aviation. On June 30, 1973 -- after 31 years of service -- he retired from the Marine Corps. He and his wife Oline -- daughter of long-time member Agnes Hansen -- live in Clairemont.

Are You A Member of the Pacific Beach Historical Society?

For those of you who aren't members, weren't aware of its existence, or thought membership was by invitation only—guess again! The society actively seeks new members. We meet on the first Saturday of each month (unless it conflicts with a holiday), at 1 p.m. at the Copper Skillet Restaurant. If you've ever wondered about the history of the beach, now's the time to find out about it. A membership application is provided below.

PACIFIC BEACH HISTORICAL SOCIETY MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

NAME _____ DATE _____

BUSINESS/GROUP _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIPCODE _____

HOME PHONE _____ BUSINESS PHONE _____

☐ - $10/Single Membership ☐ - $15/Family Membership ☐ - $20/Business/Group Membership

Send to: Membership Secretary, Pacific Beach Historical Society, P.O. Box 9200, San Diego, CA 92109

* Make checks payable to: Pacific Beach Historical Society (or P.B.H.S.)

NEXT MEETING

Guest speaker at our meeting on February 6 will be George Kordela, who will talk about the Marine Corps in San Diego and the new Marine Command Museum. The meeting will begin at 1 PM in the Banquet Room of the Copper Skillet Restaurant, 877 Hornblend.

IN MEMORIAM

Member Scott E. Peck, RADM, USN (RET), passed away on January 8, 1988. Adm. Peck's naval career was primarily spent with the great airships. During WWII he commanded the USS Curtiss. One of his crew members was Lt. Henry Fonda.

MEMBERSHIP

Joining the society since the last newsletter were Madelyn & Robert Wafer. Renewing his membership was Bill Kammer.



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