

Ace in the Making

by Bruce Bailey -

The life of an Aviation Cadet was one of extremes. As Lower Classmen in Preflight (the first phase), we were the lowest scum on earth. After six weeks of hazing, torture, eating square meals, inspections, walking punishment tours, humiliation, constant failure, having to address inanimate objects as our superior, marching, exercises, silly games, too little time and too much to do - we became convinced that we were indeed the lowest, most worthless creation on the planet. Just as we were ready to resign ourselves to that state, we became Upper Classmen - the sharpest, most perfect and most invaluable of all terrestrial beings and soon to be the Free World's greatest hope for survival.

Not only did we no longer have to tolerate the torment of our Upper Class, we were then entitled to dish it out to our new Lower Class. They had to march around inside their mattress covers, hang from the building rafters until they fell from exhaustion, sit in front of the six foot bay fan (manipulating a plumber's plunger stuck to the floor as a control stick) and pretend to be flying a Spad, recite speeches to water fountains and other devices before being allowed to use them and receive demerits (or gigs) for the same irritating, unfair items we had. We handed out gigs for shoe soles not being clean and polished (while they wore them), powder or paste inside the cap to a tube of toothpaste or toothpowder, dust inside light bulb receptacles, a piece of uniform brass being a 64th of an inch off, uneven wear on a bar of soap and the ever present dust. We lived in open bays in San Antonio where the dust blew continuously, enabling an Upper Classman to gig anyone for dust at any time. But, a favorite was to follow a bug or roach as it wandered across the floor. Poison was set out everywhere, so when one was spotted, it was just a matter of minutes before it keeled over. It was followed and the Cadet in whose area it went belly up was given seven gigs for dirt before it could be removed. It took only six gigs to put a Cadet on the Tour Ramp where he walked one hour for each demerit with a parachute dangling from his back and hitting him behind the knees with each step. We all developed a deep hatred for roaches.

For the next six weeks we were on top of the world as Upper Classmen, a "Wheel", and life was great. Preflight completed, we split up to go to various bases for advanced training and our dream come true - Flight Training. But it was a rude awakening and a sad day indeed when we reached our new base, for we were once again the lowest of Lower Classmen. We had to start at the bottom again as worthless crud, scum. But there was a difference - this time it was worse. It was said that even cow manure served a useful purpose, but not so for Lower Classmen. Nevertheless, we could tolerate anything then for we would be getting to fly.

Flight has been accurately described as hours and hours of pure boredom interrupted only by moments of stark terror. Preparation for flight has never been accurately described, nor do I suspect a serious attempt ever made. Were I to dare such a fete, I am convinced that my Thesaurus would achieve critical mass and nuke me in a most vulnerable area. We spent weeks with the technical manuals to become intimately familiar with every nut and bolt on the airplane and every possible malfunction that could occur. Then we memorized the actions to be taken for any and all emergencies, and quickly become astounded at the many, many different things that would cause our airplane to cease to fly. If after learning all that, you still want to fly, you are truly cut out for the military way of life. We then spent countless hours developing proficiency in the mounds of paperwork required to get an airplane off the ground. We began to believe the old axiom, "You are cleared for takeoff when the weight of the paperwork equals the weight of the aircraft."

Then the big day came when we actually got to go out and touch one of the airplanes and maybe even sit in it. But, as a Lower Classman, we had to first address the aircraft with an elaborate memorized speech, in which we requested its permission to approach and touch. The airplane never answered. However, we assumed permission was granted if it didn't explode, begin to shed parts or collapse its landing gear. There was something magical about the metal skin of an airplane. The moment you touched it, your mind went to 25,000 feet and began to zoom in and out of the clouds. The only method of bringing you back to earth was through an Upper Classman's boot in your empennage and an ungentle reminder that you were still the lowest living thing allowed to live.

The Upper Classman went on and on describing various parts of the aircraft and their function. His spiel was word for word out of the technical manuals, but I heard none of it as my mind was at altitude, executing perfect aerobatic maneuvers. When realizing that I was several thousand feet away, straight up, he attempted to trip me and further humiliate me by asking a question about some system he had just described. He knew he had me when my name had to be called three times before I answered. But we had committed the technical manuals to memory, so I spouted off a complete technical summary of the system, the most likely causes of malfunction and the corrective action for each. While doing this, the Underclassmen silently hoped they would never act as stupid as our Upper Classmen. What did they think we had been doing with the technical manuals the last three weeks - using them for doorstops?

When finally my time came to climb up and sit in the seat; my heart was pounding, my breath labored, my knees were shaking and my mouth went dry. As I settled down in the seat, several glands and/or organs went wild and/or overreacted. I wanted to spend the remainder of my life right there. Food, sex and automobiles no longer had any attraction at all. While sitting there dreaming, the cockpit filled with the sound of a jet engine from another airplane and the smell of JP-4 jet fuel, catapulting me into another world. It required three Upper Classmen to pry me out of the airplane and dump me unceremoniously on the ramp. That breach of discipline would cost me many hours of extra duty and walking time on the Tour Ramp. The fools! Little did they know that in those few minutes I had downed half a dozen enemy aircraft, sank two cruisers, destroyed an untold amount of armor and broken all existing speed and altitude records. I slept well that night - the feels, sights and sounds of that cockpit dominated all other sensations.

Endless hours were spent in Mission Planning, where we plotted courses on aeronautical charts, worked an infinite number of time and distance problems and filled out flight plans. We did that until the Instructor was convinced that I had made every conceivable mistake possible and vowed that he was, from that moment on, dedicating his career to personally seeing to it that I was washed-out of the program.

In spite of all the threats and promises from various Instructors that I wouldn't last out the week, the time came for my Orientation Flight. There were so many of us and so few flights available for that, only five Cadets a day could be scheduled. That was done according to room assignments (which were done alphabetically), fortunately for me, so I was in the first group.

P ALIGN="JUSTIFY"> Walking out to the airplane, I stumbled and fell. That was to be my best move of the day. I snagged my shoulder on some object and tore an eight inch slit in my flying suit, when following the Instructor under the airplane to inspect the landing gear. Next, while attempting to climb into the craft, a zipper tab on my sleeve wedged in between panels in the aircraft skin, preventing me from moving in either direction. The Instructor had to free me. I

continued my climb into the cockpit, hooking the actuator for my water wings on the canopy rail, causing one side to inflate. I sat helpless in the airplane, unable to lower my right arm due to the inflated mass beneath it. My instructor began to tremble while rubbing his lucky charm vigorously. The ground crew finally persuaded him to get into the airplane with me. Before getting airborne, I somehow managed to pull the ripcord on the Instructor's parachute and short out the intercom system. It was decreed that the only useful function I could perform in the Air Force would be that of a Tow Target.

The Instructor searched frantically about the cockpit for anything that would suffice as a deadly weapon. He made the takeoff with his survival knife clenched between his teeth, Tarzan style, after threatening me with certain death if I moved, talked, blinked or even breathed. I was so nervous I don't remember a thing about the flight except getting violently ill during the maneuvers designed for that purpose. Our flight was cut short when the Instructor laughed at my getting sick. When he laughed, the knife fell from his mouth and stuck into his leg.

The Ground Crew pulled him off me and I made good my escape across the ramp. As I neared the barracks my chest began to swell, my back straightened and my legs fell into a swaggering gait. That made me realize that I had done what most of my cohorts had not and were dying to do - fly. I was mobbed by classmates asking questions and wanting to hear all about the flight.

I changed out of my torn flying suit and announced that I was going to the Cadet Club to celebrate over a few beers. Several of them tagged along, anxious to hear my tale. They bought the beers and banana splits while I unwound my yarn.

"No sweat," was my opening remark. "There I was, on my back at 15,000 feet, approaching the sound barrier, when. . . ."

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