Summer in Europe 1962

In December, 1961, I was an E-5 in Uncle Sugar’s Canoe Club (the U.S. Navy) assigned to VAW-33 and based at Quonset Point Naval Air Station, Rhode Island. I had been assigned to bases in California, and Florida and 18 months at Argentia, Newfoundland, as an aviation electronic tech and had accumulated about a thousand hours aircrew time flying as an ECM operator. In general, I had enjoyed my assignments but not Rhode Island.

In January, 1962, I volunteered for the first deployment that came along. This was a couple months on the aircraft carrier, USS Forrestal (CVA-59), to Guantanamo, Cuba, tracking Cuban mobile missile sites. This tour had been interesting, and the weather beat January and February in RI. On the way back we made a liberty call in Haiti and were part of the task force to pick up the first astronaut, Col John Glenn, in a space capsule called Friendship 7. We would have picked him up of he had landed on the takeoff or first orbit of his three orbit flight.

I was back in Quonset Pt a couple weeks when they asked for volunteers for a six month Mediterranean cruise. I said “Don’t throw me in the briar patch, Chief. When do we leave?” I had joined the Navy to see the world. This cruise would end about the time my enlistment was up and my college career would begin.

Four four-person aircrews and three AD-5Q electronic warfare aircraft and ten maintenance personnel and equipment soon headed for Norfolk, Virginia, to board the aircraft carrier USS Independence (CVA-62). The day before we left we had a CIA briefing on what to look for and reporting procedures. We sailed on the morning tide headed for Gibraltar and

doddled along for five days so that our escort of destroyers could keep up without burning all their fuel. Sunrise found us nearing Asinara (donkey) Bay in Sardinia for a change of command.

We twelve enlisted were billeted in a small compartment two bunks high with a personal storage compartment under the mattress. The compartment was right under the flight deck and three frames in front of the bow. (On the Forrestal we had been located under the mess deck below the hanger deck and beside the ordnance department. The ordnance people had a sign on their door- “Peace through Total Destruction”. The ordnance elevator came up to the hanger deck in the middle of the dining area and we used to laugh at the armed guards escorting nukes advising us we saw nothing.)

Over the first three weeks we flew along the coast of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Malta, Crete, Turkey, Greece, Italy, France, and Spain and mapped the radars we would be dealing with. It was quite a geography lesson. We stayed outside of everyone’s territorial waters except for Libya that claimed 50 miles and even sent a couple fighters as a bluff.

Our first port call was Cannes, France, in May. We anchored a mile off shore and had two alert fighters with nukes sitting on the catapults. All the liberty parties and guests went by one of the ship’s launches.

This was during the week of the Cannes Film Festival. So far as I know none of us enlisted was given tickets to the activities nor could afford one if we had wanted to go. Also, enlisted were required to wear our white uniforms while officers were required to wear civilian clothes.

One evening while heading back to fleet landing some drunk jumped out in front of several sailors and shouted “Savate” while kicking in all directions. (Savate is a style of French kick fighting.) He got knocked on his butt by this and several other groups of whitehats.

One evening a shipmate and I were walking along the harbor looking at the fancy yachts when an American woman struck up a conversation. She introduced herself as an author named Sagan who had written “Fear of Flying” that had nothing to do with aviation. She invited us to a party that evening. We would have gone but we had to be back on the ship about the time her party was to begin. She was the first author I had ever met, and she persuaded me to keep writing.

Our group got together for a trip to Grasse to see fields of roses grown to make rose water for perfume. We could see the houses of the very rich hidden in the trees along the cliff line. Just like in the movies.

Another day two of us took a trip to Monaco. We walked along the route of the Monte-Carlo Gran Prix road race. We went to the Prince Albert museum and aquarium and, then, to the beach. It was interesting to see girls come to the beach all dressed up then wrap up in a towel and emerge in a tiny bikini. We met a couple girls with a full-size poodle and spent the afternoon tossing a ball so the dog would let us talk. We had to leave to get back to the ship before anything serious began.

We were anchored off of Cannes on Bastille Day, July 14. Cannes out did itself on a fireworks display that was coordinated along about two miles of waterfront. All shore leave had been cancelled but we had a front row seat to the show.

We had a farewell beach party where everyone was allowed two beers. One Lieutenant had his share and several that were donated to him. By the time we headed back to the ship he could hardly walk. We packed him in one of the large trash cans that had held the beer and ice and lugged him back to the ship undetected.

My unit was transferred off the carrier to fly for NATO out of Capo de Chino Air Base near Naples. We stayed in downtown in Naples in the Hotel Mediterraneo for a couple weeks. Then we moved to Athens living on Glifádha Beach and flying out of Hellenikon Air Base. Our assignment was to test all the US and NATO European radar sites from Spain to Turkey. In early August, we went back on board the carrier and returned to Norfolk with a short stop at Gibraltar.

One flight path out of Naples was north to Rome, Firenze, and Bologna then east along the Po River Valley to the Adriatic then south crossing over the tiny country of San Moreno then east of Rome to Monte Casino and back to Naples. Another route was east to Bari, Italy, over Taranto on the heel of the Italian boot then across the Gulf of Taranto to Syracuse and Catania in Sicily. Then we took the scenic route and flew over Mt Etna and through the Straits of Messina to Stromboli and across the Tyrrhenian Sea to Naples. Whoever planned these flights did not miss too many tourist sites. From the air I could see why the battle for Monte Casino took so long. Also, we had to make a detour to miss the power line strung across the Strait of Messina. Both volcanoes, Mt Etna and Stromboli, were glowing red and kicking out a little lava.

In Italy the average day was up at 6 for the bus to the base. Four hours flying then back to the hotel. In the evenings it was party time. Almost

everything cultural was closed for the day. One week there was a national election so in our civilian clothes we visited several political rallies because they handed out wine and sausages. We yelled for whichever of the 16 candidates was holding the rally and left early. Other nights there was booze and singing in someone’s room or an evening at the USO.

There were several outstanding things about Naples. One was the public pistoreas or free standing urinals along the streets similar to phone booths.

There were some holes along the alleys that dated back to the 17th century that also collected rain water and kitchen and laundry wastewater that were also used as urinals. Another was the wolf packs of kids that tried to sell stuff, buy cigarettes or mug sailors. Their favorite thing to sell was a necklace with the ancient sign of the brothel in Pompeii – the flying cock-and balls.

We seldom flew on weekends, so one weekend I visited Pompeii and climbed down into Vesuvius. The Pompeii excavation was only about half

as large as today. Another weekend I visited the Amalfi Coast to see Sorrento and Positano. It was interesting to see the use of terraces for fruit and vegetable culture. The fishing boats were beached for the weekend just like in the paintings.

One Sunday a couple of us went to the zoo. An old man began talking to us in English. He had been a prisoner of war and interned in Bryan, Texas. This was news to me, since I had not known that there were any internment camps in the US. He had learned to cook and had opened a restaurant in Naples when he came home. We talked for about an hour strolling and looking at the animals. He invited our whole group over for supper one evening.

Another Sunday several of us went to the opera. It was presented out of doors in an ancient amphitheatre and was standing room only. I forget the opera but every time someone sang an interesting passage or hit a high note, the crowd went wild. Instant replay – they backed up the production and sang it over again. Sometimes twice.

We moved back to the ship for a couple of days of war games. We must have won because the ship pulled into Genoa for liberty. This is the alleged hometown of Christopher Columbus. Genoa is called the city of palaces for the number of 17th century Doge palaces in an area called the ***caruggia***. The streets were narrow and grungy. Many of the palaces had been converted into museums or hotels. We were free only in the evenings, so I missed the museums and most of the historical sites.

I took a week of leave to visit Switzerland. The bus went west from Genoa along the coast to San Remo, Monaco, Nice, and Cannes then inland to Aix-en-Provence, France, just north of Marseille. I intended to visit a newspaper friend from back home in San Antonio, but she was away on assignment.

A train took me through the mountains to Grenoble. I had a couple of hour’s layover and looked at the churches and narrow streets and at where the Olympics would be one day. Hard to imagine this little town could hold twenty thousand visitors.

The next train was an overnight run to Genève, Switzerland. I found a tourist hotel near the lake with no view and running water with a bucket under the sink. A walk took me through down town, across the lake on a

bridge where Rodin’s “***Thinker***” sat contemplating ***le Jet,*** the tall water jet in the middle of the lake. I turned back at the rose garden. The jet and the rose garden were lit and Mozart played in the garden in the evening.

I toured Genève next day and went to Chamonix and took the tram up Mt Blanc. I remember it being very cool and there being window boxes of geraniums. There were a couple crows on the mountain top black against the snow.

Back in town I caught an overnight train to Lausanne. The trains were crowded with standing room only. The train arrived about dawn, and I spent a couple of hours wandering around this old town. I caught the late afternoon train to Bern. The next morning I toured Bern and caught an afternoon train to Milan and on to Genoa to rejoin the ship. I have some pictures from the trip but if you want to know what I saw find an old travel guide from the 1950’s and 60’s. There have been many changes in the past 50 some years.

We flew a mission to Madrid and Barcelona with a couple hours of sightseeing overnight. The ship went south and around Italy to stop for the

day at Corfu, Greece. There was a day in port. Some of us enjoyed mezethes (meze) and a bottle of ouzo under an historic oak tree near the

old fort. We pulled anchor in the evening as the U.S. Navy put on a show of force - passing the aircraft carrier through the narrow (mile wide) passage between Corfu and Albania.

As the ship headed south to play more war games, my group took off for Athens for another adventure. We landed about sundown and were met by

our ground crew personnel. They had been waiting a couple days for our

arrival. Tough duty. They had brought our bags and supplies and had found a hotel for us on Glifádha Beach. (About a mile off the beach was anchored the bright yellow converted Naval cruiser *Caroline* with Jackie Onasis.)

The maid slipped in each morning and left tea and rolls. My roommates wanted the extra sleep, so I took the tea and rolls out on the balcony to watch the sky brighten over the *Caroline* and the fishing boats returning*.* Evenings, after a good Greek meal, were spent at a local bar or at the USO.

One Sunday morning I took a taxi to downtown Athens. The main square

with the palace and the parliament and the Hotel Grande Bretagne with its revolutionary bullet holes. Talking to some old expatriates about WWII. Hadrian’s Arch. The Temple of Olympian Zeus.

Another Sunday the hotel packed us a lunch for a trip to the Acropolis. Climb the Propylea, Walk inside the Parthenon and Erechtheion. No one but us on the hill top.

The country around Athens generally looked like south Texas. From Spain to Greece the coastal plain was largely flat or low rolling hills. Vegetation was xeric dry stubble, thorny shrubs and low trees. The ancient coniferous forest had been cut a couple thousand years ago to make ships of war to invade Troy and other sea battles. Erosion had washed away the soil and the forest had been replaced by olive and grape culture.

One flight path was to the south to Crete and Rhodes, east to the southern coast of Turkey and return. The Greek islands were beautiful from the air.

Another route was direct to Izmir, Turkey (old Smyrna), then northeast across mountains and conifer forests checking hilltop radar sites up to the Black Sea. There we turned west across the Sea of Marmara south of Istanbul and the Bosporus to the Dardanelles. We continued across Anatolia to Thessalonica, Greece. While popping along over the Anatolian

hills we came across a big flock of sheep that took off in all directions with the shepherd shaking his fist at us. Near Thessalonica one if our planes had engine trouble, and we turned straight south to Athens.

After we fixed the plane, we packed up to rejoin the ship to return to Norfolk. We sailed for Sardinia and the change of command then headed

to Gibraltar and an eight hour stop. Several of us went up to see the Rock and the Barbary apes and stopped for a little sightseeing and cider in this snug little British enclave. Five days later we were back in Norfolk. We flew the planes off and landed at Quonset Point a week before my enlistment was up.

After four years active duty with the US Navy I had pretty much satisfied my intent of seeing the world. California. Hawaii. Florida. Washington, DC. Newfoundland. Iceland. Scotland. Spain. France. Italy. Greece. Turkey. The African coast from Egypt to Morocco. Mostly from the air but with a lot of good liberty. It was time to return to the real world and hit college.

Carl Lahser

4 July 2014