
SCENE

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CGAS SAN DIEGO—1953-1956 (SEARCH-AND-RESCUE)

The **PCS Orders** that brought me back to Southern California were my first return “on orders” since I left home to be a cadet in 1935! And what a GREAT LIFE I had during those eighteen years!

Finding housing, always the first order of business, was a little different this time.

We would not have to live temporarily in an auto court or someone’s backyard. The officer I was relieving, a classmate, was breaking his lease on a rental. He said the aircraft industry workers had flooded the market and rentals were almost impossible to find. But the house he had rented would not do for us, except as a place to stay while we searched to buy. The landlord agreed on a monthly rental, and we took it.

The house was unfurnished until all our household shipment arrived. Then boxes were stacked everywhere. We couldn’t unpack, for the permanent move to the house we would buy could come any day. Poor Mary had to live this way with four children and a dog. I had to peek in boxes to find what Mary needed. This was no picnic!

We found just what we needed in an upscale area known as Loma Portal. The homes were all built to early American/Spanish style with red tile roofs, thick stuccoed walls, large rooms, etc. Old but posh. A short ride down to the harbor and the Coast Guard Air Station. But the price was a scary \$20,000! Remember, our first home cost \$8,000. Our second cost \$9,000. We lived in this San Diego house for three years and sold it for \$25,000 when San Diego was in a local post-war depression. Now, in 2004, it must be worth close to \$1,000,000!!

Santa Monica was only a little over one hundred miles from San Diego. An easy drive for visits. But with whom? After my mother died, my brother Porter sold the Santa Monica house, and the family members who had been living there found employment elsewhere. My close Scouting friends scattered (but not far from Southern California). (Through the years since then we had reunions, but no more. There are only five of us left now in 2004. **True friends for over seventy years!**)

My orders assigned me to the position of Executive Officer of the Air Station. In addition to a heavy administrative workload, I helped plan searches which mostly involved private yachts out of gas or breaking down offshore, but sometimes searching for lost hikers in Mexico, just across our border. These required diplomatic clearance, which was *pro forma*, but had to be obtained and quickly.

(I could now appreciate how the Exec at Port Angeles felt about finding enough time to fly.)

For our offshore search-and-rescue (SAR) cases, we flew the amphibious PBY-5A Catalina and PBM Mariner seaplanes. I remember one overnight flight south about three hundred miles down the Gulf of California to a fishing camp. I anchored in a little cove much like one would with a boat. There was an anchor in the bow. We took bearings to make sure it was holding. There were four double-sized bunks, a little mess table, and a butane stove. The patient was suffering from “Montezuma’s Revenge.” He could wait while we inspected the camp for contraband. No, it wasn’t dope smuggling in those days. It was trade in smuggling lobster. We found none.

Search-and-Rescue has been a Coast Guard mission dating back to year 1790 when it was known as the **Revenue Cutter Service**. That mission was greatly expanded by addition of the **Life-Saving Service** in 1915, with its chain of Surf Stations specifically created to provide rescue services to ships that ran aground on the Outer Banks and other coastal shores.

And, in 1939, the **Lighthouse Service** was transferred to the Coast Guard for the establishment, maintenance, and operation of aids to maritime navigation. These were, of course, services to reduce accidents requiring rescue services.

New means of transportation were constantly being developed, requiring new SAR techniques and equipment. The changes which affected the Coast Guard mostly came from commercial aviation. World War II proved that land planes could replace the lumbering Pan Am Clipper seaplanes. Great Circle Arctic flight courses were shorter and feasible. And even ditching a land plane at sea need not necessarily mean a loss of all on board, provided the pilot and crew were trained and special flotation equipment was on board.

The post-war commercial aircraft, powered by rotary engines, were much more likely to have an engine failure than today’s turbojets. The four-engine passenger planes could fly on three engines and, under favorable conditions, even for a while on two. But you can imagine how much better everyone feels if a Coast Guard aircraft intercepts and

escorts the crippled plane, and is on-scene should a ditching be necessary? The rescue plane will accurately fix the position, drop rescue equipment, lead in rescue vessels, coordinate team effort, and keep the Rescue Control Center up to date.

When I reported to the San Diego Air Station, I found that a training course for airline flight crews was scheduled to be held in Pearl Harbor, where elaborate preparations were made for the training to be realistic. I asked to go before assuming the XO duties. It was granted, provided I could get a free ride. United Airlines flew from San Diego, so I tried them. They said I could have the "jump seat."

On departure day, I boarded the aircraft with the pilots and took my jump seat behind the pilot where I could observe everything the pilots did. That was great!

The pilots were only part way through the check-off list when the passengers began boarding. The pilot (UAL officer in charge of San Diego operations) was getting nervous because he didn't want to make passengers wait at the gate. And then he found that one engine showed a red light and wouldn't start. He radioed in to have a mechanic report *immediately*. One came running. He took one look at the switches, reached over the copilot's head and flipped one on, announcing, "You forgot to turn on the fuel pump!"

The flight was uneventful. The SAR course was very informative in use of equipment provided for ditching. Pilot instruction was based on offshore landings pioneered at CGAS San Diego in the PBM seaplane. The days were made brighter by watching the beautiful stewardesses ride the evacuation chute and bob around trying to swim in lifejackets. And then a dead-head flight back to San Diego.



San Diego took the lead in developing safer techniques for offshore landings. Amphibious PBYs were used, for they were plentiful and "expendable"!

I took my jump seat behind the grey-haired, distinguished, overweight captain. As he slid into his seat, the stewardess (as we called them in those days) placed a fresh white cloth across his lap to protect his uniform from soiling. He listened as the copilot went through the check-off list out loud. The captain then motioned to the copilot to taxi from the gate to the takeoff runway. There, on clearance from the control tower, he grasped the four throttles in one hand, accelerated down the runway, and took off for San Diego. When on course, he engaged the autopilot and gave control to the copilot.

We were a **young and healthy family**, and no more babies! Mary and I joined a square dancing group at our All Souls Episcopal Church. We dressed the part and had a caller who challenged us to keep up with his commands.

For enjoying the great “out back,” I built three rain-proof boxes for the tail gate of our new Ford station wagon, one for cooking equipment, one for food, and one for camping accessories. And Terry was old enough to join the Cub Scouts, thus starting us on the Scouting Trail.

A very capable lady named Mary Wright became Den Mother. Somehow I got roped into what we jokingly called Den Father. “Cubs” is really a mother/son program and “Boy Scouts” a father/son program, as I view it. The Den Mothers tend to engage the little boys in handicraft activities which was not by the book, so I attempted to inject “manly arts,” simple as they may sound, such as driving a nail with a hammer, tightening a screw or bolt, sawing a board, chopping with an axe, and physical acts like doing a somersault, judging the weight of a brick, height of a tree, sunrise (east), sunset (west), etc.

As the family grew older, I would find myself a Cubmaster and Scoutmaster, and Mary a Girl Scout Leader. Terry and Scott made Eagle Rank in the Boy Scouts; Christy and Karen were good Girl Scouts and have loved the out-of-doors ever since. Scouting was good for my family.

We had many other “firsts” for me and my family. We went south of the border to **Ensenada**, rode the horses on the beach, browsed the curio shops, and beat off the hawkers and the hookers. We attended the **Pasadena Rose Parade** and visited the floats being covered with flowers. But the biggest thrill for the family was to visit the just-opened **Disneyland!**

But transfer orders came all too soon. We were off for two years in Puerto Rico. We would take a Navy ship out of New York after driving cross-country. I don't remember any driving problems although it was years before the interstate freeway system was built. But the National Highways were pretty good. The northernmost east-west highway was Route 10. The southernmost was Route 90.

They were made of concrete and took square turns around land-grant property. North-south routes had a different one- or two-digit system, I believe. If the road was a diagonal, it had still another numbering system, like the famous road from Los Angeles to Chicago—**Route 66**.

Our route took us first to Mary's home in Abingdon, Illinois. It was a grand reunion with Mary's mother and father and a collection of Abingdon relatives.

But we were bound for overseas and a two-year assignment. A few tears were shed.

Our driving destination was the home of Mary's uncle George and aunt Bertha in Montclair, New Jersey, just a short distant to New York harbor where we would board a **Navy Sea Transport Ship (NSTS)** to San Juan.

We arrived in Montclair just in time for the village's Fourth of July celebration. The main event was the homespun parade. Various groups entered floats and piled on to hoop and holler. Mary's uncle George entered the centerpiece, a Wurlitzer automatic band! Lots of noise. Lots of fun!

George and Bertha raised their family in Abingdon. While there, as part of family fun, they made ice cream turning the crank by hand. It was so good and popular they decided to make ice cream to sell. When they moved to Montclair they decided to go into the business. They formed the **Bond Ice Cream Company** and opened several little outlets. Their milkshakes were the hit of the town. Someone said the milkshakes were awful big and awful good, from which came their trademark: "HOME OF THE AWFUL-AWFUL."

My next assignment was one of the very best. I can hardly wait to tell you about it! In the next Scene, I will reflect on my confession in Scene 7 of being a "milk thief" at Camp Emerald Bay, together with my assistant, Dickie Braun. (Albeit, we were stealing our own dinner ration of fresh milk.) Dickie surfaces in unbelievable circumstances.