

# I Remember Old Tuscaloosa

By Fred Maxwell

NEVER have I attended a reunion that I enjoyed more than the one at the Naval Air Station, Alameda, Cal., on May 6-10 when The Early and Pioneer Naval Aviators Association met.

This association was founded by a group of early naval aviators in September 1956. The membership includes many of those now living who were pioneers in naval aviation. Their designations as naval aviators, for a large part, number within the first 400 who qualified for their wings.

Members of the organization are called "Golden Eagles" and/or "Early Birds".

In 1914 the Navy reactivated the old shipbuilding yard in Pensacola, Fla., and designated it as the Naval Air Station (N.A.S.). Capt. H. C. Mustin, USN, skipper of the USS Mississippi, was ordered to pick up all the aviation gear and personnel at Annapolis, Anacostia and Norfolk and deliver it to Pensacola. On arrival Captain Mustin was made commanding officer of the new air station. The first year's appropriation for flying expenses was \$26,000.

Both lighter-than-air (LTA) and heavier-than-air (HTA) training was undertaken at this station. The LTA was in "blimps" or motorized cigar shaped hydrogen filled balloons. (We called these students 'balloonatics'.) The HTA equipment was either flying boats or seaplanes.

A blimp with a dead motor became nothing more than a free balloon and had to be handled as such. Therefore the first step of training was to qualify in a free balloon.

"Old Tuscaloosa" ties in with this early training in the following manner:

One Easter morning in 1916 I learned that two men had landed in a balloon in the Northport cemetery. I rushed to the scene and sure enough two naval officers were packing their deflated balloon in its load bearing basket. They had started out in Pensacola for an ordinary trip the previous evening when they were caught in a severe wind storm. Since the balloon traveled at about the same speed and direction of the storm, the officers were carried much faster and farther than they realized and they had no idea as to where they were.

As I helped them pack up and get to the depot and check their baggage I learned a lot about the NAS in Pensacola, little realizing that I would later spend the duration of World War I and also World War II as a naval aviator at Pensacola.

I reported for duty at Pensacola in the early summer of 1917 and found that Capt. Kenneth Whiting had just left this station with just about all of the naval aviators and had taken over the naval aviation shore station at Killingholme, England, which was being abandoned by the English. This unit

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was the first American fighting force in Europe by about three months.

The Navy then made the aviation corps (for the duration of the war) a reserve unit called the USN Reserve Flying Corps (USNRFC) since Annapolis graduates were so badly needed at sea.

My application for this new corps was accepted and I entered the first class (12 members).

The 15th annual reunion of the Golden Eagles was held at the NAS in Alameda, Cal., May 6-10. Briefly, our schedule of events was as follows:

Friday a.m.: business meeting

Friday p.m.: Tour of Ames Laboratory at Moffett Field now under NASA for testing aerospace equipment. Included in this facility are 26 wind tunnels, one being the largest in the world and capable of testing full size planes up to 40 X 80 feet. We saw the controversial F-111 plane, recently grounded again, awaiting additional testing.

Saturday: All day cruise on the USS Enterprise. This nuclear powered carrier was commissioned in 1962 and in three years cruised over 200,000 miles without refueling. The morning was given over to the landing and catapult launching of current high perfor-

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mance planes. The afternoon featured an airshow which included sighting a simulated enemy by radar and its interception and destruction by two jet fighters.

The hanger deck of the "Big E" had several planes available for inspection from platforms. Guides were there to explain and answer questions. The sophisticated equipment such as radar and computers clearly indicated how well the Navy is meeting the challenge of today. The time of firing contact between two planes in combat is on the order of 1 to 3 seconds. After a rather thorough briefing on one of the fighter planes a Golden Eagle friend of mine remarked: "Fred, we are now just a bunch of aged buzzards".

Sunday: A four hour tour of San Francisco was most interesting. The bus was an old cable car body mounted on a bus chassis and it furnished a wonderful unobstructed view.

To be remembered by your former friends and shipmates that you have not seen in more than 50 years is a heartwarming experience never to be forgotten.

We appreciated the many courtesies shown us and left feeling that our Navy was superior to all.