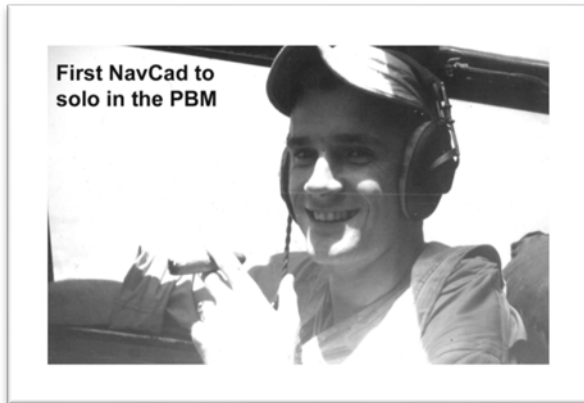


Student Solo in PBM - 1954

By Charlie Caldwell

Shortly before reporting to my first duty station, VP-45 at NS Coco Solo in the Panama Canal Zone in 1954, I was a NAVCAD (Naval Aviation Cadet) learning to fly and be designated a "Prospective Patrol Plane First Pilot".

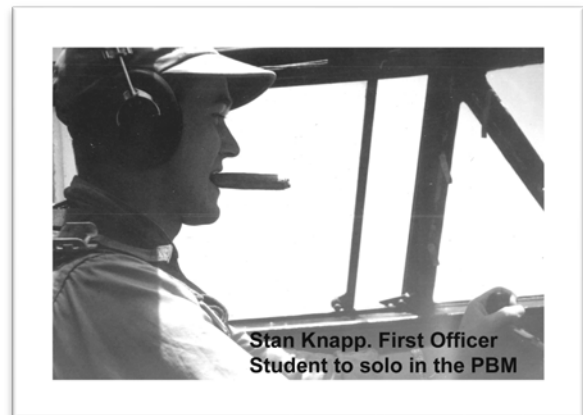


My student partner (Ensign Stanley Knapp from Northwestern U) and I were scheduled for the very first "student only" PBM Mariner seaplane flight in advanced flight training. It was a beautiful, but hot and humid, day on (according to my log book) Wednesday, 30 June in 1954 at NAS Corpus Christi.

Before the flight, I had gone to the Navy Exchange and bought the biggest three cigars I could find ; three because there were to be only three aboard the aircraft: two student pilots and a very

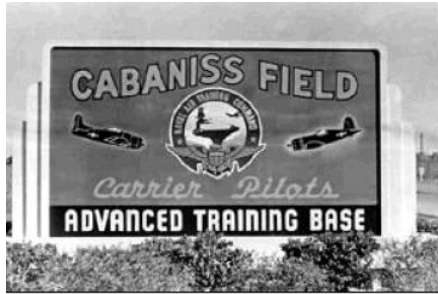
apprehensive and the most junior flight engineer in the squadron. Note: We received zero briefing by the Flight Officer before the flight because we had progressed faster through the syllabus than expected.

We did the pre-flight and climbed aboard. Since Stan was already an officer, he signed for the plane and took the left seat first, and proceeded over the ramp. After taking off we each completed a bunch of "splash and dash" take-offs and landings and climbed up to 1000 feet to cool off the engines and light up our "stogies." But before lighting up the stogies, Stan thought it would be nice to engage the auto-pilot to see how it worked...all we knew about the auto-pilot could be written on the head of the proverbial pin. Well, Stan grabbed the T-handle and gave it a mighty jerk. The airplane immediately flipped over to the right and nose down (scared the bajeeus out of us!) so he immediately shoved the handle back in and recovered level flight. We decided the auto-pilot must be inoperative but we sure wouldn't report it on the yellow sheet.



After tooling around the seadrome a few times and not knowing what else to do, we decided to go fly over Stan's apartment complex because his wife knew we were to be in the air and Stan wanted to impress her. That done, we flew up the coast a bit and turned south toward Padre Island. What we did there is, I believe, now called "Buzzing;" and we "buzzed" the hell out of Padre Island beaches all the way to the Mexican border.

Our training PBM had old WW-II style radios that were prone to put out nothing but static; so we just turned them off as we continued our intensive self-training. We then thought it would be fine sport to



over fly Cabaniss Field, where the jet jocks trained, and show them what a fine seaplane they were missing out on flying.

We climbed all the way up to 1000 feet and flew right up the duty runway. We wondered why there were so many airplanes in a disorganized pattern around us. Little did we know that the landing pattern break for the jets was at 1000 feet and we were right in the middle of it at 115 knots (remember, we had turned those pesky radios off). We then decided it was probably a good

idea to get the hell out of there and return to the seadrome for a few more splash and dash procedures before calling it a successful training day.

So we turned the radios back on and asked for permission to enter the landing area. You never heard such venomous language such as we received!! I don't recall the exact words but they went something like, "LAND IMMEDIATELY, MAKE THE OUTSIDE BUOY AND AWAIT AN INSTRUCTOR!" Well. . . OK, no problem...we didn't expect to have to make the inside buoy without an instructor anyway. After a moment of silence, the radio blared, advising us that we "had delayed the Blue Angles practice along the seawall for over 30 minutes!" Well...shucks, how were we supposed to know the schedule for the Blue Angles? We didn't even know they were to practice.

The Flight Officer was the instructor who came out and climbed aboard. He was livid and all he could say was, "You two get the hell out of here!" We did just that and sat on the seawall and watched a



wonderful Blue Angles show along with the hundreds of other spectators that had waited for us to come ashore so the Blue Angles could perform.

I don't know how many flight violations we were guilty of that day but I'm sure we set some sort of record.

I also don't know

what befell the Flight Officer because we never heard a word from the CO or anyone else about our flight. I DO know that that particular "student only" syllabus flight was summarily removed from the schedule forever!

I'd be lying, however, if I didn't report that that flight was the highlight of my entire time in the Navy flight training command as a student naval aviator - and that I was the first, if not only, NAVCAD to ever solo in a PBM. By the way, Stan completed his obligated service and returned to Northwestern as, I believe, a Sports Department spokesman. I got orders to VP-45, by way of BUPERS Temp duty where I awaited transportation to Coco Solo.