

Who Trains the Trainers?

Joe Willoughby #41297

I'd never been away from home for Christmas, and I could hear the other guys in the barracks sobbing and crying. I'd like to have been home, too, but I never got so bad that I'd cry. I never really did cry. My brother was in the Navy; he liked it and he convinced me to join the Navy. I was 19 when I joined.



Boot camp was about three months of training. At night it would get kind of cool, and we'd have to muster outside and march at 5:00 in the morning. It was cold, and we wore those big old pea coats. We had to wear them until noon because we couldn't go back to the barracks until then to change. It was hot by noon. So I got where I'd just go out without a coat in the morning.

At the end of boot camp, March 1943, I got orders to Norman, Oklahoma, to aviation machinist mate school, (AMM). They never told me I was going to mech school. Since I'd worked in a body shop in metal, I thought I'd be a metalsmith. They said, "All metalworkers over here, and all aviation machinist mates over there."

Well, I got over here (with metalworkers), and all of a sudden I heard them call my name to go over there with machinists. They just told me what I'd do. No choice.

So I attended that AMM school, and they taught all phases of engines. We did troubleshoot on the OS2U, an observation plane, and the SC1 Curtis, which is a scout. They used them on a battle wagon, and they'd catapult them into the air. They had floats on them, so when they came in for a landing—they call it



a skid—the ship would go sideways to flatten the ocean and there would be no wave. The aircraft would land on that smooth water. They'd hoist them back on the battleship. They used observation and scout planes to scout where different things were, like an advance observation.

At the end, they kept me there as an instructor, and I was there another year and a half.

We left Norman and went to Daytona Beach, Florida. Daytona Beach, where we were, is now the Daytona 500. I went down there as plane captain to take care of the aircraft for the pilots. I helped them in, got them buckled in, pulled the chocks, gave them thumbs up, cleaned the windshield. One time I had a short

marine pilot. The aircraft had just returned from a flight and had spots of oil on the windshield. I offered to clean it off. He said, "Don't worry about it. I'm so short, I can't see out anyway!"

I got my first ride in the Navy in one of those biplanes, a yellow Steerman. The pilot always wanted me to go with him, but I didn't much want to. Then he said, "I cleared it with your chief and I brought you a parachute. You're going."

So I got in, and I was sitting in the open cockpit. I got to looking at the seat, and only a little piece of tubing was holding the seat to the floor. I thought, if he rolls over, with my weight, I could just pull that seat right out of there. I thought, I'm in big trouble!

We took off, and he wanted me to fly. He told me to put my feet on the pedal and my hand on the stick. And he said, "Now I'm going to make a right turn, and you feel how I do that." Then he made a left turn, climbing. Then he dove. All of a sudden, we were over the Pier Casino, nose down. I could see the pier, then land, then pier, then land. He wrung me out. And that was my first Navy aircraft ride. The seat had stayed in.

I was at Daytona Beach only two months when I got orders to take the train clear across the United States to Seattle, Washington. That was April 26, 1945. I visited my cousin in Miami the day before I left to go to Seattle. You might say I went from one corner of the U.S. to the other! I never got so tired of hearing

“clickety clack, clickety clack.”

By November 1945, my rating had become AMM(I), first class (E6), and I was sent to Chicago to instrument school, either carburetor or instrument. I could take my pick. I picked instruments. The instruments were air-driven, and it took six months to learn how to tear them apart, repair and clean them. So I finished that.

I'd met Virginia in Oklahoma when I was in AMM school, and we'd been corresponding, and we got pretty chummy. So we decided we might get married when I finished instrument school. I stopped by Oklahoma, and we got married April 4, 1946.

In May 2, 1946, I got orders to Browns Field, the VX2 detachment. The maintenance officer said, “If you got anywhere to go, you'd better go now because in about 10 days, we're going aboard the USS Shangri-La (aircraft carrier), and we're going to the Marshall Islands, and we're going to be flying Hellcat drones. And we're going to be having A-bomb tests. We're supposed to fly the drones through the blast, and then bring it back and land it at Roi Nemo Island.” So, they put me off the ship at Roi Nemo to help recover the drone when it returned from its mission.

I served in the U.S. Navy for the next 22 years, mostly in training positions. I served right through the Viet Nam War. But, hey, that's another war, another story.