

Civil Air Patrol Historical Monograph

NUMBER THREE

1983

PROPWASH



NATIONAL HISTORICAL COMMITTEE
Headquarters CAP

PROPWASH

A Collection of CAP Wartime Anecdotes
and Odd Facts

By

Robert E. Neprud

With Foreward by

Lt. Col. Lester E. Hopper, CAP

CAP National Historical Committee Monograph Series

Number Three

1983

FOREWORD

Through the personal generosity of Mr. Robert E. Neprud, Civil Air Patrol's historical holdings were considerably enriched by his gift of material utilized during the writing of his book, FLYING MINUTE MEN. Long accepted as the Bible by those interested in Civil Air Patrol's early history, FLYING MINUTE MEN was originally published by Duell, Sloan and Pearce, Incorporated of New York. Through the efforts of CAP's National Historical Committee it was reprinted in 1982 and once again made readily available thru the Bookstore.

Included in the material recently (1983) donated by Mr. Neprud was a collection of Wartime Anecdotes and Odd Facts entitled "Propwash". These were not initially published due to last minute editorial changes. They are presented in this monograph for reasons best explained by Mr. Neprud's contemporary definitions as; "Being a collection of anecdotes and odd facts from all over the CAP map---a round-up of some of the stories that will enliven Civil Air Patrol 'hangar sessions' for years to come." They are presented in their original unedited version so that the reader may receive the benefit of the form and feeling of the time.

L. E. Hopper
Lt. Col. CAP
Chairman, National
Historical Committee
August 1983

NUFF SAID - Two tired, dirty CAP coastal patrol fliers landed, out of gas, at Ellington Field, Texas, after a six-hour ramble over the Gulf. Between them, the two had around 1500 hours over the water.

Across the field they noticed an impressive ceremony was in progress. "What's doing?" one of them asked.

"They're awarding the air medal to some of the fliers," the mech explained.

"What for?" came the query.

"The men have completed 100 hours of flight over the Gulf on patrol in their B-25s."

"Oh", came the somewhat muffled reply from the visitors. And the two climbed back into their 90 horsepower, single engined Stinson Voyager for another long and weary round of escort duty.

SUNRISE SERVICE - One spring evening a coastal patrol C.O. was amazed to have practically every pilot on the base come to his desk and request the dawn patrol assignment the next day. Then the reason dawned on him. The following day was Easter Sunday and the men wanted to see the sun come up over the rim of the ocean on Easter morning.

"THREE POINT" AGAIN - Previous to being commissioned a "Flight Officer" at a solemn assembly held by the Beaumont garrison, "Three Point" - the unit's flying cat - was content to hang around downstairs with the guards and the mechanics. But once his promotion came thru and a bar was presented to him on a special collar, the feline aeronaut moved upstairs to the officer's lounge and could usually be found curled luxuriously in an overstuffed chair when not on a mission. He also stood all formations with his officer brethren.

AT YOUR CONVENIENCE - When Captain Zack Mosley, the cartoonist, found anyone who was skeptical about the work of the coastal patrol during the days when he was flying out of Major Ike's Lantana, Florida, base, he would hand out a card with the following challenge:

"Meet me at your convenience 40 miles off the Florida coast, 400 feet above the ocean, in a single-engine land-plane."

"MAYDAY" - Most poignant of all coastal patrol memories.... the cry of "99" or "MAYDAY", the distress signal, over a base's loud-speaker system. Every man would run to his prescribed station, and within a few seconds the rescue plane would be in the air. And all hands would hope that the "99" had been for drill purposes only.

A LONG DAY - In order to keep up with schedules during the winter of 1942-43, fliers at some of the bases became accustomed to flying as many as 10 hours a day. There were many occasions, at the northern bases, when pilots and observers had to be lifted from their ships and walked up and down the field between two men, like injured football players. Sometimes they were so stiff and cold they'd cry like babies in their agony.

LIGHT RUNNIN' - Down at the bases along the Gulf, everything was "light runnin'". Just where the expression originated, no one knew. A good plane was a "light runnin' Stinson"--or a pilot had a "light runnin' date"....

GOOD THOUGHT - The two men had been afloat for several hours in their Mae Wests. Their plane had gone under 45 seconds after their forced landing on the crest of a wave. Overhead, a CAP rescue plane was vainly trying to spot a rubber boat to the men, but a high wind caused them to miss several tries. The boys upstairs made a couple more passes but failed to drop another boat.

"Damn it, go ahead and drop the boat, you !#!#!" shouted one of the crewmen in the water.

"Bill," advised the other man, solemnly, "if you've got to use words like that -- pray!"

ELEPHANT BALLET - At Sarasota, Florida, members of Coastal Patrol Unit 13 used to enjoy spending some of their free time at the winter quarters of the Ringling Brothers Circus, which adjoined the CAP field. One of the more entertaining acts in rehearsal that year was the "Elephant Ballet", where gorgeous girls dressed in ballet costumes went through their paces with elephants, who were also bedecked in ballet skirts.

The CAP guards, meanwhile, were getting a nightly workout. It seems that some of the circus roustabouts, once their daily labors were finished, had the habit of relaxing just off the Ringling property with a bottle of beer in one hand and a bottle of wine in the other. Sipping first from one bottle and then from the other gave them all sorts of adventurous ideas. It made some of the tipplers want to fly airplanes and awakened a yearning in others to sleep in the CAP hangars. Sooner or later, the roustabouts -- having been prevented from realizing their ambitions -- would stretch out on the ground and snore sonorously until daylight. So peace would reign once again and the guards could go back to swatting mosquitos.

THE WELLSMERE - The personnel of Base 18 at Falmouth were quartered in a former summer resort hotel on Vineyard Sound, a huge wooden U-shaped building called the Wellsmere Inn. The venerable hostelry, which has since toppled into the ocean, was even then so close to the water's edge that the spray flew in through second-story windows on rough days. In winter, the residents either went to bed early or sat huddled in chairs with blankets wrapped around them as protection against the gusty drafts and the frigid temperature.

CALL ME "LUCKY" - Pilot Buck Pratt and his observer, of the Beaumont base, were cruising 24 miles offshore one sunny summer day in Pratt's little Voyager when the motor suddenly emitted a grinding protest. Buck started to give a "99" (or Mayday) over his radio, then changed his mind. He had noticed a freighter about five miles away and he was heading toward her.

"Maybe I can make it that far," Buck reasoned.

The motor still coughing along as he looked down on the vessel's deck. "Well, maybe I can make it to Eighteen Mile Light," Buck told his observer. He did. By this time, the protesting motor was about to shake the plane into small pieces, but Buck kept going, his courage strengthened by the sight of a Coast Guard cutter.

Finally, with the beach in sight, Buck fondled the little crate and deposited it on the sand in a three-point. The mechanics who hurried out from the base discovered that the crankshaft had broken diagonally and was held together only by the main bearing.

After that incident, Pratt's nickname was very nearly changed from Buck to Lucky.

POWERFUL BREEZE - The nor'easter that lashed at the northern coastal patrol stations in December of 1942 was one of the worst storms in years and won't soon be forgotten by the CAP members who were around at the time.

Regular missions were grounded, but some planes took off to warn outlying Coast Guard units and lighthouse tenders just about the time the gale struck. When the storm-battered ships returned to their home fields, wobbling crazily in the wind as they came in for a landing, personnel on the ground lined each side of the runway and literally caught the ships as their wheels hit the ground. Then the reception crew would cluster around the plane and "walk" it into a hangar -- if there was any hangar space left, that is.

But despite these measures, a number of light aircraft anchored to the ground by means of "dead men" -- usually submerged gasoline cans or cement blocks -- were ripped loose from their moorings and dribbled across the fields like jackstraws. After that, they were good mainly for the spare parts that could be salvaged from them.

CROSSED WIRES - Coastal patrol personnel were constantly studying code, navigation and other subjects that would do them some good on their treks over the ocean. In one instance, a pilot practicing code in his room at Falmouth's Wellsmere Inn unwisely hooked up his practice sending set to some electric wires belonging to the room above, where another CAP man was sleeping. When the light in the room of the innocent sleeper kept flashing code in the direction of the ocean for half the night, FBI investigators broke into the room and put the man under arrest. No one suspected the codester, who announced himself the next day when told what had happened.

FIRST STOP - Over and over, observers on the coastal patrol planes were informed that their first stop on landing should be at the Intelligence office -- and without delay. But after a three to six hour flight, the first stop was more likely to be at the men's room. After all, there were no modern conveniences aboard.

RADIO PROCEDURE - A Beaumont flier, recalling the time when a new radio procedure was introduced, relates that the men felt rather sissy when they had to say things like, "I say again" and "How do you hear me?" The training school class pretty nearly broke up the time when the base commander exploded when it came his turn to say "Twitter, this is Eagle."

HIS TURN - Sergeant Pat Brook, a one-time barnstormer from Texas, was custodian of the Link Trainer installed at Base 17 for the benefit of coastal patrol pilots flying out of Falmouth and Suffolk, Major Ralph Earle's twin bases.

An experienced pilot himself, Pat was nevertheless barred from overwater missions because he had only one eye and bore the marks of of couple of crackups. But he learned everything there was to know about the Link and he turned out to be a whirlwind of an instructor. It was the outspoken, red-faced Irishman who was largely responsible for the fact that all of the Suffolk and Falmouth pilots eventually were checked out with instrument ratings, or green tickets.

Pat, who was operating an airport in Pennsylvania when last heard from, showed up for a postwar Suffolk-Falmouth anniversary conclave at Riverhead, Long Island, site of Base 17's coastal patrol operations; Brook arrived early, landing his Cub at the old familiar field just before the weather closed down. None of the other coastal patrol vets were able to fly planes in.

And so it worked out that as a finale to the anniversary weekend, it was Pat -- the man who had never been allowed to go on patrol -- who buzzed out over the Atlantic and dropped a wreath into the ocean. The gesture was in tribute to Captain Gordon McAlpin Pyle, the one-time Base 17 intelligence officer who later disappeared in the ocean while on a tracking mission off Sandy Hook.

MAN-HUNT - Three draft-dodgers who took to the mountains in the rugged territory along the Colorado-Utah state line were brought in by the FBI, largely due to the reconnaissance provided by the Civil Air Patrol.

The fugitives were elusive characters. They kept on the move, always staying a jump or two ahead of the FBI agents on the case. They were smart enough not to show up in any of the scattered small towns of the region, preferring to make their way by stealing food, ammunition and other supplies from ranchers.

The noose tightened when CAP Wing Headquarters at Salt Lake City furnished a plane for aerial reconnaissance. Pilot of the craft was a Major Sherman Falkenrath, executive officer of the Utah Wing and a captain in the Salt Lake City police department.

The CAP major and the government agents set up a makeshift airport on a plateau near Vernal, Utah, and flew a series of missions over the area where all signs indicated the trio was in hiding. On each occasion, a G-Man with powerful binoculars accompanied Falkenrath. With the aid of a walkie-talkie radio, the pair in the plane could communicate with authorities on the ground.

The fugitives turned themselves in shortly after the aerial search began. They admitted being discouraged by the probing CAP plane, which was coming closer and closer to their hide-out, and which made movement impossible during daylight.

THIRTY PARTS TO A DOG - Members of one of the Southern Liaison Patrol units along the Mexican Border, surrounded by sizzling desert and mesquite country, were understandably startled when they received a shipment of Army manuals on the subject of dog-team transportation, complete with pictures of dog sleds and a nomenclature chart of a husky with 30 parts from muzzle to tail neatly labeled.

The number of this manual was FM 25-6, whereas the publication on Interior Guard Duty, which should have been sent, was FM 26-5. Somehow the figures were interchanged in one of the dozen or so forms involved in the delivery of the books.

COWS BOMBED WITH CORN - One of the flood missions in Kansas consisted in dropping corn to a herd of stranded heifers, since it was feared that they might become desperate through starvation and drown in attempting a break for land a quarter of a mile away. So a CAP plane loaded up with 150 pounds of corn in grocery bags, which burst when they hit. Although the knoll was no larger than a submarine, the bombing aim was good and 12 out of 14 bags struck home.

SUNBATHER RETREATS - On a simulated lost-plane search, it was agreed that a white sheet should represent the plane. Winging over the countryside, eyes peeled for a sheet, a pilot spied one and swooped low, only to scare up a girl sunbather, who jumped up and ran for cover.

COYOTE HUNTERS - Aerial hunting to protect livestock from the depredations of coyotes is a serious business out in the Plains Country--and even more so during the war years when sheep and cattle ranchers were straining to produce every possible pound of meat for the expanded market. This led to a petition by Major T. B. Roberts, Jr., South Dakota's first wing commander, which resulted in the granting of clearances by the CAA so the coyote hunters could fly again.

Tracking and shooting these slinking marauders from aloft is no job for the novice. When a coyote is sighted in the brakes, the plane makes a circle and flies behind him at 50 to 75 feet altitude, zigging and zagging to keep from over-flying the quarry. In this way, the animal is driven to the higher open ground, where the plane circles and comes in low behind him. The pilot must keep his eyes on his flying rather than on the coyote while the observer blasts away with a shotgun.

Then the plane lands on the nearest flat area and the pilot and gunner get to work skinning their victim.

"The worst part of it", one of the hunters relates, "is that you have to ride back to port with pelts in the cockpit. When you climb out at the end of your ride, you usually find that you've inherited all the fleas that formerly belonged to the animals."

However, since coyote pelts fetch around \$8 or \$9 on the usual market, the hunting better than pays for the flying time -- besides helping to cut down on stock-raisers' headaches.

OLDEST PILOT - They call Starr Nelson, 80 year-old pilot of Delta, Colorado, the "young man of the mountains."

Nelson, who stands straight as a poplar and looks at least 15 years younger than he is, learned to fly at the age of 73 after 12 hours dual instruction, soloing in 1940. He owns his own airplane and has made a number of long cross-country hops to eastern and southern states. On his ranch, which sits at the base of a flat top mountain, Starr maintains his own airfield. The "young man" is as much at home in an airplane or astride a horse.

A 25-year-old pilot remarked, after being introduced to the patriarch of all mountain fliers: "Gosh, when he shook hands I thought I had caught my hand in a steel vise.!"

HELP NEEDED - The pilot of a CAP plane on a search mission over the San Bernardino mountain range in California noted an object flying in a deep ravine more than 600 feet below. From the plane, it looked very much like a person. The pilot called his observer's attention to the object and ducked for a closer view.

It was a person, all right, and in serious need of help after falling from a cliff to a lower overhanging ledge. A radio message to the base resulted in the injured man's rescue several hours later. CAP cadets, trained in first-aid and in mountain search procedures, clambered down the cliff and carried the man out of the ravine.

CAP GREMLINS - Like all airmen, CAP fliers were occasionally harried by Gremlins. The type that associated themselves with the Civil Air Patrol was described by a Cleveland group publication, and the little fellow's portrait was executed by Jimmy Canborn, a Plain Dealer artist.

"The CAP gremlins seem to be a special breed," the Patrol's newspaper commented. "He has short, stocky legs, a little round tummy, and a big head, pink cheeks and a stubby nose. He is always seen with a wrench and a screw driver in his belt, since one of his favorite tricks is to loosen screws and bolts. His costume, too, is unique. The shoes turn up at the toes and on each heel is a suction cup enabling him to walk all over the outside of a plane in flight. His coat has king-size buttons that shine like beacons and on his head is perched a miniature CAP overseas cap. Usually his pranks are of an ornery nature, but it's said he can be bribed into behaving if you keep a supply of used postage stamps on which he can munch."

JAP BALLOONS - CAP fliers as far inland from the West Coast as Nevada became acquainted with the weird Japanese bomb-carrying paper balloons that had been wafted all the way across the Pacific by prevailing air currents.

Four came over the vicinity of Reno in the late summer of 1944 and were tailed by CAP planes, who were giving a hand to Reno Army Air Base fighters. Reports were radioed from the planes to Wing Headquarters at Reno, giving full details on direction, estimated speed, altitude and the rate of descent. Army authorities, with detonation specialists among them, were called when the Jap calling-cards finally landed.

Eleven of Reno's hard-riding "mounties" stalked one of the balloons early in 1944 along an old stage-coach road near Paramint Lake, following a call from the Reno Army Air Base. CAP was warned not to get too close to the balloon in the event they succeeded in tracking it down, but merely to post a guard near it. The horsemen spotted it, saw the wind pick it up again and when they thought they had it cornered, then followed it for two more miles. An Army contingent from the air base took over a short time later.

LOST SHEEP - A Utah squadron was once asked to find 600 sheep that had strayed from the main flock. Due to the rough terrain and high bush, herders were unable to locate them. Captain Art Mortenson, a squadron commander, finally found the sheep, plus three deer and an elk, sighted enroute.

CALIFORNIA DUCK COWBOYS - A bizarre but practical mission was flown by pilots of the California Wing to protect the rice crop in the San Joaquin Valley against the depredations of wild ducks and geese in the autumn of 1943. The farmers had increased their rice acreage from 150,000 acres to 230,000 acres that year, and the wildfowl -- apparently tipped off by their scouts -- moved into the area three weeks earlier than expected, just as the crop was heading. And since the flocks, numbering uncounted thousands of birds, could devastate 40 acres of rice in a night, the threat to the entire rice growing area was very real.

Flares, smoke bombs and other ground tactics merely chased the birds from one field to another. In desperation, the farmers raised a fund and called on the Civil Air Patrol for an aerial "blitz" that might turn the tables on the flocks that continued to blanket the rice marshes.

Grounded for much of the war because of West Coast defense restrictions, CAP fliers of the Sacramento area were given special permission by military authorities to assist the Fish and Wildlife Service in its efforts to check the ravenous birds.

The early morning and dusk attacks delivered by the light CAP planes, which flew at grass-skimming height, produced the desired results. Sometimes blasting at the ducks with shotguns, sometimes tossing practice hand-grenades into them, the duck "cowboys" succeeded in routing thousands upon thousands of the birds. Then, flying behind the flocks, they drove great numbers ahead of their planes to the Willows game refuge and to Benecia, where the Fish and Wildlife service had deposited 400 tons of feed in an effort to divert the ducks from the ricelands.

CAP fliers quickly learned that the trick was to keep over the birds and to avoid collisions which might shatter props or windshields and result in a crack-up in a marshy paddy field. Ducks seldom fly up in front of planes, but there was always the danger of their coming down in the path of a plane below them. The ducks flew at a speed of about 60 miles an hour and so did the CAP puddle-jumpers, making the planes ideal for the herding job. With operations at 25 and 50 feet, on the average, and involving many turns and constant radio communication, the Californians at the controls had to be on their toes every second.

The successful techniques used by CAP were described as follows in the Oakland Tribune:

"They fly out over the field and then roar down to 25 or 50 feet over the birds. Usually that scatters the flocks and brings them off the water. But sometimes, after they have been frightened a time or two, the birds stick to the water and watch the planes fly over. When the ducks don't take to the air, the planes swoop low a second time and the fliers drop hand-grenades and blaze away with shotguns. The grenades, which go off five seconds after the pin is pulled, usually explode well above the ground and don't give the fliers much time to pull out of range."

Chief of the "cowboys" was Captain Ed Meyers, commanding officer of the Sacramento squadron, who was in charge of the aerial operation in 1943 and again in 1944, when the ducks again threatened the rice fields. Meyers, a mechanic and a pilot since 1914, received major assistance from Lieutenant Gene Hughes, a rice farmer and a one-time crop duster, Lieutenant George W. Hancock, a Sacramento jeweler, and Lieutenant G. W. Hilton, 62 year old tractor salesman from Modesto.

Cost of the CAP's successful month long war against the wildfowl in 1943 was \$1600, which was considered something of a bargain by the farmers, who stood to loose at least \$100,000 had the ducks been allowed to eat their fill. The process was successfully repeated in 1944, with the "cowboys" using their earlier techniques to advantage.

BUGGED UP - The South Dakota Wing, through its publication, once made the suggestion that a grasshopper emblem be presented to pilots of the Plains Country who had the experience of flying into a swarm of these insects.

"To those who are uninitiated," the Wing bulletin explained, "it might be of interest to know that swarms of grasshoppers have been encountered as high as 4000 feet. When you fly into a cloud of them, you'd think you were in a hailstorm. All you have to do in South Dakota to get bugged up is to fly through an army of "hoppers."

NORTH WOODS ADVENTURE - CAP planes played a part in the tracking down of a bearded fugitive in the Maine woods in 1943. The desperado, who had a habit of shooting into windows to see whether anyone was home, was a Canadian draft evader who had been living in the woods for more than a year by robbing camps. When a guide was killed, the hunt was on. For weeks, CAP planes made many flights to transport men and supplies and to search for campfires that might give a clue. The search for the killer ended with the shooting of the bearded figure.

THE PICKLE KING - Since the beginning of Civil Air Patrol, a number of its finest pilots -- several of them women -- have died in airplane crashes. One of the most lovable and colorful of them was North Carolina's wing commander, Colonel Frank E. Dawson, of Charlotte, who was nicknamed the "pickle king" because of his civilian occupation.

Colonel Dawson spearheaded North Carolina's participation in the CAP program throughout the war and into the difficult peacetime transition period. Along with carrying the ball as wing commander, he was C.O. at the Beaufort coastal patrol base and also directed the Manteo base during much of its existence. A man who insisted on sharing the same dangers that his men faced, Dawson flew hundreds of hours on patrol missions in the stormy Cape Hatteras sector.

The jovial, story spinning wing commander, who possessed a wonderful talent for making friends and for getting things done, was returning from a luncheon flight and safety conference at Rocky Mount in November, 1946, when his PT-10 crashed in the woods near Cannon airport, just outside of Charlotte and within sight of wing headquarters. Dead with Colonel Dawson in the wreckage was Captain W. E. Merck, wing operations officer.

TALENT POOL - One of the greatest services of the Civil Air Patrol during the war was its maintenance of a pool of trained people for special jobs. CAP Headquarters kept a punch-card system of detailed information on personnel. If a rush inquiry came in for a man who could pilot a two-engine plane and speak Spanish -- or one who was an expert photographer and a seasoned night flier -- the IBM operator ran the punch cards through the sorting machine at the rate of 400 per minute. Out would come the dozen or the hundred who suited the specifications. The man culled from the pack was sometimes on his way to an important assignment within a few hours.

PARA-TALKIE - The Michigan Wing, which numbered a seaplane squadron and several parachute units among its components, even developed a para-talkie system for chutist-to-ground communication.

The transceivers, which were designed by Lieutenant Arthur Copland, a group communications officer, and Radio Technician Ed Pietrasik, emerged after a year's experimentation -- five units being built and discarded before the final version was pronounced a success.

The para-talkie was demonstrated to the public one Sunday afternoon when a two-way conversation was carried on at Wings airport between Lieutenant Ralph Berkhausen, who bailed out of a plane, and Lieutenant James Allen, who gave instructions to the descending jumper from the ground.
