

Another Note to Explain my Addiction to the Navy and Water...

By CAPT Al Atwell, USN (Ret.)

I had two grandfathers – one a fisherman and the other a Spanish American war vet who was teaching at the Naval Academy. He had bought some land in Eastport, about six 100 by 300-foot lots and built a large 4 story house that my mom inherited. It was only about 3 miles from the capital in Annapolis.

There were 8 kids in the Atwell family, 3 men and 5 girls. Two of the men taught at the Naval Academy. My dad had lost his right arm, and I had to go out with him to fix oil burners, furnaces, etc. at night as well as on weekends and holidays. All five of the girls were married to Navy people. My fisherman grandfather taught me how to catch fish/crabs/shrimp and oysters on all the nearby waters.

A brother that was two years ahead of me drowned and my mother's brother drowned. Hence, I was sent to swimming school at the age of four. Sometime later my dad built me a cypress fishing boat and other Navy uncles fixed up two outboard motors – one large and one small – allowing me to spend 7 glorious years on the waters of Chesapeake Bay.

One uncle teaching went to WA on a WWII destroyer and the other ran the midshipmen store and the Naval Academy dairy farm 20 miles away where they had 200 Holstein cattle producing dairy products for the 4,000 midshipmen. I worked there for 40 cents per hour.

I was also in the Boy Scouts and whenever there was a football game at Annapolis, they asked me to bring my troop to pass out programs to people there.

When WWII started, all our male teachers were gone and the Academy sent out a leader to my high school to observe and appoint a male student in physical education and shop classes to supervise class activity. They picked me in my senior year when I played soccer, basketball, baseball and ran track, ultimately winning the best athlete award.

Another uncle on a fish factory ship had taught me how to use a marine sextant and shoot morning and evening star shots, as well as noon sun lines. My dad had become president of the local Democrat club by that time and said the Naval Academy wanted me to be a Midshipman. I declined and enlisted saying I wanted to be an Aviation Mechanic, because the best of them could fleet up and become pilots.

There were only 12 Patrol Squadrons in Westpac - assigned to San Diego, Moffett Field, Whidbey Island, and Barbers Point, HI. I trained and flew out of all these bases.

Some interesting challenges – Was deployed to the USMC base in Iwakuni, Japan, and flew a patrol when the starboard engine caught on fire and the nearest runway was on Iwo Jima. We were able to land safely at about 0300 – cut down 3 pine trees and replace the engine with a hoist the squadron had brought.

About 5 months later we were going home to Hawaii – had a tailwind of 100 knots but the aircraft would not level out and fly allowing me to cut off the jet engine assist as normal. I finally heard one of the men say “It must be those Hondas” – our max gross weight at takeoff was 80,000 pounds. So, there we were, with two props turning, two jets burning, and experiencing heavy weather with a 100-knot tail wind. After a couple of hours, we did not have enough fuel to return to Iwakuni or get to Hawaii. To solve the problem, I opened the bomb-bay doors and ejected 5 Honda motorcycles and everything else I could and we headed to Midway Island. As we were just about to land, we hit a large gooney bird (Laysan Albatross) putting our starboard engine out of commission. About a week later we put a new engine on that our squadron CO had sent out.

That's enough sea stories for now!

Cheers,
Al

Please click on the following link for a highly entertaining article on the Gooney Birds of Midway, published by National Geographic in June, 1964. [1964-The-Gooney-Birds-of-Midway.pdf](#)