

THE DAY THE DEVIL BLINKED

(The sea voyage of "Pelican" 8 – LM 8)

By Lcdr Ray Myers USN (ret)

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Over the years I have worn my miniature navy wings on my lapel proudly announcing I was once one of the proud band of Naval aviators. Needless to say when people I meet see the wings I am asked "what did you fly?" I can see the visions of Tom Cruise in "Top Gun" in their eyes and when I reply seaplanes PBM's and P5M's their bubble bursts and the reply "Oh- the old Catalina". I then Reply "I have heard of the "catalina " but I never flew one". If I am talking to the initiated they want to know how did you ever get seaplanes in the training command. (that's assuming that they ever heard of them of course). That number of ancient mariners is diminishing rapidly. This keeps me current on how old I am. It's a short story about a "flying Midshipman" who wanted to get his wings and out to the fleet posthaste and PBM's were the answer to that prayer. The other choices had long stays in the "Pools" as the waiting lines were known. There was a time in my career when this choice was beneficial to my survival in the human race. Maybe I should elaborate on such a bold statement.

It was February 1960 and our squadron VP-44 out of Norfolk Virginia was finishing up an exercise in San Juan Puerto Rico Known as "Spring board" where we get a chance to strut our stuff and do things that we were training for. We were an ANTI submarine squadron with a secondary mission of mining. We had fired 5" rockets at smoke lights and flown formation as we mined imaginary harbors to the best of our ability. We also had played tag with our submarines, conventional and Nuke, during the two weeks we were there. These were the days when the Russian "Whiskey" class submarines were Prowling off the Atlantic coast watching our maneuvers and ASW (Anti Submarine Warfare) was of prime interest to the powers to be. Our crew ran over what we thought was a "whiskey" on a routine flight one day but when we went back he was long gone. She looked like a double prow barge without a tow. That's why we went back. That's another story and I am getting away from the story line.

One more diversion which has some later implications. I was invited to ride a Nuke attack sub for a contest of skills between it and a Destroyer. The challenge was made at a bar in San Juan the night before between the skipper of the sub (I can't even remember the name) and the USS Abbott a DD with the flag aboard. As I went aboard I noticed the absence of brass to be attended to as on other navy vessels. I was informed by a crew member that they weren't allowed to even allowed shine their shoes because of the fumes and there was one person assigned to test the air quality at all times. I guess that a good reason to go

submarine but the chow is a better one. I went aboard before breakfast and was enthralled by what happened at the breakfast table. The ward room was within shouting distance of the con and the OD (Officer of the Deck, the one in charge of the ship when the captain is indisposed) was giving positions to the skipper as we dove into the Puerto Rico trench out of San Juan harbor . As we approached the operating area the officers were not enjoying the pleasantries of idle conversation over a cup of coffee they were planning the attack. It didn't even feel like we were underway as there were no lurches as we maneuvered. They informed me later that it was more like flying than sailing and most turns were with positive g's. The OD gave out the range and distance as we closed in. The captain assumed the con and got down to the business at hand. It seemed like only minutes when the captain announced he had executed a successful attack and left some noise makers which the destroyer was pounding with training depth charges. He confirmed his report by going to periscope depth and watching the shenanigans of his opponent. Scratch the USS Abbott. That was the subject of many briefings about the skill and cunning our enemy, the submar-eeee-ner not submariner, the ASW (Anti Submarine Warfare) officer,(me), gave out to keep the lads focused . We needed that be alert beyond the call of duty . OK, no more sea stories.

We were aroused at 0-dark thirty and marched smartly to the weather briefing for the trip home (smartly can mean the same direction). "Stormy," the aerographer, Said we were in for a great day, puffy CU over the route back with a chance of thunder bumpers at home. No sweat we could land blind in Albemarle sound at 80 knots and 200 FPM down after departing Elizabeth city's ADF at 300 feet if Norfolk was socked in. As 8 planes (Two went to Bermuda the day before) milled about smartly in the harbor preparing to take off. This was one of the draw backs of sea planes we had to keep moving while we turned up the engines and getting in to position for take off. This times 8 was taxing to say the least.(a play on words). We had the good fortune to be classified as power boats until we became airborne and then the rules changed in the twinkling of the eye. That day we were 3rd or 4th in line to depart. In a roar of our two 3350's we lurched off gracefully and attained the airborne state. The quality of the maneuver was directly dependant on whether you were at the controls or not. At about 300 feet we were greeted with the sweet aroma of rum being produced as we went through the smoke plume over the rum plant at the harbors edge. This experience has a special place in my memories of Spring board 1960.

Stormy was right it was a fair weather day but he hadn't told us about the sunrise we were enjoying. The clouds had that bright Aroura around their edges and the rays streaming down to the sea below, which was calm.(Sea state 0). Rod Hall, the navigator gave us our heading home and the radio hummed with the out report to the skeleton crew at home waiting for us lucky dogs to return. We throttled back and were at our departure altitude 6000 and settled in for the trip home with, George, the auto pilot at the controls. On the VHF We could here those in front and those who were falling in line behind for the trip. We were relaxed and the coffee was brewing. We were plotting right down the track and ticking off our progress with reports to base when Oceanic control interrupted the serenity of a great day with a request to go to 8000 for the remainder of the flight. In compliance with the order we advanced the RPM and manifold pressure and climbed to 8000 feet. Again we settled into our routine which was soon to be interrupted. As we throttled back

there was a large explosion in the Starboard engine. As I was in the left seat I couldn't see the engine so I requested for a report on what we could see visually as the instruments showed we had a real problem. We were feathering number 2 and going to single engine. Thoughts of where is the closest sea drome, and could we make it back to San Juan were interrupted with a message that would make these thoughts irrelevant. "Sir the Starboard engine is on fire" came from the after station and was confirmed by the right seat. Ok, Just pop the fire bottles and settle that problem. The copilot took care of this as I concentrated on getting the single engine procedure completed. I was bolted out of my complacency with "sir it's still burning" from more than one station. My mouth was dry as I shifted to high frequency and Screamed "MAY DAY, MAY DAY we have an uncontrollable engine fire in the Starboard engine". I knew some body would hear HF as I had had a conversation with Manila tower one day while taxing in the harbor at Norfolk VA.

That engine can burn the wing off we got to get these guys out of here. I don't know how many times we hollered MAY DAY. I told the copilot I will make a left spiral down to about 1000 feet then we will bail out and throw the life rafts out stay in a circle and try get together. I would be last out and I still didn't have my chest pack attached yet. For some reason that wasn't on my to do list just then. Upon reflection I think I figured we had to get the men out before the wing burned off and if it did I couldn't possible get out anyhow. The crew had preceded to the after station and were ready to bail out on orders. I was thinking that there are sharks down there I hope we can get everybody in the rafts before they come. "The fire is going out" some one said. I thought It's still flying maybe we can get it down. "All hands to ditching stations we are going to take her in", I shouted into the mike. No response. I tried again. Still nothing. I looked down and the radio was still on HF (High frequency) and the world knew what I was doing but they couldn't hear me in the after station. I shifted to intercom and the cockpit and flight deck was alive with the crew buckling up. I don't remember what the altitude was but Bob Deland ,the copilot, went through the check list and asked for the flap setting. As I recall I hadn't given it a thought and told him ½ flaps. Reality had set in and all we had to do was land in the open sea. This I wasn't trained to do. See these aren't really sea planes they are bay planes. I had watched from the nav table in Korea when we were delivering a South Korean spy to the North Korean coast. The sea was calm and it looked like a big bay with bumps (swells). The wind wasn't a factor, all we had to do was pick a heading and keep it on the water after touch down. Yoke forward to keep from skipping off, back to keep from digging in .In a moment it was over and we were once again a power boat. At this point ,I reasoned that, my selection of sea planes at Corpus Christi had served me well.

The flight engineer "Snake" Snively was out on the wing Starboard wing with a fire bottle checking the damage. The news was good, the sea spray on the landing had put out most of fire that had remained. The crew reported in and all was well and no one was hurt. We were in one piece. As the adrenaline wore off it seemed like only yesterday that we had an engine fire. Time had seemed to go into slow motion and for some reason time wasn't part of the equation while we tussled with the emergency. There had been plenty of time to do what had to be done and some time left over for thinking. It was kind of eerie and surreal. I mentioned this to someone later and I was told that he had heard something like this before.

Bob Deland took over and I hopped out of the left seat to see , for the first time, the damage to the starboard engine. The wing was scorched and the engine seemed drooped due to the heat and hard landing but other than that we were in business. The first of the strange happenings of the day were about to occur when I tried to find out who had said "The fire was going out" nobody owned up. I was sure they misunderstood so I tried again with the same result nobody knew. Since the initial shock hadn't completely worn off so it was easy to move on but this still haunts me until the present day. Guardian angels are real and present. We were about to settle in the routine for the third time that day. A quick check told us we were about to be a surface craft for a while, quite a while as a matter of fact. We tried the hydro flaps. A new fangled device consisting of two appendages under the hull which were extended by pressing down on the rudder petals. They gave us directional control on the water and did away with the sea anchors we had used in the PBM's. Glen L. Martin thinks of every thing with all the comforts of home. They also did not slow us down.

We on our way to wherever, cruising on our good engine. I asked Rod ,The Navigator, for a course back to San Juan. The quizzical look on his face would stay with me the rest of my life. I explained we didn't have a great deal to do now and I thought we could close the distance for anybody that might be looking for us. He snatched his trusty protractor and gave us a heading. We set course and settled in for the long ride back. It wasn't long before Erne Wilson , the exec, was over head asking if every thing was OK. He had heard our MAY DAY and turned back to help. We reported all's well and we were underway back to San Juan. Shortly the Search And Rescue HU16 joined the group and asked to be updated on the situation. The exec. said he was going to head back before his fuel became critical and wished us good sailing. SAR passed us the word that we were to make for Grand Turk island and meet the Tender, USS Albemarle, there as they were under way as we spoke. Rod broke out the charts to get us a course for Grand Turk. As we chugged along SAR gave us a plot of our position and remarked, " do you guys know that you are making about 11 knots". This was the first time we were able to ascertain our speed because our navigation gear ,Loran, didn't work except when we were airborne. Around this time we were contacted by the USS Abbott (the same DD which the Nuke boat had sunk in that famous dual of skills). They informed us that they were proceeding at full speed to our location and would be there ASAP. We answered back we were steaming away from them at 11 knots and it might be longer than they thought before rendezvous. In a few hours the SAR said he was going to Grand Turk as he was low on fuel. We asked him to fly over us on a course to Grand Turk so we could set our course. He rodgered our request and departed. We were on our own until the USS Abbott arrived.

It was about dusk before we saw the masthead lights of Abbott on the horizon behind us. It was after dark before she came abeam of us. They wanted to tow us. This was one of their exercises the preformed for their ORI's (Operational Readiness Inspection), I was told. This didn't seem such a good idea as a following sea might put us into the fantail and we would probably sink. Also they would have to slow to steerage way and make for a slow transit. We declined the offer and requested that they take a position about 1000 yds or so on our Starboard beam and give us fixes about every 30 minutes in case we became separated. They concurred and we settled in for the night. It wasn't all that bad as it was a full moon and when the sun went down the moon came up. At first I hadn't thought much about it but we were soon to appreciate our good fortune. It was still sea state 0 with a light breeze a perfect night

for Caribbean cruising. That's what we painted on the side of LM 8, (The plane ID number and our call sign was 8 Pelican) when she got home (Caribbean Cruiser).

The moon went down and the sun came up as we prepared for our arrival at Grand Turk. The Abbott wanted to know our intentions and we replied we would anchor and would need less than 5 fathoms to give our anchor slack to hold. They said the position we had indicated was perfect. We had chosen this spot on our aircraft charts because the color was light blue the destroyer must have assumed that we had surface charts. We chuckled at our seemingly knowledge of seamanship and surface navigation. But before we could demonstrate our new found abilities the tender, USS Albemarle, arrived and took charge. They announced they would change the Starboard engine on the buoy and we would be on our way. This was because they would not be able to take us aboard the fan tail for repair due to the fact they had just been configured for the new jet seaplane the P6M (A four(4) engine jet seaplane) requiring a ramp be cut in the aft area of the ship to allow the P6m to taxi it's nose in to work on the engines. (I bet most people don't know the navy had about 12 of these babies in the Martin Plant in Maryland that were scrapped before they got to the fleet. Our crew had the opportunity to see these planes as they decommissioned them.) On with the adventure. We taxied in close and told them about our observation of the damage to the mounts due to high temperatures during the fire. They raked us with binoculars and concurred with our observations which they would check when we tied up to the buoy they had laid in the harbor.

After tying up we were welcomed on board the tender and informed we would probably be taxiing to GTMO(Guantanamo Cuba)if they couldn't help us. They offered to replace the crew for the trip. This kind offer was refused as the crew voted ,to a man, to see this thing through. Besides we were having a ball regardless of the inconveniences and close quarters. We had 4 extra people who were just riding back ,three from the squadron maintenance department and a Lt. Smale from the Canadian ASW group and they wanted to stay on board too. Our requests for a fill up on gas to give us more weight was filled and we were about to have another startling discovery about our adventure.

On fueling the gas had streamed out of the tank. At first we thought a valve had been left open but inspection revealed the main line to the starboard inboard wing tank had been burned through. The squadron had a running argument about how to burn the wing tanks and I had decided not to burn the inboard tanks until last. This would mean if we had burned these inboard tanks first they would have been half empty and when the manifold burned through the tank would have been a bomb and blown off the right wing dooming all aboard. Our guardian angel was doing a good job on this one too. The fire we would learn was caused by a blown jug (cylinder) and had been fed by the sloshing out of the fuel in the tank and it seemed that when the overflow was exhausted the fire had subsided and that kept our wing in tact.

Gas wasn't the only thing we had ordered. Steaks and ice-cream seem to have mysteriously appeared on the list of "had to have" items for the yacht trip to Cuba. We did have a galley to cook the steaks but we were not blessed with a freezer for the ice-cream. Hope springs eternal in the breasts of flight crews it seems. As we loaded our supplies we dropped a bottle of catsup on the steel deck splattering the XO (the ships Executive Officer who was looking after us.)with what

looked like blood on his immaculate white summer uniform. He graciously excused himself and returned in a fresh set of whites looking none the worse for the experience.

It was late in the evening and time to get underway for the trip to GTMO. We cast off and were provided with a crash boat from the tender to lead us through the coral heads which were visible only because of the white breaking water over them. The devil was not to let us off that easily. USS Albemarle came up on our frequency with the notification that she was returning to port with a medical emergency which could be handled only at Grand Turk. (an emergency appendectomy as I recall). The boatswain commanding the crash boat asked what was our intentions. We replied that we were all secure and he had better return the ship before daylight disappeared and made his transit through the coral heads more difficult. We were now on our own, having departed of our own free will not due to an emergency. This was to be my first and only command at sea. I guess I could have stridden the flight deck with my hands clasped behind me like Charles Lawton in Mutiny on the Bounty or perhaps rolled my steel balls like Captain Quig but it just didn't seem right. "Damn the coral heads full speed ahead" was the order of the day. We were just passing the last coral head as the crash boat broke off and headed back.

For some reason we were being served huge servings of soft ice-cream desert before the evening fare of Steak being served on the cruise ship we were embarked on. Seconds were in order as five gallons had to be consumed promptly. We set the RPM at 1500 and the hydro flaps thumped as we made our way into the open sea. Free at last we were quickly falling in to the routine that would be ours for the next 24 hours. We had it made, reclining chairs on the flight deck, stove in the galley and four bunks aft with a breeze wafting through the after station hatches. The ice-cream was gone and we were consuming our steaks as if they wouldn't last through the night, and they wouldn't for the same reason as the ice-cream. Every body had a watch as needed. The pilots steering the craft, the flight engineer watching the engine, and radio with position reports and the others keeping watch. I reminded the crew, much to their chagrin, that as it was the day before there would be no sun bathing on the wings. We didn't need sun burn or having to fish some one out of shark infested waters. Later that night the Tender pulled along side to give us comfort and fixes of our progress. The moon light on the water was impressive and had some of us wishing our sweethearts were along for the ride. After all it was February 14 St. Valentines day.

Dawn came up like thunder as the song goes and ham and eggs and coffee were served to celebrate the beginning of the new day. The hydro flaps thumped first on one side then the other. We were told that we could not hold them in a half open position and had to fully extend one at a time. As a result of this continual pounding we had a small mishap. During the night one of the crew received a nasty burn when he rolled over in a bunk and touched a red hot hydraulic line. After breakfast the ship contacted us by radio and told us that the "Padre" had hooked up the VHF to transmit the church service to us. The memorable part of the service was the crew singing the hymn "Eternal Father, Strong to Save" (I call it the Navy hymn). The verse that says "For those in peril on the sea" hit home that day and my mind wandered to the voice I had heard during the fire. This rendition with all male voices was stirring and prompted our flight engineer "Snake" Snively to remark "we Needed That". We were making good progress and were closer in

to the Cuban mainland than the ship because they had to have deeper waters. About dusk we were just off GTMO when the ship informed us we were to enter the port unassisted. Wow ! I hadn't even thought of this but it was reasonable if not mandatory. After all we both couldn't fit into the entrance. The moon had come up on schedule and made it brighter but it was still plenty dark especially to the PPC (Patrol Plane Commander) who was shooting the channel, me. We didn't have any instruments for this sort of work so we just used our hands to indicate the angle to the marker and our desired bearing. Then we would pop back into the cockpit and compare with the compass. It was up and down then hit the hydro flap and do it all over again. I often wondered if anybody had seen this comical scene with us popping up and down like a jack-in-the-boxes in the cockpit of this helpless P5M . We made it in only to find the bay filled with carriers. Lights were every where as we retreated back out of the bay. We then saw the lighted ramp off to the Port and made a hasty approach to the buoy. The search lights were illuminating the ramp area and we slowed by blipping the one engine (switching the mags on and off) and using the hydro flaps for what they were designed for. We were on the ramp buoy and our beaching gear was being delivered by the rearming boats with their padded gunwales. We were not amphibious and required wheels with flotation tanks to be clamped on and hauled up a cement ramp by a tractor to be accommodated in the parking area. As we were hauled up we heard what appeared to be cheering but much to our disappointment was only the crowd in the outdoor movie angrily calling for the ramp lights to be put out so they could see the movie. Another reality check. Our radio operator tapped out the "IN" report to home base indicating mission completed. We loaded our gear ,as it was, in the bus and retired to our quarters for some needed rest.

In a few days the squadron sent a plane to GTMO to retrieve the wayward ones . The maintenance officer was upset because I had given some secret electronic equipment to the tender for safe keeping and they were long gone on another mission. We returned home to a welcome prepared for us by the PAO (Public Affairs Officer) officer . We were heroes and had been the subject of the TV nightly news while we were gone. My folks had heard the news on our mishap via one of these broadcasts. We were interviewed by the local paper and when asked for an outstanding remembrance all I could think of was the expression on the navigators face when I asked for a course to San Juan. I guess we answered many more questions because the article next day had a more complete story. I could have been that the PAO had a good press release for the occasion. We lined up for pictures for posterity adorned in our sweaty flight suits and the accompanying aroma from our cruise. There were rumors that our 55 hour and 550 mile voyage had set some sort of a record but I couldn't verify that. I did learn that one of the planes on the first transatlantic flight had taxied 55 hours to the Azores . I think that is part of the exhibit in the Naval Aviation Museum. The adventure was history and it was back to work for the returning heroes.

Later an encounter with Cdr Peoples our personnel officer and the leader of the 2 plane detachment to Bermuda left me wondering. He told me at 8:00 AM on the morning of the fire he had been awakened with a dream of one of the squadron planes with an engine fire crashing and cart wheeling on landing . Cart wheeling was what we called it when a seaplane would dig in one of the wing floats into the water while landing and the results of such a maneuver. I have never known of such a crash except in films. Curious I questioned all of those in the landing if they had such a fear. Only Rod Hall the navigator said he was really

sweating the open sea landing and had imagined cart wheeling. This was ESP (extra sensory perception). I had been involved in experiments with Dr. Rhine, while I was at Duke university, in this area and had seen persons as far away as London transmit data with better than the probabilities predicted for chance. You can understand if I say I was careful what I thought around Rod after that.

It was years later when I saw a TV documentary on the legendary Devil's triangle (AKA The Bermuda Triangle) that it dawned on me that we had landed in about the middle of a triangle with boundaries between the points of Bermuda, Miami and San Juan, and some show it even as far north as Norfolk Va. We had operated in this area as a matter of course with out realizing that we were stepping on the Devil's own territory. My wife likes to remind the listeners to the story that I am a "Bermuda Triangle reject". I hasten to remind her that we were not thrown out, it was just that the Devil blinked and we sailed out the back door..

A final note. When I told this story one time to a sailor who had sailed though the windward passage as it is known he said he had never seen the waters there when it wasn't rough and windy. I don't care what they say about the Bermuda Triangle, that's a place where the unexplained is the norm and it's good to be on the alert.

A fair wind and a following sea to you all.

Ray Myers LCDR USN Retired

Raymond W. Myers Lcdr USN (Ret)

Born Philadelphia, PA July 6 1927.
Moved To Doylestown, PA in 1943
Graduated Doylestown High School June 1945
Drafted into the U.S. Navy September 7, 1945
Went to boot camp in Bainbridge, MD
Accepted in the V5 program from Bainbridge
Went to Duke University under the Flying Midshipman program
Went to Pensacola and began training in preflight class 6-48
Received wings in Corpus Christi in Multi Engine-Sea
Married Nadine Peevy (Deceased 1983)
We had 3 children - 1 boy and 2 girls.
Served in VP-42 in the Korean war. (3 Air medals)
Returned to Pensacola as a flight instructor in the SNJ
Served on the training Carrier USS Saipan until decommissioned
Returned to Duke University and Graduated with a BA in History
Served in VP-44 at Norfolk Va (Voyage of LM-8)
Served at NATSF Philadelphia, then COM FLEETACTS Ryukus, Okinawa
Retired from Schools Command NAS Pensacola June 1970
(My first wife Nadine Peevy Myers passed away on Feb 9, 1983)
Presently live at 2551 Pine Forest Road , Cantonment, FL with my wife Mary
and have 4 children; Howard Davis (Atlanta, GA) , R. Scott Myers (Falls Church, VA) ,
Lynne Short (Quakertown, PA),and Robin Clay (Fredericksburg, VA)

Life time member

Flying Midshipman Association
Association of Naval Aviation
Retired Officer Association

Serve on Board of The Waterfront Rescue Mission, Pensacola FL
Elder McIlwain Memorial Presbyterian Church, Pensacola FL