

My final navy tour - the "Twilight" tour - after 30 years Active was assignment as Ground Electronics Officer, or GEMO, at Naval Air Station Kingsville, Mexicee Texas, shortened to NASK. During that Last Hurrah I became involved in one of the more interesting facets of working around Airedales, and that arose simply from my being my usual, a-hole self.

Naval Air (NAVAIR) shore bases undergo a series of inspections on a two-year cycle, called the NAVAIR Bi-ennial Quality Assurance (QA) Inspection. It's mainly an in-depth coal-rake for the Air Operations people, but a section of it covers Ground Electronics (GE), the organization that maintains airfield electronics systems.

I had my first QA about a month after I got to NASK, conducted by our next-higher boss, Chief of Naval Air Training (CNATRA), based at NAS Corpus Christi. The guy who did it was a mustang Lieutenant Commander named IV Velez, who was the Staff N3 (now, I hope we all remember our "N" codes, hmmm?). IV came into my shop firing omni-directional shitbombs, until I began throwing out the B.S. flag by replying, quite humbly, "Oh, YES? *SHOW ME THAT IN WRITING.*"

He couldn't--as I damn well knew. So, he drug me behind a closed door and we had a short "chat," the sum of which was I told him I wasn't agreeing to any discrepancies he named if he didn't have a reference behind them. I then called my boss, the Air Ops Officer, explained, and said, "Hey, I think I just blew our QA. Gomen-a-sorry." The Boss crawled off to fall on his sword.

However: during the de-brief with our CO we got rave reviews. Not only that, but IV asked for, and got, my CO's permission to take me along on his next QA, to conduct the Ground Electronics portion of the inspection. Turned out IV was an okay guy (for an Airedale), and, though he was a consummate expert at the Ops side, he made no such claims where Ground Elex was concerned.

Thereafter, I did NAVAIR QAs of the GE organizations at NAS Point Mugu (CA), NAS Corpus Christi (MeX TX), NAS Meridian (MS), NAS Patuxent River (MD), and a thorough groom job on the new airfield control tower and Air Operations building at NAS Pensacola (FL). Mostly had a ball, especially at Patuxent River, which leads me to some of the neatest Naval Aviation stories of my experience. We inspected Pax in the Fall of 1996.

Patuxent River Naval Air Station is located south of Washington, D.C., at the point where the Potomac empties into Chesapeake Bay. It is truly a beautiful area, worthy of a visit any time. Pax River is home to, among other things, the Navy's Test Pilot school, so Air Ops figures prominently and our inspection assumed "Really Big Deal" proportions.

The Pax GE supervisor was a civilian and a damned good guy. His organization was running smoothly, to the point that my portion of the inspection was actually a pleasure. Very little wrong, nothing out of whack. He'd been doing the GEMO job for about ten years, and some of his programs were in better shape than mine. (So I immediately copied them...)

One of the areas I had to look at was outlying fields and remote equipment sites. I was loaned a truck and an airfield-qualified Petty Officer driver, and off we went to the southern end of the base to one of their radio sites.

At the very eastern tip of the base is a large nature preserve, with a road running by the bay, right along the beach. Inland of the road are a number of ponds and small islets, all very beautiful. The P.O. drove me along that road and, as we passed by a particular spot, he pointed to a tall, creosote-preserved pole with a large bird's nest on top of it. The pole looked down on a picturesque scene--a small beach and wooded area around a pond maybe an acre in size.

"Here's where *IT* happened," said he, and related this story, which I later confirmed with other sources on base.

Seems the Maryland state wildlife people had come to possess a young bald eagle in physical difficulty, and nursed it back to health. They announced they were going to return it to the wild, which item was eagerly seized upon by the Clinton White House. Bubba's Public Relations kiddies figured there was much political profit to be gained by having The Prez be seen releasing our national emblem while cameras rolled and the world watched.

So, arrangements were made and on the big day Marine helos flew the Biliarys, the OwlGores and a cast of

thousands to Pax River for the release of the eagle. Gorgeous George Stephanopoulos had the stage set with camera crews from every blow-dried media outlet on the planet, including Le Monde, UPI, Reuters, CNN, etc. I think even Pravda showed up. The whole shebang was set to go on that picturesque little beach on the one-acre pond the Petty Officer showed me. The eagle was to be released from a specially-designed cage with a simple handle to pull to safely open the cage door and let the bird fly out.

Before we get to the main event, reflect on what happens whenever the President of the United States (POTUS) appears in public. Envision Maryland state police have sealed off the main roads nearest the base in Lexington Park, stopping all traffic for the duration of the visit while keeping one road to the nearest hospital free of traffic in case POTUS has to be rushed to medical care. The surrounding woods on base are filled with Secret Service, Marines and Base Police patrols. Aircraft patrol overhead. The Coast guard rings the area with armed cutters, and, for all I know, the off-shore waters teem with frogmen.

Also imagine that all of these various police, para- and military forces must communicate with each other, so: there is one common radio channel designated to which all are listening. Further, each member of the Presidential party has been assigned a code name for the day by the Secret Service. Hillary might have been "Bitch One," say; Owlgore, "Doofus One," and so on. And POTUS Actual was that day assigned the code name "Eagle." This figured heavily in what happened later.

And so they foregathered. Included were Mr. and Mrs. Governor of Maryland, Mr. and Mrs. Maryland Wildlife Commissioner, Mrs. Banal Rodham and Mrs. Tipper Clueless. As the cameras rolled, Bubba stepped up to the mike and gave a rousing speech about how today's event could only have happened during *his* Administration because nobody hugged trees better'n him and his pal Owl, Inventor of the Internet, Protector of The World's Ecology and Global Warming Guru.

Then--drum roll, please--came The Moment. POTUS placed his hand upon the lever to release the eagle, as the crowd--nein, die Welt!--watched breathlessly.

Remember that creosoted pole with the large bird's nest on it? The World weren't the only ones watching events closely. That pole was home to another federally-protected species, a mating pair of osprey.

Osprey are sea eagles. They are predatory. They are also stupendously territorial, especially when guarding eggs or young in their nest. They are, in fact, raptors. Think "Jurassic Park"--not quite so big, but every bit as vicious.

And they watched, amazed, as some big red-nosed idiot turned another raptor loose at their very feet and in their own back yard!

The scream the male let out as he launched to protect his home ("BANZAI!") stopped the crowd's round of applause cold. The female was right behind, egging him on ("GIT SOME!").

The osprey commenced making overhead passes at the eagle, hitting it in a cloud of feathers and spray of blood each time, right in front of the horrified assemblage of Eco Nazis. (Think about it. Two protected species: who ya gonna root for?) One osprey would make its attack while the other gained altitude for the next run, in what the TACAIR guys would call a "wagon-wheel," where the target is continually being engaged by at least one aircraft. They also kept the eagle boxed in over the pond, refusing to allow it to escape.

After only a minute or two (an eternity, I'm sure, to the eagle), the osprey rendered the eagle hors-de-combat and it crashed into the pond. The osprey then did a few victory rolls and loops for the crowd, screaming delightedly over their conquest, as the state wildlife boys rowed a boat out to retrieve the now-defunct eagle.

The story to this point actually had me feeling just a bit sorry for the poor ol' Billster, whose plans that morning hadn't included looking like a Froot Loop on the world's stage. I mean, hey! *This* gag wasn't even his fault!

But the story's postscript is utterly delicious, because--somewhere, out in that herd of security radios--a rattled member of Law Enforcement keyed his radio on the common channel and yelled,

"THE EAGLE'S DOWN!"

The Secret Service blurred into action! Bitch One, OwlGore and The Tipster were hurled to the nasty ground and piled upon by hordes of agents from their personal details. Bubba was unceremoniously shoved into a hardened Suburban and whisked back to Marine One and safety. Out on Maryland 235 the Fuzz pointed riot guns at already pissed off and

completely innocent motionless automobile occupants and screamed "FREEZE!"

And there was panic! Confusion! MADNESS!

The entire episode was captured for posterity by the Press, and not a bit of it was ever used. Georgie Stephanopoulos stood up his best White House Spin Team and talked the media out of using any of it, because it might embarrass Bill. How 'bout that.

There were two other ha-ha's from that Pax River visit. First was as a result of our visit to a Pax outlying field, OLF Webster, located near St. Inigoes. When IV and I climbed up into the Tower we found both enlisted Air Controllers fast asleep.

Which led to a new standing joke at Pax: "What's 50 feet tall 'n sleeps two?"

"The tower cab at Webster!"

The second one was even better.

Part of IV's portion of the inspection of Air Ops involved taking a drive around the field itself, noting a myriad of detail. For the uninitiated, the Navy puts a mobile unit at the approach end of an active runway called the Wheels Watch trailer. It's no more than a small wagon with a glass-windowed box on top and a flare gun installed in the roof, for the poor schmuck assigned Wheels Watch to sit in. His job is to personally observe every landing aircraft as it approaches the Active to see if the cockpit drone remembered to lower the landing gear; if not, he's to fire a flare in time to remind the goofball of Navalation's second-oldest* adage: "Yeah, ya CAN do it that way, sport, but it takes a LOT of power to taxi!" IV liked to try to sneak up on the Wheels Watch to see if he was alert; and after the Webster debacle, he was more than primed for it.

IV drove his borrowed white gummint Dodge 4 X 4 crew cab to a spot on the perimeter road near the Active's Wheels Watch trailer. Out of fairness to the Watch, he slammed the door getting out and tromped guilelessly over. Inside, sure enough, the young enlisted man was sound asleep. IV then snuck back to his truck and got on the radio to Pax Tower.

He asked them if they had any aircraft in the pattern just then, and they did. Without telling them why, he requested that they ask the pilot if he'd mind flying an approach to the Active as if he were going to land, but keep his gear retracted and just throttle up over the runway and go around. The pilot said No Problem, and did just that. The plane sank down, whistled over the top of the Wheels Watch and hit the power to go around.

The noise of a jet engine spooling up right over his head woke the kid on Watch. He caught sight of a jet sinking towards the runway without landing gear, panicked, cocked the flare gun and fired a flare *behind* the aircraft.

Did I mention the drought that year at Pax? No? Well...I should have, because the flare started a roaring fire in the grass around that end of the active, which the wind then drove straight towards the Wheels Watch trailer. IV dragged the kid out, threw him in the truck and fled, yelling to the tower on the radio, "That was my fault, that was *MY FAULT!*"

They had to shut down the active until the flightline fire crews got the fire out, but not even those hardy professionals could save the Wheels Watch shack. Totally gone--along with some of IV's reputation.

I was, unfortunately, not invited to the CO's Friday debrief of that inspection.

But oh, to have been a fly on the wall....

*The oldest adage, of course, is: "You can equal, but never exceed, the world's low-altitude record."