

THE PENSACOLA EXPERIENCE **Bob Button, Flotilla 10-20**

THE TRIP DOWN

Delta has the only flight that goes directly from Newark to Pensacola with one brief stop in Atlanta, no change of aircraft. You can make reservations on Delta Flight 293 on-line via www.delta.com, preferably a week in advance to get a more favorable air fare (protect the Coast Guard's budget – it's your money). It leaves at 1400 hrs. Remember to save all receipts and to print out the itinerary and e-ticket you receive on-line.

With any luck at all you'll be traveling with other Auxiliarists attending the Spatial Disorientation and Crew Resource Management classes and will be able to rent a car. Otherwise, wear something like a cap symbolizing the Coast Guard so attendees from other areas can recognize you and (maybe) offer you a ride to the motel. At worst you'll have to take a taxi. (I was the only attendee from the Northeast and had to take a cab.)

Chances are you'll be staying at the Pensacola Inn (formerly Holiday Inn Express). Their phone number is: 850-476-7200. Government rate is \$55/day

FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

The uniform for school is a flight suit if you have one, otherwise wear the Tropical Blue (Long) uniform. Report for your first class at 0730 hrs at building 3845, the Spatial Disorientation Building. The numbers are difficult to fathom because they don't seem to be in any order at all, but the general area is called Base Maintenance – the police building is nearby, plus other administrative functions. The gate guards will know.

The drive from the motel to the Naval Air Station takes 20 to 25 minutes.

The cadre provides coffee all day for the cost of a paper cup (\$1.00) that you use all day (buy a new one each day). You might want to take donuts or bagels in to share.

REMEMBER: Pensacola is on Central Time, one hour earlier than Eastern Time.

SPATIAL DISORIENTATION TRAINING

Your very first class will be on physiology, taught by a very sharp Navy Corpsman. The aim seems to be to acquaint you with the workings of the middle ear, with emphasis on how its fluid responds to motion, how the effect is to fool your brain into believing your body is oriented one way when in fact it's oriented another – ergo, disorientation, vertigo. This takes up most of the first morning.

After lunch you'll be introduced to the Spatial Disorientation Simulator. You go into a large room whose dominant feature looks like a giant phonograph turntable. Atop the turntable are what look like nine (9) cans. An open door on each can reveals a cockpit, complete with seat, stick, panel, etc. Each student is assigned a number (1 thru 9) and that becomes his radio call sign – you are in constant communications with a monitor who can see how your 'aircraft' is oriented and how you are responding to its movement. Once they close the door you are in total darkness with lighted instruments and only occasionally an outside reference that reflects movement.

The turntable can turn clockwise and counterclockwise while each 'can' can spin or tumble on three (3) axes. You are supposed to press buttons telling the monitors what condition you are in: spinning right or left, diving or climbing, not moving at all, etc. You will probably be wrong 90 percent of the time – par for the course. The point is not to test your reflexes (or we'd all flunk), but to acquaint you with disorientation, explain how it happens and hopefully how to recognize its symptoms early and take appropriate action.

It's important to know that the cadre is not trying to make you sick! In fact, they are proud to tell their students that **NO ONE HAS EVER LOST HIS LUNCH** in the simulator (however, they do provide a plastic bag and suggest you wear it like a bib).

CREW RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

This training (called Cockpit Resource Management for single seater types) begins mid-afternoon the first day. Our instructor was LCDR Chris Conley, chief instructor from the Coast Guard Aviation Center, 80 miles up the road in Mobile AL. I can only hope you are lucky enough to have this guy at the podium – he's truly sharp and knowledgeable. All Coast Guard pilots must take refresher training at Mobile – he's the guy who does it.

Crew Resource Management is a common-sense set of rules and guidelines that spell the difference between a safe flight and one destined for disaster from the get-go. You'll see and hear crews in trouble from past

aircraft accidents, some of which you'll remember from news reports. Other first-person accounts of hazardous flights that were accomplished successfully because of good CRM were missions flown by LCDR Conley himself – hairy rescue missions from his last station, Kodiak Alaska.

GETTING HOME

Because check-out time is 1100 hrs at the motel you'll have to take your gear to school the second and final day. Chances are you'll get out of class early enough to visit the Naval Aviation Museum (highly recommended) or catch an early evening flight home.