

Shipmates

La Joie de Voyage (The joy of travel)

BY LTJG ERIC VORM, AEP#149

Even before joining the Navy, I always had what you might call “wanderlust”- a strong desire or impulse to explore the world. I had grown up listening to stories of family members who had traveled abroad extensively. I can scarcely remember a family reunion or holiday get-together that did not include a photo album or slide carousel from a recent journey. We would sit and watch for hours, listening to stories of far off places and the adventures of travelling to mysterious countries. And I would go to bed dreaming of one day following in their footsteps.

Fast forward to today, and flying is part of everyday life. Although, I have to say, the first few months of flying after winging, while somewhat exciting, was not what I would consider worthy of much attention. Some of the notable stops included Milton, Florida; Lake Charles, Louisiana; and Midland, Texas. Over time I began to learn about other flight opportunities that could take me to somewhat more favorable places. Soon I found myself flying to places like Key West and Ft. Lauderdale, Florida; Las Vegas, Nevada... and also Midland, Texas.

Then, this past March, I finally hit the jackpot. I managed to talk my way onto the crew of a flight out of Jacksonville, Florida that would take me to one of the most exotic locations I could imagine- Indonesia. Within an hour of confirmation, I immediately began clearing my schedule, cancelling business meetings, and looking through the closet for my favorite Tommy Bahama shirt.

An hour after that, the flight was cancelled.

The next morning I arrived to find an email from the scheduling officer waiting for me.

“Hey, Doc. Sorry about all the cancellations” the email read. “But I think I can make it up to you.”

He went on to explain that the flight I was originally on had been cancelled because of a last-minute modification that took precedence, and he wanted to know if I was willing to

go on it instead. I didn’t have to think long when I heard where they were going- Dijon, France.

Still, I did have some reservations that made me stop and consider whether the trip would be worth it. The drive would be around 11 hours round trip, plus the hotel room I’d have to get in Jacksonville in order to make the early morning ramp time, plus food and lodging in France- all of which are expenses for which I would not be reimbursed. As a first-tour flyer, my flight pay is relatively meager. I quickly did the math, and it just didn’t add up.

It was at this point that I began to imagine the words of my late grandfather, a WWII flyer and long-time aviation enthusiast.

“It’s not about the money” he would growl. “It’s about the experience. It’s a PRIVILEGE to fly!”

I could never argue with that logic. It had always been my dream to jaunt off to foreign places and see the world on a grand scale. And so before I knew it, there I was, cruising at 36,000 feet, assisting the crew as they worked to ferry a group



LT David Combs (AEP# 146), and LTJG Eric Vorm (AEP#149) on the runway in Dijon, France

of non-descript government workers across the Atlantic for various non-descript activities (very hush-hush). And as far as military trans-Atlantic flights go, this one was tops!

I learned a great deal about weight and balance issues when the passenger group arrived with several tons of extra cargo that required several last-minute adjustments to fuel consumption and trim. This trip also taught me a bit about foreign relations. It seemed the maintenance worker in charge of emptying the chemical toilet from the aircraft was so interested in watching us unload our cargo that he forgot to connect

the hose to the truck. The resulting pool of liquid waste on the runway seemed a disingenuous gift for us to leave immediately upon our arrival... though, oddly enough, none of the runway workers seemed to think all that much about it. And so we were off on a wild, 24-hour adventure in France. It was eight o'clock in the morning, and I was determined to see the sights, eat exotic foods, and speak in a foreign language. Within a few short hours, I doing all of those things... or trying, at least.

French has been my second language since Miss Crawford's 7th Grade French class. I can still vividly remember a faded and creased poster on the wall of the dingy classroom. It featured a group of 1970's teenage students, decked out in corduroy bell bottoms and tight, plaid shirts. The poster read "Parler français et laissez le bon temps rouler!"
Speak French, and let the good times roll!

I have, more or less, been a student of French since then... though not a very good one. I took French a few times in high school, and a few more times in college. I toured with a musical group through Belgium and France for a summer (ask me about it sometime), which is where I asked my wife to marry me. Over the years I joined clubs and tried a few online services to continue learning, but always half-heartedly.

When my wife and I decided to have children, we agreed that we should raise them to be bilingual, which meant that we both had to increase our speaking ability. After securing the home equity loan it took to purchase the full package of Rosetta Stone language software, we set about becoming a bi-lingual family. Months went by and my wife diligently practiced, ticking off lesson after lesson. Meanwhile I continued on my routine of half-hearted apathetic (or was it just pathetic?) learning, until it fell off my radar entirely, somewhere around the time my first child was born.

"Bonjour, Papa!" my son, now six years old, says as he greets me. Today is Thursday-French day in our house. We exchange greetings and other minor small talk in French; the typical give-and-take conversations of early learners. And I feel pretty good about myself. After all, I am speaking a foreign language in



my kitchen with my own son. What could be more rewarding?

And then my wife enters the room.

I am quickly marginalized and ignored as the speed and complexity of the conversation elevates to near fluency levels. I resign to reading the paper, and quietly wonder to myself just how long it has been since I bothered to even open Rosetta Stone.

Sometime later my son pops his head around the corner and says, “Je parle plus bien français que vous!” in a ‘nanny-nanny, boo-boo’ tone.

I speak French better than you!

He runs off giggling, feeling an obvious sense of satisfaction at having obtained power over me. Who knows what else he’ll be saying to me in just a few short years.

It is thoughts like these that occasionally distract me as I wander through the Rue de Liberté, a busy outdoor walking mall lined with cobblestone and packed with cafes and dress shops. At one end is an enormous cathedral, one of several in only a few city blocks. Their spires and towers dominate the modern office buildings which have crept up around them. I am not alone. A colleague and friend of mine, David, has made the trip as well. For several hours we wander through the streets, snapping pictures and admiring the juxtaposition of medieval and modern, all while pinching ourselves repeatedly. Surely this all must be a dream.

We meander in and out of shops, and up and down long, winding alleyways lined with windows adorned with flowers and ivy. Eventually we find our way to an outdoor café in the large open courtyard of the city government center. While I had managed to sheepishly avoid revealing my French deficiency fairly well up until now, I knew that was all about to change. Our waiter, a middle-aged looking man with short, wispy dark hair who smelled of cigarettes, handed us our menus. We said thank you, at which point, realizing he was dealing with English speakers, he literally ran to get someone else to wait on us.

Ordering lunch actually went mercifully well- as it turns out, pizza means the same thing in both languages. Still, my French phrasing was awkward enough to attract the attention of other patrons around us, and the appearance of green sprigs of spinach on my pizza was a bit of a surprise... I was



certain I had used the word for sausage. Not bad, all things considered, I told myself. I may not be able to keep up with my six year old, but at least I can order a decent lunch, mostly.

The remainder of the day was spent riding trollies, snapping more pictures, and filling our bags with the finest mustards, chocolates, and wines we could find- which, as it turns out, is remarkably easy to do... it is France, after all. We did everything to experience the culture and vibrancy of the city, and I managed to avoid any situation that would require me to speak more than a few words- until dinner.

As before, I decided on a strategy that was certain not to fail. I would simply order something on the menu that I recognized, and do my best to appear like I knew what I was doing while ordering. It was at this point, either out of jet-lagged fatigue, or just plain old arrogance, that I turned to my colleague and assured him, “don’t worry, Dave. I’ve got this. Trust me.”

The waiter arrived.

“Duex plats de pâtes, s’il vous plaît” I said, confidently. Two plates of pasta, please.

The waiter paused, as if expecting more. He subtly cleared his throat, then asked, in perfect English, “nothing else?”

I gave the man my best European-style dismissive wave, and returned to my conversation with Dave. I think I may have noticed a slight roll of the waiter’s eyes as he walked away.

When he returned, it was clear, the joke was on me. There, sitting before us, were two steaming bowls of plain, spiral pasta noodles.

They were tri-color.

We did our best to appear casual so as to avoid any more unwanted attention, though I couldn’t help but notice the glances, whispers, and giggles of nearby patrons. Grudgingly, we ate our dry, plain noodles in near silence, and to his credit, Dave was a great sport. He only rubbed it in my face a little bit.

Still, sitting there, enveloped in the culture, surrounded by the sights and sounds of the beautiful city of Dijon, I could not suppress the overwhelming sense of gratitude for just being there. Again, my grandfather’s words echo through my head and remind me of just how few people have an opportunity to travel to such a place, and what a privilege it is to fly. And considering this perspective, I had to concede that, my wounded pride aside; it had been an amazing day.

Spinach pizza and dry noodles may not have been the best French cuisine I could have sampled, but in retrospect, adventure never tasted so good.

