

Musings of a Wandering AEP

LT ERIC VORM, AEP #149

Among the many perks that come along with being an Aerospace Experimental Psychologist in the United States Navy, flying has to be one of the best. Once in a while a great opportunity comes along, and for those who are willing to grab it, there are usually great stories to tell. This trip was no exception.

In mid-May I was on the hunt for a good opportunity to “bag” some flight hours in accordance with OPNAVINST 3710.7S. Despite living and working in what is commonly known as the “Cradle of Naval Aviation”, flight opportunities in the Pensacola area are actually quite hard to come by, mostly due to the large student populations that Aeromedical Officers such as myself have to compete with to get stick time. So this time I looked towards the east a few hundred miles for my solution, and I found it in Jacksonville, Florida.

The “Sunseekers” of VR-58 have a unique and critical role to play in Navy and Marine Corps logistics. Critical because their sole job is to move lots of people and things long distances - a service that would ordinarily require a commercial carrier and cost hundreds of millions of dollars per year. Unique in that they fly the C-40A Clipper, which is the military version of the Boeing 737-800. The C-40A has a range of 3,400 nautical miles with 5,000 pounds of cargo, which serves this very important niche of high priority logistical airlift in support of Fleet activities.

The mission for this trip was simple: fly two crews and several pallets of airplane parts and gear to Atsugi, Japan, and then fly home. For this particular mission, the crews being flown to Japan were traveling for a three-week “det,” or detachment, where the crew would be stationed temporarily and fly missions all over the Southeast Asia region of the world. On this particular flight, the crews we dropped off were swapping with other crews who had been overseas for several weeks already, and were ready to come home.

We left Jacksonville around 0900

and headed to Whidbey Island, Washington for a refueling stop, and then north to Anchorage, Alaska where we stopped for the night to rest up for the long trip to Japan. A nice perk of the C-40A is that the passenger section is configured just like a commercial passenger airliner, which gave me plenty of room to spread out and get some work done on the 7+ hour leg to Anchorage. Flying from the east coast to the extreme west coast of the United States was the beginning of what would be a very confusing time for the crew, as we all struggled to get some rest, despite the near-constant sun well into the middle of the night.

The next morning we headed back to the airplane, and after a short crew brief, we were in the air by 11am, headed for Japan. While enroute I had an opportunity to get to know the pilots and crew, and learn more about the missions they would be flying once stationed in Atsugi. One of the many jobs they would be doing, I discovered, was moving the nearly 2000+ people of the Carrier Air Wing from their respective locations around the world to where they would meet the USS George Washington, somewhere in Southeast Asia. I learned that they would also be flying similar missions to the Philippines, Korea,



Tokyo, Japan

Guam, and Australia over the course of their three-week stint in Japan. Again, moving Sailors and Marines and their gear from bases in the United States to places as far away as Australia using a commercial carrier would incur enormous travel costs. But the VR squadrons make this happen every day, and deliver an exceptional value for their service.

Although we left at 1100 on Sunday, and flew only 7 hours, we landed in Atsugi around 1200 on Monday – crossing the International Date Line in the process. We received an in-depth brief about the rules and regulations of staying and working in Japan, and then we all set off to see what we could see. After some quick directions, I grabbed a few fellow aeromedical officers and headed towards Tokyo, which was only an hour’s train ride away. We had a great time in Tokyo, hitting many of the popular tourist destinations, like the Imperial Palace and Akihabara (aka “electronics city”). As beautiful and interesting as these tourist hot spots were, we were determined to get off the beaten path and see the “real” Tokyo. Our wanderings took us to a small cafe-style eatery somewhere in downtown. Admittedly, we were drawn to the place because of the prominent Coca-Cola signs out front, but once we saw the menu, we knew we had found the kind of authenticity we desired. Over the

course of many such trips, I have learned that one of the best ways to really experience a new country and its culture is to eat what the locals eat. However, in this case I found myself questioning whether I should really follow that philosophy. After a little coaxing, my colleagues and I dug deep and ate what has to be the most unique portion of a pig ever served. I am told “it” is considered a delicacy.

While my mind understood this leap forward by an entire day, by the time the sun was setting in Tokyo, my body was quick to remind me that I had been up for more than 24 hours already. As the three of us shuffled back through the gate at Naval Air Facility Atsugi, and made our way back to our beds, I was reminded of just how challenging and often complicated international travel and logistics can be for pilots and aircrew. In only two days I had gone from the east coast of the United States, four hours behind Alaska local time, and then nearly 24 hours ahead to the next day in Japan. My internal clock was hopelessly confused, and soon all I could think about was long, uninterrupted sleep.

But our mission was not complete, and early the next morning it was all hands on deck in order to make a 0700 brief for a 0900 takeoff time. I marveled at the resiliency and professionalism of the crew as



We went in search of “authentic” Japanese cuisine, and found it. Can you guess which of these delicacies we ate?



LTs David Combs and Eric Vorm at Kenai Fjords National Park on the Kenai Peninsula of Alaska's southern coast

bodies and minds were now aligned in our need for sleep, so we all quickly retreated to our rooms for some much-needed rest.

Since we had travelled so far for so long, we learned we would not be departing Alaska for Florida until Wednesday morning. This provided an excellent opportunity for some recreational activities, so once again, my colleague and I decided to be adventurous. The next morning we rented a car and headed out to explore the Kenai Peninsula, a vast mountainous area in southern Alaska filled with snowy peaks, small fishing towns, and what I hoped would be some wildlife. We made great use of the day, and with every turn of the road the view became grander and more breathtaking. It isn't every day a person has the opportunity to have these kinds of experiences, I told myself repeatedly as we navigated through Alaska's rugged coastline. And even more amaz-

ing is that this trip, and the various experiences that came along with it, are all just part of the job. Aero-medical Officers are required to maintain flight currency precisely so they can remain cognizant and familiar with the roles and rigors of flight, such as fatigue and human performance issues, for example.

they tirelessly performed the various inspections, aircraft checks, and preparations for the 7+ hour trip back across the Atlantic Ocean to Alaska, despite having as much rest as I had gotten- which I will say did not feel sufficient. It is these kinds of first-hand experiences that truly help me understand just why aviators and aircrew are taught to protect their sleep, and why they hold to crew rest and crew day limits religiously. The human body is an amazing machine, but performance limits are quickly reached when deprived of sleep.

As the day finally came to an end and we prepared our gear for the last leg of our journey home, I decided I had learned three valuable lessons on this trip: First, that aviators and aircrews just like the ones we travelled with do this kind of work day-in and day-out. Without these individuals, the task of moving gear and personnel to bases around the world would be an enormously expensive logistical nightmare. Second, I learned that flight boots also double as excellent hiking boots! Finally, while first-hand experiences such as these can sometimes mean temporary discomfort and mild sleep deprivation, they are not without their many perks as well.

We departed Atsugi promptly at 0900 on Tuesday, and started our journey back towards the United States. On board were two new crews. We chatted and laughed about the many exciting adventures and humorous anecdotes of their det, and of course, they all mentioned how eager they were to get home to see their families. In one last twist of time-travel, we landed safely around 2300... on Monday night! Thankfully this transition was much easier than the first, as our

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