

## Air Corps

by Norman Nelson Jones Jr.

Shortly after Christmas 1941 I finally received my orders to report to active duty at the U.S. Army Replacement Center at Minter Field in Bakersfield, California. Mom and Dad put me on the good old "Aksarben" West Coast Limited from the hideous old Burlington Station and wished me good luck in my new career. The "Aksarben" was still a wonderful, deluxe train with handsome polished wood, upholstered Pullman cars, full-sized diner and club car in the rear. "Uncle Sam" provided first class accommodations for its incoming Aviation Cadets so I traveled in true luxury.

In normal times this trip to the West Coast is a lovely scenic journey, greatly enjoyed, with all of its great vistas of either the Royal Gorge or the Feather River Canyon, depending upon the route the railroad chose. Of this I remember not a particle; though I'm sure we passed through outstanding scenery. My only recollection was a most pleasant time spent with a brand new Air Corps second lieutenant and his bride; he just out of flying school and newly wed, off to his first assignment as a Pilot Officer. They were extremely cordial to me for reasons I know not, and we spent many pleasant hours together.

This grand, comfortable train was bound for San Francisco but, since my destination was Bakersfield, I had to debark at Stockton and take a bus down the valley. This had all seemed very simple at the time, but what I didn't realize was that I would be put off the train in the middle of the night, in pouring rain, at a palm tree decorated, deserted station. It was lovely and warm, and I was much excited to be in "California"! Perhaps the bus left from the railroad station; I don't remember, but everything went well, and I found myself in downtown Bakersfield about 5 a.m. I dismounted from my bus to find that another bus to Minter Field left in a few minutes so, again, my transition was relatively uneventful. I joined a full load of civilian workers employed at the airbase and within half an hour was unceremoniously dumped at the gate at Minter Field. I don't recall any demand for identification, but I did ask the MP's at the gate where I should go to report to the Replacement Center for new Air Corps cadets. Therein lay the crux of the matter. One side of the base was the U.S. Army Basic Flying School. The other side of the "tracks" (as it were) was the new home for beginning cadets where we got shots, learned to drill, were issued uniforms and were indoctrinated into the Armed Services of the U.S.A.

From the gate, now enlightened as to where I must go, my only means of transportation was my own two legs. So I picked up my suitcase and trudged up the main thoroughfare toward my designated area. This all occurred at just 6 a.m., and suddenly the deserted street was filled with cadets clad in blue flying coveralls ready to start their day. There I was, suitcase in hand, dressed in my best gray flannel suit, white oxford button-down shirt and knit tie (I suppose you would call it my "Ivy League

Uniform”), passing in review for the entire cadet battalion. It took but a wink to size me up and, as one, they chanted the familiar Army cry “You’ll be sorreee, you’ll be sorreee!” This was hardly the greeting I had expected, and I could have cheerfully crawled into a hole in the ground. However, in a matter of seconds, discipline prevailed, they marched off to breakfast, and I proceeded on my lonely path.

The Replacement Center was a sight to behold. It was brand new. Our quarters were tents, six men to each, with wooden floors. Permanent shower and toilet facilities were strategically placed. We had a large parade grounds and our own permanent mess hall. One large hospital served the entire base, and we were frequent visitors, getting physical exams and the multitude of shots that service required. We spent hours in lines, naked as jaybirds, with identification numbers painted on our chests with red-orange Merthiolate.

World events were happening fast and the Air Corps was expanding at top speed to fill the demand for pilots, so the system wasn’t really ready for us. We were a motley crew, many in “civies”, but some of our fellow cadets who had transferred from other branches of the service shared whatever bits of uniforms they could spare as we endeavored to become aviation cadets. As time wore on, we all became properly uniformed; we drilled and drilled, took schooling in military matters and cast envious glances at our brothers in arms across the road who were really flying.

After about a month had passed, a ridiculous old train of open coaches was backed into the Field, we were loaded on like cattle, and we puffed up the San Joaquin Valley to Tulare, California. We tumbled onto the platform and into buses bound for Rankin Aeronautical Academy, our “Primary” flying school.

If in your lifetime you have never experienced hazing as provided by our military establishment I don’t think I can bring to true life this incredible confrontation. Our upper classmen were entrusted with the overwhelming duty of making raw civilian material into disciplined, knowledgeable aviation cadets. We “braced” on demand (exaggerated attention rigid as a post with chin out and gut pulled in as far as humanly possible), double-timed everywhere, with elbows held high to signify we were “dodos” who could not fly, and obeyed their every whim, from reveille to taps, except when we were in ground school or on the flight line. As you might expect, some cadets were fine men and treated us decently but others actually became vicious and made our lives miserable at times. As we fell into the routine, we made fewer mistakes, learned to avoid the really tough eggs and began to enjoy training despite the rigid discipline. I must mention meal times as they were, in retrospect, amusing. We sat on the front 4” of our chairs, ate “square” meals, always passed first to our upper classmen, etc. If one was so careless as to put down his knife with blade towards his neighbor, always an upper classman, he would roar “Mr. Jones, are you trying to murder me?” And then I or some other luckless cadet would have to stand, climb up on our chair and “sound off”

giving name, rank, serial number, date and place of birth and college or university at the top of our lungs. Despite this hectic scene we managed to get enough to eat.

Rankin Academy was a private flying school under contract to the U.S. Army so our instructors were civilians; only check pilots, disciplinary officers and commandant were military. Most of our instructors were older men of vast flying experience in many types of aircraft and superb pilots. They ignored the military aspect of our life entirely, worked hard to make us into pilots and were a joy to be with. My instructor was one of the most popular; an older man (all of about 40, I suppose), heavy set, humorous and full of fun. He helped me over some rough spots, and I soon soloed and began really having fun. The PT-17 Steerman "Kaydet" was a single engine, open cockpit biplane with 225 "horses" up front, manufactured by Lycoming. It was a sturdy little craft, well stressed so it would take inverted flight and aerobatics, so we could do any maneuver that our instructors taught us to do. It was a rare person who, after completing his first loop, slow roll and snap roll in solo flight, did not return to earth feeling that he was God's gift to the fraternity of pilots. Our tendency to get cocky was kept well in hand by our instructors and he flight checks by the AC officers which were scary and could result in "washing out" due to a bad check flight. Many of our fellow cadets did not make the grade, for one reason or another, and their departure was sad and often tearful. Most of these men, having caught the flying "bug" went on to Navigator or Bombardier School and would become part of our air crews later on.

Once we were upperclassmen, our hazing of course stopped, and we were now "in charge". My two best buddies, John Mackey and John Sandall (both Nebraskans) and I vowed not to be so mean and tried to be more helpful and less strict to our newly arrived lowerclassmen. As upperclassmen we could really enjoy the flying, and time passed very quickly. Before we knew it, it was graduation time. We were given our orders and taken to town to catch the bus on our own, rather than as a military department, to find our way to Gardner Field at Taft, California, actually just a relatively few miles further down the San Joaquin Valley. Taft was a forlorn little town, virtual desert, populated by hundreds of towering oil rigs which were its only reason for existing before the Air Corps built Gardner Field.

Basic training was all military; instructors, ground personnel, the works. We were introduced to the BT-13 "Vultee" basic trainer, an all metal, canopied, two-seater with a much larger engine and two speed propellers, and we were enormously impressed. It was nicknamed the "Vultee Vibrator" as it rattled noisily when taxied over the rough asphalt tarmac due to its all metal construction.

My instructor was a tall, handsome, blonde lieutenant, C.C. Gregory, and I felt myself extremely fortunate as he was a wonderful guy and a skilled, patient instructor. They wasted no time, and we soon were soloed, practicing aerial coordination maneuvers, modest aerobatics and having an exciting time of it. After we passed the midpoint of basic training we started formation flying, including take off and landing,

and were allowed to “dog fight” with our instructor and his other students under his careful eye. We also had several cross country flights and began night flying, another big thrill. With night flying came radio communication, very brief but important for proper traffic control of all the blue and yellow aircraft buzzing around the night sky.

When we goofed in flight training we were given a star or stars, depending upon the gravity of our transgression, which were recorded on a large chart in the Ready Room. Each star represented a debt of 25 cents to the Star Fund which would pay for a party at graduation. We went up into the mountains by truck, had beer and barbeque, fraternized with our instructors and had a great time. We actually had a formal graduation, with a big parade, passed in review for our Commandant and also a Graduation Dance! It was at this graduation dance that I met my beloved Mary Ad, but that’s another story.

We proceeded to Advanced Flying School at Williams Field, Phoenix, Arizona, once again on our own with enough travel time to spend a brief day or so in Los Angeles en route!

We found ourselves assigned to a brand new base, just recently scratched from the Arizona desert, without tree one, the only redeeming feature being a fine, big swimming pool in the cadet area. It was now July and, thank goodness, we had received our summer khaki uniforms before leaving Taft as it was really hot. We caught a brief spell of hazing from our upper class but that soon wore off under the heavy pressure of our accelerated training schedule. Our planes were twin engine, retractable gear Cessna advanced trainers, and they seemed very large and wonderful. Training proceeded rapidly, and we were soon soloed but of course, always with a fellow student in the right seat as copilot. The advanced trainers were not difficult to fly, and we enjoyed the formation and cross country work. As I think back on it, the big important thing was to remember to “get your wheels down and locked” before landing. There always were a few unfortunates that forgot and either landed wheels up and wrecked an aircraft or awoke at the last moment due to the screaming in the headset from the Tower to “go around!”

It was an odd bit of time in our training as the demand for pilots was so great that we accelerated to 7 days a week, 12 hours on and 12 hours off, either day or night, as our schedule demanded. We didn’t really mind, but it seemed so strange to have such a lack of military formations and discipline when this had been a part of our daily life for months. I can remember wandering over to our cadet mess, long after regular dinner time, being very courteously treated by the mess personnel and getting extra steak and extra milk which were fabulous luxuries. We also spent many happy hours in the wonderful swimming pool, which in the hot dusty 100 degree days was a Godsend.

I can best illustrate the really desperate demand for pilots by describing our graduation from Advanced Flying School. This event, so lavishly portrayed in movies

and recruiting films with proud parents, pretty girls, etc. present for the awarding of our pilot's wings and commission as second lieutenants U.S. Army Air Corps, was accomplished in a brief half hour ceremony. Our commanding officer made a short talk, gave us our wings and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. bars, our orders to our new stations and bid us farewell and Godspeed. That was that, so much for the recruiting posters.