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N3Ns AT THE NAVAL ACADEMY

Tailhooker Art "Swede" Hedberg of Bonita, Calif., went to the Naval Academy in June 1948 as a plebe. Here are a few recollections of his time with the "Yellow Peril", the Naval Aircraft Factory N3N:

"We were given a number of indoctrination flights in the N3N floatplane during plebe summer at NAF Annapolis, across the river. We would go to the rifle range and shoot M-1s and pistols in the morning, then go to the air facility where USS Block Island (CVE-106), an old World War II jeep carrier, was moored. We'd have lunch in the ship's mess hall."

"After Lunch we went to the flight line for our hops. We met our pilot at the schedules board in the hangar, where we were briefed on procedures and equipment. We then went out to the aircraft that were standing on the parking ramp mounted on heavy wooden dollies. Their engines were already ticking over. We were strapped in by a line crewman while the pilot did a walkaround before crawling in. There were no radios, but a one-way gosport allowed the pilot to talk to the "midiot" in the back. We needed a director and men on each wing float to steer us during taxi, since all four wheels on the dolly castered. All the pilot could do was furnish a few bursts of power on command to get us moving."



Left: A pair of float-configured Naval Aircraft Factory N3Ns are beached at the U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis, Md. The training aircraft were assigned there to provide orientation flights for midshipmen. The program continued until 1959, marking the end of the "Yellow Peril's" service to the U.S. Navy.

"We were taxied to the head of the seaplane ramp and a mule (tractor) with a cable was hooked up to the rear of the dolly. The mule backed down slowly, and with the men on the wing floats keeping us steady, we were moved down the ramp into the water. Once the pilot could feel that we were afloat, he would gun the engine and we were waterborne. Next he looked for a green light from the tower clearing us for takeoff. Once airborne, we went out to the operating area and were given some rudimentary instruction and a few landings near a crash boat. After that, we came back for a final landing and taxi to the ramp. Crewmen in rubber waders snagged our wingtip float struts with big hooks and guided us onto a submerged dolly. A mule hauled us out and back to the ramp area."

"In December 1957 I went back to Canoe U. to teach Marine Engineering Department (Plebe Steam). This time I flew as an instructor in the N3N. When one climbed aboard, the first thing to do was to check out the cockpit, stand up and lean forward over the windshield, take off the gas cap and check the fuel (the gas gauges were unreliable, so if you could see gas, you had enough for two hours - very scientific). By this time we had two way gosports. Helmets were the old World War II rag hats with goggles and a gosport hook-up -- man how cool can you get! Cockpit instruments included turn-and-bank, airspeed, altimeter, RPM indicator, gas gauge, wet compass, magneto switch and not much more"

Right: An airborne view of the N3N shows its float and pontoon configuration.



"Did you ever try to taxi without brakes? One had to plan taxiing using left turns if at all possible, because the engine torque always pulled the airplane to the left. Right turns could be awkward in tight quarters. The airplane tended to weathercock in any sort of

wind, and making the ramp with a brisk quartering wind was a real problem. In most cases, the approach to the ramp was made parallel to the shore with it on the right, and at right angles to the ramp so that the tendency to weathercock and the engine torque allowed waveoff easily to the left and out to open water. When nearing the ramp, a cut signal was given and the beaching crew would snag the starboard wingtip float struts. The airplane's momentum would swing it around to the right so that the beaching crew could take control."

"We operated in an area across the bay from Annapolis where there was little traffic. Stall speed was about 38 to 40 knots as I recall. Slow cruise was 50 knots, normal cruise was 60 knots, and fast cruise was 70 knots. The floats inhibited any sort of speed or fancy maneuvers. We showed our students a few turns and basic maneuvers, demonstrated weightlessness (this was 1958 and attempts at space flight were in the news) by holding zero-g over the top for a few seconds, and a few touch-and-go (splash-and-dash in seaplane lingo) landings alongside the crash boat anchored in the bay.

"Twice we joined up on the end of the echelon of a flight of Canada geese at about 3,600 feet. They kept turning away from this big, yellow bird that made a lot of racket. The formation got a little ragged, but no one broke away - great formation discipline. I could see them looking over their shoulders with large, round eyes. With the engine clobbered, I could just stay on the end of the whip. Though many folks have heard me tell this story and looked at me in skepticism, I swear it's true."

"One student wanted to let the stick go forward after touchdown. I had to grab it, and while taking off told him not to let the stick go forward when we touch down. If he did, the nose of the float will dig in and we will go sternsheets over teakettle. On the next landing as soon as we touched, I felt the stick thump back into my stomach! There we were about 15 to 20 feet in the air, 45 degrees nose up, power off and in a full stall. I shoved everything I could think of all the way forward, and we came down with a huge splash in an approximately normal attitude with full power on. Luckily, nothing seemed to be broken. I looked over that bird thoroughly when we got back, but everything was OK."

"Another young plebe who had never flown before was so excited that he almost wet his pants - he absolutely loved it! As soon as we were airborne I heard him exulting, "Man, is really flying!" I nearly crashed I was laughing so hard. He wanted to try everything and was sorry we only had about an hour. I gave him a 4.0 for attitude and a 4.0 for aptitude!"

"The N3N was a lot of fun, but in 1959 the station maintenance officer discovered extensive corrosion on almost all of the old planes, and they were all retired from service.

"So, I figure I'm one of the last Naval Aviators to fly the N3N in U.S. Navy service."