



I'M GOING TO FLY IN THE P-3 ORION! (Are Marines hardheaded?)

As in Dragnet, the names have been changed (omitted) to protect the innocent!

In 1980, after retiring from the U.S. Air Force, I became a tech rep for Hughes Aircraft Company on a contract with U.S. Customs Air Operations at Davis Monthan Air Force Base in Tucson, Az. For over four years, I had been supporting a prototype radar system with special Airborne Moving Target Indicator (AMTI) capabilities



installed in a Citation II executive style jet.

It had been a great assignment, but it came to an end with the catastrophic failure of the radar transmitter in the aircraft. Since it was a prototype, they elected not to spend large bucks on it. After all, they had several Citation IIs with Westinghouse radar installed, similar to the one in the F-16 fighter. It had special software for air-to-ground capability and it was working very reliably.

About that time, President George Bush Sr. was vice-president and was chairing a drug enforcement committee consisting of several VIPs from Congress, and of course, the Commissioner of Customs. They had been rapidly expanding the US Customs drug interdiction program and were looking to develop a new platform for the equipment needed to spot the drug haulers who were seemingly crossing the southern border with impunity. The lead time to develop such a platform was too long so they started looking around for an existing platform that might be modified to accomplish the task. So, they picked the P-3 Orion, a Navy high performance, anti-submarine warfare aircraft with long range capability. One reason the P-3 was chosen is that the aircraft was available. Several P-3s had already had a 30 year service life and had been retired to the



bone yard in Tucson. Four P-3A aircraft that had been part of the Canadian Navy's inventory were chosen to be modified with Hughes Aircraft F-15 radar systems with, of course, special software. That's where I came in.

When I heard about the program, I asked my boss back in Long Beach if I might be transferred to that program rather than leave Tucson and go on another assignment. He said it would be OK if Customs approved, and he made a special trip to Tucson to ask (This, in military terms, is called a "boondoggle"). The Air Branch Chief agreed and so I was in.

For a couple of months during the summer of 85, I was monitoring the P-3 modification and installation of the AN/APG-65 Weapons Control System in the four aircraft at [Donaldson AFB](#) in Greenville, SC. The city fathers of Greenville knew a good thing when they decided to develop the closed air force base into an aviation center. Lockheed Aero Mod were contracted to perform the modification and Hughes Radar System Group engineers developed the software and engineered the changes necessary for the drug mission.



One day, I was told that if I intended to fly in the P-3, I would need water survival training and I also would need a flight physical. Well hell, I had flown in just about every aircraft in the Customs inventory without any kind of training, but, I suppose it was necessary, and I fully intended to fly at every opportunity. I called my boss in Long Beach and he said he would look into it. It was all arranged, I would take a flight physical in Charlotte, NC and I'd have to go to survival training at Cherry Point Marine Air Station near Havlock, North Carolina.

Here I go. I drove up to Charlotte and had a quick physical by some old Doctor. He made me walk up and down the two or three steps on a platform and listened to my heart and said I was OK. The first step was taken care of. Next, I had to fly from Charlotte to Goldsborough and then drive to Cherry Point. That's the first time I had two rental cars at the same time! It took most of the day to get there and I was to arrive by 4:00 PM so a Navy doctor could examine at me before I could start training. Geez, I played racquet ball nearly every day and was in the best shape of my life (I thought), after all, I was only 45. But, the doctor cleared me for training. Finally, the next morning, I reported to the giant square pool where the survival training was given.

Day one: There were a bunch of guys there from the Navy, enlisted and officers, and a couple of Marines. Two Navy Chief Petty Officers were in charge and briefed us as to what we could expect over the next two days. The first thing we had to do was swim the circumference of that big pool, demonstrating a different



stroke along each side. When I was about to get in the water, the Chief says "Hey Sandcrab, you don't have to do this if you don't want to!" I told him that I was there to get the training and I was going to do it just like the rest of them. By the time I got on the second leg, I was wishing I had taken him up on the offer. My ass was dragging when I finally got around that pool. It was a big one. Next, they gave us old flight suits and dried out flight boots along with a beat up helmet. The Chief in charge got in the water and showed us a couple survival strokes that would allow us to conserve energy if we needed to swim a large distance. Then he said it was time for us to don the equipment and show him that we could do those strokes.

So, we're suiting up and one of the Marines, a major, says "Hey Chief, we (his buddy a First Lieutenant) don't wear helmets in our jets (C-9 executive style). Do we have to wear one for this test?" The old Chief thought for a moment and said, "Well, I guess if you don't wear helmets, you don't have to wear one." So the Major and the Lt left their helmets under the bench. Then we all demonstrated the required strokes for survival and moved on to the next stage.

The next one was a doozy! In the deep end of the pool, they had two giant fans and a short tower with a crane and electric winch on it. The Chief got in the water and after getting his suit soaked, he showed us how to tighten the Velcro straps on the sleeves and legs of the flight suit. He then held the material of one immersed arm and blew air into the sleeve and it puffed up. The then did the other sleeve and both legs...quite a contortion for me it turns out...and showed us how it made it easier to tread water. He kept refreshing each arm and leg on occasion and said it helped a lot to stay afloat. He then motioned to the other Chief and asked him to throw him a helmet. He took the helmet and held it opening down toward the water and lowered it,

trapping air inside. He then basically sat on it. He told us that it would give us seven additional pounds of buoyancy. Then he donned a Mae West vest and said that the cartridges had been removed, but they could be blown up with tubes attached.

Here was the drill. We would all jump in the water and, using the techniques shown, would have to tread water for five minutes, boots and all. After that, we could blow up our Mae West and wait to be lifted out by the crane



which simulated a helicopter lift.

In addition, the fans would be turned on and would blow air and water similar to what might happen if a helicopter is flying close overhead. You guessed, the



Major and Lt ran over to the bench to get their helmets when the Chief says, “No, no, you don’t WEAR helmets, right? There’ll be no helmets for you!” You could tell by the look on the Major’s face that he knew he’d been had. You can probably guess that he and the Lt were just about to go under by the time their five minutes were up. Didn’t they know you don’t mess with an old salty Chief? Well, they knew after that.

At the end of the day, I was exhausted. I went to the motel and got in the sack and slept. When I awoke, I was so sore and stiff I wasn’t sure I’d be able to make it to day number two! After some coffee, Tylenol and a bite to eat, I made it back to the base.



Day two: We started out with a briefing on the altitude chamber. We all entered the chamber and put on the oxygen masks and the Chief told us we would be given a simple exercise to do such as dealing cards and playing solitaire, writing our name rank and serial number on a clipboard or just playing hand clapping games like kindergarteners. They started pumping the air out and we went up in increments to about 25K feet and then we were given things to do after which were told to remove our masks. We were to keep them off for a few seconds so that we could experience feelings of hypoxia and then, when told, put them back on.

So there we were, playing cards, writing, tossing a ball or doing patty cakes with our hands. Pretty soon, as we were all acting pretty silly being deprived of oxygen, the Chief says “Put on your masks!” We did, however, there was the Lt. He was all bent over with his head down near the clip board and motionless. You could see the writing on the paper where he had entered a few lines and then it just trailed down to a long squiggly line. He was holding the pen tightly in his hand but not moving. The Chief noted the Lt and said to give him a hand. When the chamber crewman reached down and touched the LT’s arm, he exploded up and it took three of the crew to get the Lt’s mask back on him. I suppose, as a Marine, he had been given a task and he was going to follow orders, by god and by golly, oxygen or not. When he got a couple whiffs of oxygen, he was sure embarrassed about it.



Get wet again? Now it was Dilbert Dumper time. Not the original, but it was a pretty good sized replica of a fuselage with seats for eight or ten in a giant tank of water, all controlled by hydraulic cylinders. Pictured is a much newer version. So, we get in it, it's dropped in to the water and we have to wait for it to fill up and then make our way out as directed, via a window or the cockpit door. Of course, there were a couple of divers ready to grab us if things went wrong. We all took our turns. Then, they tipped the fuselage over on its side and submerged it and we had to get out, and then followed by turning it upside down and performing the same egress. When they said the next step was to put on a mask so you couldn't see, I told the Chief I was exercising my right NOT to do that. He said, "OK, it don't make no difference!" Whew! Therefore, I just watched the last dunking with masks. Good deal, I'm now going to be a card carrying P-3 crew member!