

Whippoorwill E-Comment

Number 51,

July, 2007



An Electronic-Journal published for the AAPA

From my Memoirs

by J. Hill Hamon

SOME of our fighter squadron's Atlantic crossings during the mid-1950s were in rough weather in a classic task force formation, supported by destroyers, cruisers, and tankers. We refueled frequently, while running slowly in



high seas. Men were transferred to other ships in flimsy boatswain's chairs, swinging precariously over breaking waves that sometimes drenched them. I enjoyed going out into a small, fairly well protected catwalk under the flight deck near the bow of the ship at night and observing the overwhelming vastness of stormy seas.

There were uncountable numbers of the phosphorescent alga, *Noctiluca*, which flashed a faint blue light when agitated in the violent swirling sea. On the darkest night I could clearly see the eerie blue sea with flashes of brighter blue in breaking waves and eddies. I never tired of watching this hypnotic

scene. I probably was the only man on the ship who knew what I was looking at.

Another incredibly beautiful, sense-stunning experience I had was flying at night at altitudes above 40,000 feet. I flew many CAPS (Combat Air Patrols), climbing up over the carrier and flying a lazy race course pattern, generally being in a position to be vectored out to intercept any incoming, unidentified aircraft. This was a solitary duty. I was up there alone, but kept in contact with the ship, transmitting routine fuel-remaining reports, and in general, being kept awake by the flight controllers in CIC (Combat Information Center), down in the bowels of the ship. Often I would be vectored over to make an intercept on an unidentified plane, knowing that it was some pilot also flying CAP from another, or the same carrier, just for practice. It was great fun performing the intercept, ending up just a few feet behind and beneath the bogey, all done, of course, without lights. After identifying him by reading his number and determining the type of jet he was flying, the information

was passed on to CIC. Despite the fact that the unknown plane was also flying without lights, one could easily see the large identifying letters and numbers on the fuselage. I was invariably told, "Yes, that is Red-6, from the Forrestal. Break away, vector three-two-zero, forty-five." I then would gently pull up slightly ahead and below the other plane and turn on all my lights. The other pilot would throw his plane into wild, gyrating, spastic, evasive maneuvers every time. I had had this happen to me a number of times when some other pilot flying CAP had been vectored out to intercept me, and I had been totally unaware of his presence until he pulled up into about the same position and turned on all of his lights. After flying for over an hour without lights, the running lights of the intercepting plane was a hell of a shock to me. They seemed incredibly bright!

I have flown along under a starry sky and was surrounded by showers of the light blue trails of micrometeors, cascading down over and past me, blinking out below me. I didn't know that was happening the first time this occurred, but when I figured out what it was, the thought of one of these minuscule particles hitting my plane, possibly rupturing and igniting a fuel tank, flashed through my mind. They reminded me of 4th. of July sparklers, but raining all around me. The particles couldn't have been larger than dust motes, and I didn't know if any of them ever struck my

Banshee or not. But I had the weirdest feeling being caught in such a shower which apparently went on all night long, and invisibly all day long at certain times of the year. Night flying exposed me to many strange, beautiful sights, much more than daytime flying did. There is a certain definite tangible peace in an airplane that can only be experienced at night. The display of lights by *Noctiluca* and the showers of micrometeors are among my most unusual and memorable recollections of nature at night.



AFTER flying in the Navy, I returned to graduate school at the University of Florida, carrying many such unusual memories in my mind. And in a number of my classes the professor would describe some place or event that I realized had actually witnessed, but had not know its significance. I often wished I had completed school before flying because I would have known more of what I was observing. One day I was shot off a catapult in the Caribbean and as I retracted my landing gear and picked up my flaps, gaining flying speed to climb, I encountered two mating giant sea turtles floundering in the calm sea ahead of me I was intrigued and turned the jet slightly to watch them and was immediately called by the carrier and ordered to fly straight away and not cross the flight pattern. It was a reprimand, but I had observed something not too many men had seen.

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