

Operation Cantaloupe

The adventure that took me overseas to participate in the Korean War began in early August 1952 at Camp Stoneman, CA, a bay-area Army Personnel Center for processing individuals with assignments to the Far East. I was an infantry 2nd lieutenant with orders directing me to Camp Drake in Japan, where I would receive further assignment to a unit in Korea. After a little processing and a lot of waiting at Camp Stoneman, I was transferred to Travis Air Force Base, where I would be put on a MATS (Military Air Transport Service) shipment to Tokyo. Travis was about fifty miles inland—only a short bus ride from Stoneman—so those of us on that day’s travel orders arrived at the base with plenty of spare time before the flight, which was scheduled to depart somewhere around midnight on the 14th.

By now, the war was into its third year, so we were a pretty typical collection of replacements for officers that had completed their tours of duty in the Far East and were rotating home. Most of us were junior officers like me—and most were heading for combat assignments in the Korean War. We had spent the last ten days at Camp Stoneman reflecting on this somber reality and waiting for shipment orders. That waiting was not something most of us were willing to endure alone or with patience. So, at least for the half dozen or so guys that became my soul mates, we had found our escape at the bar in the officer’s club. It was there we got together every day, to shot the bull, to play cards...and to drink. Mostly, we drank.

However, now that we were once more on the move, we put all of that behind us—or so we thought. The bus to Travis AFB took us directly to the terminal, where we would wait till we were called to board a plane waiting for us out on the runway. Regrettably for us, that call never came. Our plane had mechanical problems and the flight was scratched. We were told that we had to wait till the next night, when we would be put on another flight at about the same time. Meanwhile, we would be transported to BOQs (bachelor officers quarters) on the base at Travis and we were invited to spend the next day at the officer’s club till the time for our flight that evening.

The flyboys provided us great accommodations, much more palatial than we were accustomed to at Stoneman. We slept very well and ate like royalty. Our only complaint was that the bar didn’t open till 4 pm. However, that still gave us ample time to accumulate blood alcohol levels well above those that, under normal circumstances, would set off alarm bells in our consciences. However, for me, the revelry was cut short by my discovery (I don’t remember how) that I was scheduled for an earlier flight than my comrades and had to rush to catch the next shuttle to the terminal. With profuse and raucous ceremony, my traveling companions poured me onto that shuttle bus with promises to connect with me again in Japan.

At the terminal, now functioning with considerably less than perfect acuity, I suddenly remembered that my little gym bag—containing many of the necessities I needed for the trip—was secured in an airport locker for which I did not have a key. The night before, when we had been bumped from the ailing airplane, we stored our carry-on bags at the terminal. As they were mostly small bags, we doubled up, expecting to be together on the flight the next day. My locker mate was a captain—so he had kept the key. Now I needed to recover my bag, which would have been a challenge even if I were stone cold sober.

I discovered from one of the ground crew that the night duty officer had keys to all the lockers, so I first had to find him and then convince him in somewhat slurred English why he should open that locker solely on the word of a drunken second lieutenant. After some hesitation, he finally consented and, thanking him too profusely—but not too coherently—I grabbed my bag

and rushed for the gate, where the last of the passengers were boarding the plane. Then, over the loud speaker in the terminal, I heard my name being paged. I stopped and listened to be sure I had heard right. I had, but it wasn't a call for me to report to the gate. It was an insistent request that I report to room such-and-such on the second floor of the terminal.

Doing a rapid about face, I dashed for the stairs—which I mounted two at a time—and then searched the upstairs hall for room such-and-such, still completely mystified why I should have been diverted at the last minute from boarding my scheduled flight. When I found the room, its lone occupant was an Army sergeant. On the desk in front of him was a box of cantaloupe. I identified myself to the sergeant and asked if he were the person requesting my presence. He confirmed that he was indeed that person and then made the most astonishing request.

“Lieutenant.” he said, “These cantaloupe are for General So-and-so in Honolulu. Melons like this don't grow in Hawaii, and the general has requested that we send him some on this flight. I wonder if you would be so kind as to take this box on the plane with you and give it to the sergeant that will be waiting for it at the airport in Honolulu?”

What could I say? I grabbed the box, hanging for dear life to my gym bag, and I sped to the gate where they were waiting for me as the only passenger still not on the airplane. The plane, a four-engine DC-6, was parked out on the tarmac, so I ran as fast as I could—given my condition and the precious cargo I was balancing in front of me—and mounted the steps into the airplane. A steward help me find a place to stow the cantaloupe in the rear of the passenger compartment and I staggered up to aisle to find a seat.

The seats were arranged with three on the left of the aisle and two on the right. There were only two unoccupied seats remaining on the plane—aisle seats, across from one another and about halfway up the aisle. I chose the one on the left, next to two naval officers—offering a friendly, but slurred, greeting to the one in the seat next to me—then fastened my lap belt, tilted back the seat and went to sleep (or passed out?...take your pick).

When I woke up some hours later, it was daylight and I could now observe my seatmates more distinctly than with the dim light and blurred brain from the night before. What I saw was more than a little disturbing. The officer sitting next to me wore the stripes of a full commander, and he was obviously the aide for the man in the window seat, who had more gold on his sleeve than I had ever seen before. Happily, neither the commander nor the admiral made any comment about my condition when I had first made my appearance on the plane, and they became friendly traveling companions for the rest of the flight to Honolulu. I expect they were willing to cut me a little slack, recognizing that I was on my way to become “cannon fodder” in Korea.

When we landed at the airport in Honolulu, there were two staff cars waiting on the tarmac next to where the plane parked—one for the admiral and one for me...or, more precisely, for my cantaloupe. I have often wondered whether it might have been no mere coincidence that I was the only one from our group scheduled that night for the earlier flight. Did I perhaps have an unwritten designation next to my name on the roster—“Cantaloupe Courier?”