

NAF El Centro

(From the diary of Roger Cyr circa 1984)

A hot July sun bleached the soil to a yellowish translucent hue and miniature dust devils played tag with each other among the sand dunes of the desert floor.

It was the seventh month of the second year of the reign of “King” Richard and almost three hundred and thirty years to the very day since the Spanish explorer Melchior Diaz had left his footprints in the soil of the Imperial Valley.

Held aloft by whirling propellers and wings of metal there arrived a company of modern day adventurers with a machine never before seen in these parts.

California’s largest saltwater lake, AKA, The Salton Sea was off our starboard wing tip and as our aircraft neared the airport I pressed my nose against the window. The patchwork topography of the land stretched out before me and I could just make out the region known as the Valle de Mexicali through the haze that obscured the land below.

As I stepped onto the tarmac a temperature that I had not experienced since a peacekeeping tour in the Dark Continent greeted me.

We struggled to carry our few possessions across the asphalt to a large white building and crowded around a window mounted air-conditioned that wheezed and groaned against the heat rising from Imperial County California.

The day before our arrival the CC-115 Buffalo with an advanced party had touched down at the United States Navy Air Facilities west of the city of El Centro California.

It was hot in Ottawa that summer of 1970 but it would take us several days to adapt to the heat of Imperial County where the summer temperatures often hit 120 degrees.

I was beginning my second year with Aerospace Engineering Test Establishment at Uplands air base south of our capital city. This was to be another challenging projects since arriving at AETE in 1967 and now for the next two months we were moving our test crews to the south western United States.

Those of us who had been at Churchill Manitoba during the cold weather trials on the Buffalo and the Falcon were given first refusal for the hot weather trials in California. I was the first in line at clothing stores to exchange the heavy gray shirt and other items from our B-25 kit for short pants and open neck shirts. In July thirty-five technicians, engineers and aircrew departed for California.

We were billeted on the upper floor (much to the chagrin of those on the ground floor) of The El Dorado Motel on Adams Street in beautiful downtown El Centro near the Intersections of highways 80 and 86 six miles from our work.

Since our ground and flight tests were to be carried out in the heat of the day we did not begin work until after nine AM. In the early mornings when the temperature was still bearable to be outside for us northern creatures many of the men sat around the swimming pool munching on jelly donuts and black coffee for breakfast. While others chose a nearby restaurant by the name of "Little Black Sambo." (Long since closed, as its name is no longer politically correct.)

The two vehicles we had borrowed from the US Navy would not hold all of our crew and it usually meant an extra trip to the airport each morning.

As my duties would only begin once the test flight was over for the day I usually got to be the designated driver. (This was a job I gladly accepted as it gave me freedom to explore the vast systems of canals, check dams and pipelines that carried water from the Colorado River.) It also meant that I would usually be one of the last to leave work for the air-conditioned comfort of the room I shared with a man from the avionic trades. (Not to mention a cool one around the pool when the temperature late in the evening dropped to 97 degrees.)

The agricultural lands are served by a constructed agricultural drain system, which conveys surface runoff and subsurface drainage from fields to the Salton Sea, which is a designated repository for agriculture runoff. (But I digress here and will return to the original purpose of this narrative.)

The history of the air force and tasks such as this are always well documented by those in charge of such matters. The side stories that make up the real history of any large organization always ends up on the cutting room floor to coin a phrase from California.

The non-commissioned ranks regardless of their station in life were all given the privilege (and honor) of attending the Chiefs Dining Room for meals. This arrangement continued until the third day when the mess officer discovered that we were in fact drawing full allowances for room and board. We were being charged a rate for meals that did not reflect our extra allowances and now would have to pay the full price of one American dollar as opposed to thirty-five cents for lunch.

Business dropped off at the Chiefs Mess but greatly improved where liquid refreshments were served!!

My first day at the "bar" so to speak had the temperature hovering near the 121 mark on the Fahrenheit scale when with five of my companions we drew up stools and I ordered a pitcher of beer. (\$1.36 US) As the barmaid sat the pitcher in front of me someone said. "A pitcher for each, my good woman if you please." "Who are you guys anyway and where are y'all from she queried? She drew five more pitchers of beer and set them on the bar.

We played the jukebox and danced with the ladies who arrived in great numbers when they heard that some crazy Canucks were on the prowl. Before the week was out some of the junior officers had removed their rank badges and joined us at the NCO's mess. Lunch hour lasted from eleven thirty until one fifteen and the president of the mess told us that business had never this good before we arrived!

By the middle of our second week here the duty free booze we had with us had evaporated in the heat and we were without adequate snakebite protection. One of the US Navy types whom we had befriended suggested we try across the border where the elixir to treat snake malady could be obtained for the equivalent of two dollars American. "But you can't take the vehicles into Mexico." He warned.

No one paid us any attention as we crossed the Mexican border and made our purchases at a shop in Mexicali. There seemed to be some confusion as the US customs were unfamiliar with Canadians bringing alcohol into the USA after a fifteen-minute trip to and from a foreign country. However we were allowed to re-enter the USA when we presented them with our Canadian air force ID cards.

When we neared the half-way point in the flight tests our chief test pilot arrived from AETE and spent four days with us. He had a few cool ones with the crew and congratulated each for our contributions to the mission.

The flight tests continued without incidents and in September we saw the Buffalo off for home and a day later we all flew back to Ottawa via a Hercules C-130.

I remained with AETE for two more years and was involved with the test flights of the F-5 Freedom Fighter. But that's another yarn for another day.

My wife and our two-pre teenaged children were waiting for me at the air terminal and the kids cried out in unison when I walked into the room

“Can we get a dog?”

Just in case you have forgotten your history “Senior. Diaz” came to a violent and tragic end in 1641.

He impaled himself in the groin with his spear.

(Edited and the names of the guilty removed February 2009)