



Donald Harton

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Donald Horton, the son of Herman and Mae Horton was born in Fort Morgan, Colorado on May 22, 1920. Along with the family he moved to Table Rock, Nebraska when his father was transferred there by the Burlington Railroad. While growing up he played in the school band, participated in athletics and attended the Methodist Church. Donald graduated from Table Rock High School, Class of 1938 and then attended the University of Nebraska.

Don grew up during what must have seemed to be a series of economic hard times and social turmoil: the Great Depression began with the collapse of the Stock Exchange in October 1929; over the next several years the stock market would lose nearly 90% of its value and one out of every four Americans would be unemployed. This was soon followed by the destruction of hundreds of Mid-West farms due to drought and locusts during the Dust Bowl years (1932-1935). Finally there was a Banking Holiday declared by President Franklin Roosevelt in March 1933 since so many financial institutions had become so weak that even a mere rumor could start a "run to the bank" and drive it out of business. Against the backdrop of these events, any job was better than none.

Donald had always worked. During his youth he'd tended the family garden and later on he worked at both the local drug store and with the Burlington Railroad track crew. While it was good to have any of these jobs, neither of them held much promise of permanent employment. All of this changed very quickly in September 1939 when Germany invaded Poland and World War II began. Almost immediately the United States began mobilizing its military and industry to meet the challenge of the Axis Powers. The next spring, France was overrun and during a "Fire-Side Chat" on May 26th, 1940 President Roosevelt asked Congress for funds to build 50,000 planes per year for the Army, Navy and any other friendly nation. Although we were not yet at war, this meant that American aircraft manufacturers would have to increase their combined production from about 2,000 per year, to nearly 4,000 per month. It was in this rapidly expanding aircraft industry that Donald found a career as well as steady employment.

Although he had always possessed considerable technical ability, Donald entered an aircraft school [possibly the Missouri Aviation Institute] located in Kansas City, Missouri to receive formal training as an aviation mechanic. This school provided him with the skills needed to perform either aircraft maintenance or manufacture. It included knowledge of aircraft engines, hydraulics and airframe / sheet metal work. Upon completing this course he went to work for Consolidated - Vultee in San Diego, California at a plant that produced both the Navy's PB-5 Catalina Patrol Plane and the new B-24 "Liberator" Bomber. The B-24 would be the first truly mass-produced 4-engine aircraft in aviation history with nearly 18,000 of them built at five factories around the country.

While in San Diego Donald witnessed the initial stages of America's industrial mobilization. Early in 1940 the Consolidated workforce was just 3,100 people, a number that ballooned to nearly 33,000 by the end of the year. On October 20, 1941 Consolidated opened Plant #2 which nearly tripled the production floor space available to build airplanes. While the plant(s) initially operated just two shifts, they immediately began 24-hour operations after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941. While Don was there, the Consolidated San Diego plant(s) produced 425 early model B-24s for the US Army Air Corps and for the Royal Air Force (RAF) under the terms of Lend Lease. Another 7,000 bombers would be completed at this complex before production ceased in 1945.

During this period, Donald must have impressed one of his supervisors, because at some point he suggested that Don apply for a Civil Service (US Government) position at the plant as an acceptance inspector. In short order Donald received his appointment to the Civil Service, but evidently not the position for which he had applied. Instead he was sent to the Army Air Corps

maintenance and supply depot at Tinker Airfield, Oklahoma, which was then called the Oklahoma City Air Material Area (OCMA). This organization busily repaired and modified B-17 and B-24 bombers, as well as fighters and cargo aircraft. Later the huge B-29 "Super Fortresses" were also brought to Tinker Field for retrofits before being sent overseas. It's interesting to note that in 1944 several B-29s belonging to the 509th Bomb Group received very extensive and unique modifications at Tinker Field. One of these planes, christened the "Enola Gay" would drop the first Atomic Bomb on Japan August 6th, 1945, effectively ending the war. Donald, as you will note below, was not there to work on that particular plane.

The maintenance effort needed to support military aircraft grew rapidly both in terms of numbers and complexity. As more factories opened and production rates increased, an ever expanding torrent of airplanes was produced, but not always to a specific or designated standard. Hundreds, if not thousands, of engineering changes were being adopted by manufacturers in order to improve their aircraft's design, substitute parts, resolve safety issues or to take advantage of combat experience. Two separate challenges quickly became evident: the first of these was the need to build large numbers of combat aircraft as quickly as possible. Equally important was the second problem of how to keep all these aircraft operational while retaining some degree of design control and standardization.

Donald was drawn into the maintenance challenge, working on literally hundreds of aircraft to repair damage, revise equipment or replace components as needed to keep the aircraft working and standardized in accordance to their type, model and modification. His ability to manage both people and workload became evident early-on and he was often sent out as a team foreman to remote places around the country to inspect, fix or modify disabled aircraft. Whether he was on the road or back at Tinker Airfield, very long work hours were typical of those years. This was so much so that Donald married Miss Marcile Vonasek, daughter of Charles and Bessie Vonasek, also of Table Rock, on December 28th, 1942 literally between his work shifts.

In the spring of 1943, Donald joined the US Navy and was sent to Farragut Naval Training Center (NTC) in Idaho for his basic training. This base had six separate encampments and temporarily became the largest city in Idaho. Each of the six camps had barracks space for 5,000 trainees as well as parade grounds, swimming pools and rifle ranges. When completed, Farragut was the second-largest naval training station in the world and during the 30 months it was open, nearly 300,000 sailors received their initial training there.

The choice of a town in Idaho for this "Boot Camp for Blue Jackets" reflects the very real fears of Japanese attacks on the West Coast just after Pearl Harbor. Although no further attacks actually occurred, the choice was reasonable and nearby Lake Pend Oreille provided a 43-mile long body of water on which to conduct small boat training. During their eight-week course at Farragut the recruits got lots of physical training and learned to how to march, row lifeboats, swim and use firearms before heading off to their assignments. Perhaps more important, they adjusted to military discipline and to living and working together in large groups. Don graduated from basic training in the fall of 1943. Due to his extensive background in aviation maintenance, he was assigned to Naval Auxiliary Airfield (NAA) Oakland, California and served there for the duration of the war.

The San Francisco Bay area was one of the major Navy fleet and supply bases on the west coast during World War II and it remains so to this day. Initially, the Naval Air Station (NAS) Alameda was the only airfield used by the Navy in the Bay area. However, by the end of 1944 it had grown into complex of 14 airfields (including NAA Oakland), seaplane ramps and aviation facilities totaling some 10,000 people and 1400 aircraft. The maintenance workload at these

airfields was overwhelming as nearly 1000 of these machines were in various stages of maintenance or overhaul at any given time.

When Donald arrived at NAA Oakland it had some 500 officers and 4,658 enlisted men assigned. The station had several different, but related missions: First of all the Naval Air Transport Service (NATS) headquarters for the west coast was located there. In essence NATS was the Navy's own airline; this force was established when the war began in order to provide rapid air delivery of critical equipment, spare parts and specialists wherever they were needed around the world to naval bases or fleet units. The return flights also evacuated casualties from the forward areas whenever this was possible. Additionally, NAA Oakland was the west coast terminal for all NATS flights arriving and departing San Francisco. Several NATS squadrons flying both RD4 and RD5 aircraft (the naval versions of the Douglas DC-3s and DC-4s, respectively) operated out of this base at one time or another. Squadrons VR-4, VR-11 & VR-13 were all commissioned at Oakland, however the last two units moved to islands further out in the Pacific as the war progressed. VR-4 continued to fly out of Oakland and also ran an aircraft overhaul facility which supporting all NATS activities in that part of the world.

NATS's achievements, measured in terms of number of flights, amount of cargo transported, distances traveled and the associated maintenance workload was enormous. Oddly enough, neither NATS's overall accomplishments nor the activities at NAA Oakland are widely recognized today. A few examples however may be useful in putting NATS achievements into perspective: In one instance NATS cargo flights to Okinawa delivered 186,000 pounds of ammunition directly onto a newly captured airfield, just in time to meet critical combat shortages for the Army. In terms of medical support, between December 1944 and May 1945 some 145,000 pints of whole blood departed from Oakland without loss; the largest daily shipment being 2,544 pints urgently needed for casualties we'd suffered on Iwo Jima. Aircraft maintenance also set new standards: a "*NATS Packet*" command newsletter dated May 1945 refers to an R4D's "Progressive Engine Overhaul" being completed in 12 days instead the expected 16 days.

NATS has two other significant achievements footnotes in history. First, it firmly established the land aircraft routes and the infrastructure used by the modern airline industry. Secondly, it made airline use far more common. Prior to WWII, almost all transcontinental air travel was done using flying boats. After the war however, flying boats such as the Pan Am "Clippers" rapidly became extinct. Donald therefore witnessed both the growth of America's aircraft industry and the emergence of modern airline travel.

After being discharged from the Navy, Donald Horton returned to his Civil Service position at Tinker Air Force Base, in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. He eventually rose to the position of Deputy Production Control Officer for the Air Force Materiel Command (AMC) Aircraft Refurbishment Center. Donald retired in 1977 and still lives with his wife Marcile in the Oklahoma City area.