Living with History â€“ Captain Cecil B. Hawkins, Jr. USN (Ret)

Description

He was my second Commanding Officer. An aviator on a â€œdeep-draftâ€•Â• vessel, the stepping stone to command of an aircraft carrier. Getting this far, you knew people in these positions would be wearing flag rank one day.

Capt Cecil B. Hawkins, Jr. At 6â€™4â€³Â•, half Cherokee Indian he was now in the Combat Logistics ForceÂ• (CLF) on a replenishment oiler. He was the kind of CO that was all over the ship, but only for the reason was he was interested in what made the ship tick. When you found him looking over your shoulder, and he asked â€œWhat are you doing?â€• he wanted to know the details.

Prior to being my CO, he had been the CO of the largest aviation squadron at the time. If I remember correctly, it was an A-7 training squadron in Texas, with about 1000 people assigned. Quite a responsibility.

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Sometime in 1978, we had pulled into Port Canaveral for a few days, I canâ€™t remember the reason, but, as usual, the Commanding Officer was given a car, but the rest of us had to hoof it if we wanted to go somewhere. Several of us were sitting in the Wardroom, it must have been a Saturday, and Capt Hawkins came in the door from the weather deck and asked â€œDoes anyone want to go to Cape Kennedy?â€•Â• The 1st Lieutenant, LCDR Mike Pivonka, and I said we would like to come along. We changed and met him on the pier. Capt Hawkins had been the CO for a while at this point, but as we drove to the Cape, he began to tell us about being part of the initial set of men being trained as Mercury astronauts, that he had not mentioned. As we walked about the Cape, he told us stories of the original Mercury 7 astronauts selected. One put his house up for sale as â€œA Future Astronaut.â€•Â• One of the others had the reputation of doing anything it took to make sure he was one of the astronauts selected. Over the years, his stories have squared with other historical accounts, such as Ã¢â‚¬Å“The Right Stuffâ€• and â€œFrom the Earth to the Moon.â€•

I did a little searching and found that there were 32 men who were not only passed the selection process, but also volunteered to enter the training program. Capt Hawkins told us he went almost all the way through the program, but was Ã¢â‚¬Å“cutÃ¢â‚¬Â• when the final design of the Mercury capsule was completed. The tallest you could be was 5â€™8â€³Â• and still fit inside the capsule. At 6Ã¢â‚¬â„¢4Ã¢â‚¬Â•, he wasnâ€™t going to get to fly.

Capt Hawkins had another story he told, and if any of you out there who have been in Naval Aviation, or worked with some of the aviators, see if you can confirm this:

For the filming of Ã¢â‚¬Å“Tora, Tora, Tora!,â€• a large group of Naval Aviators were recruited to take leave and fly as stunt me in the movie. With scenes of Japanese planes launching from their aircraft carriers, where else do you get people who can actually do that while the camera rolls? Anyhow, Capt Hawkins was one of those, and told of the film producers paying their stunt actor guild fees, and how there were really big parties every night. His next claim is one IÃ¢â‚¬â„¢m not sure is all real, as I ran across someone else, who had a CO who made the same claim. He told us that the one plane in the

carrier launch scene that leaves the deck, then sinks out of sight, only to reappear a few breath taking seconds later was piloted by himself!

He never made a big deal of all of this, but just presented it as the story of his life, just a slice of history. I learned many things from Capt Hawkins, as a very junior officer on a CLF ship.

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admin

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