

Written By:  
**Nick Brandi**  
Photography By:  
**Stephen Cherry**

## **FLYING LESSONS**



Born in bucolic Dobbs Ferry, NY in 1923, Andrew “Andy” Serrell had the great good fortune to discover what would be his life’s passion at a time when most have theirs oriented around potty training and applesauce.

“I knew from the first time I’d ever seen an airplane in the sky, which was age three, that I wanted to be a pilot,” said Serrell, “but my father felt they were unsafe, so he tried to discourage me. At some point after I’d lost him in 1938, I approached my mother to see if perhaps she felt differently about the subject. Well, thank God, she did, so in 1939 I started taking flying lessons.”

Andy received his student-pilot certificate in 1941, just in time to graduate from Dobbs Ferry High School and enlist in the Navy, which in December had fallen prey to a sneak attack on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese.

The decision was a perfect combination of patriotism, passion and practicality: He could serve his country while receiving the most advanced flight instruction to be found anywhere in the world. Following eight weeks of academics and ground school at St. Lawrence University in New York State and another eight weeks at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, he shipped out to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for extensive physical training.

“There were guys like [Major League Baseball players] Ted Williams, Tommy Henrich and “Birdie” Tebbetts at Chapel Hill,” Serrell recalled. “It goes without saying that the Navy baseball team there just creamed everybody. They were all good guys, even Williams, except that

sometimes he mouthed off too much, but we'd just laugh and say, 'Eh, pipe down over there, superstar. Nobody's impressed!' which was basically true; we were all treated as equals and treated each other as equals."

In 1944, following primary flight school in Indiana, basic training in Pensacola and instrument training in Whiting Field, Fla., Ensign Serrell was ready for assignment in the U.S. Navy. He'd petitioned for fighter pilot, but those slots were full, so he accepted a gig in Jacksonville, Fla. to fly patrol bombers (PBYs) called "Catalinas," which were used for bombing missions as well as antisubmarine warfare and convoy protection. He spent some months getting to know the craft whose slowness earned it the nickname "the flying bathtub" before training in the four-engine B-24. It was the same year he married his high school sweetheart, the vivacious Beverly Francis. ("Beverly and I met in summer school because that year we'd been busy having too much fun to do things like homework and studying for tests, so our grades paid the price, but man was it worth it!")



Unfortunately, Andy had to leave his new bride behind in San Diego in 1945 to form a squadron that was dispatched to the Pacific to fight the Japanese. It was the mission of the squadron to essentially island hop immediately after the Marines took the area and the SeaBees set it up for operations.

"Man, those SeaBees were really incredible," praised Serrell of the Naval construction battalions ("CBs") constructed during WWII. "They could set up bases and landing strips within 24 hours. They would often build the landing strips out of coral, which gets very flat and hard, like concrete, when fresh water is poured on it. The SeaBees were definitely a large part of our success in the Pacific Theater.

"But I'll tell ya," he continued, "there is nobody in the world I respect more than a Marine. Those guys just define the word 'courage,' and I defer to them every time. I seriously doubt that

the U.S. would be the peerless country it is without something called the United States Marine. Thank Heaven they're ours!"

Despite a perilous campaign that brought them to places like Eniwetok Atoll, Guam and Saipan, Serrell and his squadron somehow managed never to let the fear take over.

"There really was no fear of getting shot when you were in the middle of a mission," Serrell shared. "All though we lost two aircraft — one on the first day of operations, the other a week before the war ended — we had invested so much time in training for this kind of thing that it and a good dose of adrenaline left us focused rather than afraid."

Eventually Andy and his squadron landed on the island of Iwo Jima, which was another story entirely.

"What an absolute hellhole," Andy said of the infamously bloody 35-day battle that claimed over 26,000 American casualties. "The Japanese had fortified the area for years and were very well entrenched. The Marines landed after a 23-day shelling campaign, but the Japanese started coming out of the caves and were really pounding them. [The Japanese] had no chance whatsoever of winning, yet they just would not give up or surrender. It seemed like forever before the island was secured."

With the success of the island-hopping campaign in the Pacific, plans had been drawn to invade Japan's homeland in November of 1945. Those plans were obviated, however, with the advent of a new technology.

"They dropped the [atomic] bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6 and 9, 1945," reminded Serrell about the event that claimed the lives of over 200,000 Japanese and brought an abrupt end to the war. "But what wasn't and isn't emphasized enough is that [President] Truman had already been given the projected casualty estimates of the November invasion plan, which had predicted approximately six months of fighting and roughly one million casualties. Those statistics figured heavily in Truman's decision to drop the bombs rather than invade."

Serrell spent much of the time immediately after the war continuing his education. As a lieutenant (junior grade), he'd earned a bachelor's degree in military science from the University of Maryland and a master's degree in administration from George Washington University. He also enhanced his Naval training by studying a new approach to aerial photography.

“Because of the Cold War and certain advances in technology, there was a push as of the late-50s for aerial reconnaissance,” Serrell said, “so I studied aerial photography and in 1959 became an air-intelligence officer in the Sixth Fleet under Admiral George Anderson.”

In 1961, Serrell, now a commander, joined a squadron deployed to the Mediterranean with 12 aircraft and 650 men as their executive officer before becoming commanding officer the following year. It was during this time that he flew the Lockheed P-2 Neptune bomber and its successor, the four-engine, turbo-prop P-3 Orion antisubmarine and surveillance aircraft.

Though it was a huge honor and career coup when he was tapped in 1963 to go to the Pentagon as chief briefing officer to the Chief of Naval Operations, it meant spending four years behind a desk instead of up in the sky. As he likes to put it, the experience of being “chair-borne rather than airborne” wasn't exactly his idea of thrilling.

“While it was an honor to serve in the Pentagon, it sometimes felt like the inmates were running the asylum,” laughed Serrell, who'd logged thirty-two consecutive years of service by the time he retired in 1974. “The amount of energy that was devoted to political posturing and infighting was incredible. Everything you said and did could have political ramifications that you'd never intended. Quite frankly, I was happy when my tour there was complete.”

These days, retired Navy Captain Andy Serrell is the owner-operator of his own flight school, Ocean City Aircraft, which he established in 1972. He says he chose the Eastern Shore as his post-retirement home at Beverly's insistence because, as he put it, “If she was kind enough to follow me to 40 different locations around the world, the least I can do is follow her to the last location.”

“Andy Serrell is one of the finest men I’ve ever met,” said Todd Ferrante, a flying student of Serrell’s in addition to being the owner of Park Place Jewelers and the president of the Ocean City Development Corporation. “His technique as a flight instructor is one of patience and respect. It’s so easy to see his lifelong passion for flying, which is contagious whenever you get in the plane with him. He makes learning to fly a fun and exciting experience, and I, as well as his other students, consider it an honor and a privilege to have been taught by him.”

On any given day, Serrell can still be found hopping the clouds and riding the wind through the benevolent skies of Delmarva, either giving a lesson to a student, shooting aerial photography for one of his clients or just for his own pleasure — which remains utterly undiminished after 84 years.

“Apparently, there are people out there who would rather eat than fly,” he said with a big grin, “and, quite frankly, I just don’t understand it.”

<http://mobile.coastalstylemag.com/articles/September-October-2011/People/FLYING-LESSONS#>