

In Memory of Patrick O'Leary

John Patrick O'leary goes all the way back to 1959 with VP-44. He was with the squadron from 1959 through 1963 and then transferred to VP-30 across the tarmac still in Pax River. Pat got his PPC papers in the 3 aircraft that VP-44 flew during that time, P5M, P2V and P3A. He went on as PPC in P3B and C with VP-30. Pat served under Commanders Ernie Wilson, Bob Pierce, and Andy Serrell.



He was highly motivated and always had a can do attitude and a big smile to go with it. Pat was always on top of the situation at hand. He had a quick wit and a sharp tongue. You didn't want to get into a battle of wits with him unless you just

liked to laugh at yourself. His retorts were cutting but at the same time not out of place or unjust. You got just what you asked for from Pat. After any of his verbal encounters, though, you could still count on him as a friend.

Pat talked about his military career of 24 years and I wish I had written it all down but we always talked over a few beers and so here is the beery version as I can remember.

- VP-44 from 1959-63
- VP-30, det A from 1963-65
- VP-24 Brunswick (dates unknown)
- Army War College (yes, Army)
- VC-5 Commanding Officer on Okinawa. Flew missions in Vietnam
- USS Ranger as Ships Navigator
- Point Mugu Air Station

Pat was married for 14 years and was divorced in the early 1980s. He has a daughter, Maggie Skiba, and two grandsons, Eli and Atom. He loved Maggie and those kids more than anything else in life. I learned a bit about being a good father from Pat.

I got in contact with Pat again after many years through the Armed Services Record Center Letter program in 1987. I sent the letter off and gave up of ever hearing from him after about 3 months had elapsed. I figured that Mr. O'leary was not to be found. Then one evening, out of the clear blue came a phone call from old Pat. I couldn't believe it and was elated. His voice sounded exactly like it did many years before. I would have recognized that voice anywhere.

After the service, Pat had worked for a while with the Ventura County government in California. He finally retired for good in about 1988. After several years more in Ventura, CA he started traveling around the country in a small Toyota motor home. He lived in that thing for over 3 years and visited me several times during his travels. He

finally settled in south Texas near Corpus Christi and lived in a trailer park there. By that time he had a much larger trailer and a 1998 Ford F150 truck.

I visited him down there 5 or 6 times using the space available flights out of Scott field. We went all over down there from San Antonio to Mexico. Then, in 1999 we traveled back to California so that Pat could dig some of his treasures out of storage and bring them back to Texas. That was a happy trip driving highway 10 to California and seeing where he had lived in Ventura. We popped a few corks on that trip.



When his son in law (Randy Skiba) received orders to go to Korea for a one year unaccompanied tour in 2001, Pat moved from Corpus to Panama City, FL to be near Maggie and the kids and to help them out as needed. He was there until his death in December of 2002. I had one last visit with him in November and knew he was very ill (was using oxygen full time by then) but just couldn't believe it when I heard of his death. He had been in the hospital for one month and seemed to be getting better but finally succumbed just before Christmas.

Pat had many friends. Most of them I do not know. Of the ones that I know or have heard about are: Glenn Coulter, Marty Duling, Ron Schug, Ralph Cook, Ed Oneil, Bob Minnerly, Don Thune, Bob Stephen, Andy Serrell, Jim Ball and many others. Then there was the Irish leprechaun that parachute rigger 1st class Azukian had painted on his helmet.

This is a story that Pat liked to tell on himself. One time, very early in Pat's career all officers were ordered to vote in the upcoming presidential election by Cdr. Ernie Wilson. It came back to the skipper that only one officer didn't vote. That was Pat Oleary. Pat was called on the carpet and asked why he didn't vote. Pat said "I'm not old enough to vote, sir." That comment was overheard by the office yeoman and soon made the rounds of squadron personnel. People respectfully held back their laughter as well as possible.

Pat was a real character. He was a very smart man, excellent aviator, and hard worker. He was a take charge sort of guy. He was president of his high school class while working full time at night. With a person of his nature there just had to be many stories about him. I will start with where I first got to know him.

I had just been assigned to the squadron as a new ensign in 1961 when we were in Norfolk. We were deployed to Sigonella Sicily later that year. It was go, go, go during that deployment so it was with a great deal of surprise when Cdr. Pierce granted Pat Oleary, Dick Marrack and Myself our request for 5 days of leave. What made it even more of a surprise was that he granted it to 3 bachelors all traveling together. Now, Cdr.

Pierce was notorious for not really trusting bachelors out of his sight, and probably with good reason. So, when we got the approval we took off out of there with lightning speed. We had wanted to travel to London but the space available flight that was supposed to take us didn't make it. So, we decided to get on the train and travel up the boot to Garmisch-Partinkirschen in Germany.

We arrived at the station, purchased our tickets, bought some wine and cheese and set off. The first evolution that occurred was the breaking apart of the train at Mesina and floating the whole thing across the straits of Mesina on a barge. It was put together again on the other side and we were off for the 2 day excursion up the boot.

Well, we couldn't speak Italian and the Italian passengers couldn't speak English. But what we had between our separate nationalities was a handy-dandy Italian-English dictionary. We spent most of the trip between sips of wine passing the dictionary back and forth and waving our hands trying to communicate. We must have done ok because the folks in our compartment seemed to like us and we started sharing our wine and cheese. As we traveled further north, the Sicilian wine and cheese was exchanged for northern wine and salami (the northerners seemed to think their stuff was better). The Italians liked to try to talk with us and we liked to try talking to them also. Each city we went through was a stop with new people while wine and salami vendors sold their wares on the outside of the train. We stopped at all of the big towns. I remember Rome, Naples and Florence. While we had to have passed through many more small towns and cities where we stopped for short periods, I just don't remember. Anyway, after 2 days on that train we were beat.

We finally arrived at Garmisch and took immediately to trying out the skis. Now, none of us had ever been on skis and I have not been on them since. We figured we didn't have time to take lessons so we rented the rigs and went up the intermediate slope on a rope tow. I remember that Dick Marrack fell down going up but Pat said that it was me so maybe it was. Anyway, getting off the rope tow I pointed down and said Geronimo. I think Pat was right behind me. We both ended up at the bottom on our butts while yelling "look out below." Neither of us knew how to slow down or stop and we were afraid to fall. Somehow we made it down ok and headed immediately for the bar where we knew what we were doing.

The trip back was slower and less eventful because we were worn out. We did manage a short stay of a few hours in Innsbruck Austria where we bought some souvenirs and drank some more beer. After that it was mostly sleep all the way back. Then back to the grind.

That trip was where I got to know Pat and Dick really well. They both became my best pals and were both very special to me. Dick died in 1985 and that is a story in itself but not for here. So both of those good old guys are gone.

That was a rather lengthy rendition of a fun time. Maybe I went overboard but I'll try to make up for it in the rest of the stories.

Then there was the time in Sigonella when a morale boost was decreed by putting on a play. Most of the good guys were in the play. There was Andy Serrell, Bob Minnerly, Chief Vermillion and others. How Pat didn't get picked for that play I don't know. I just think that Pat didn't want to be an actor. Anyway, as Pat told it, after having flown a 10 hour patrol, he had to stand the ready duty because the other crew was in "play practice." Pat always remembered that with a shake of the head and a sly smirk. You had to have seen that ready duty shack to know what a sacrifice this was. Suffice to say, it was not a very clean, dry or warm place and no TV. The roaches and rats would finish off your box lunch for you. He always ended the story by saying he had hoped for a ready duty alert that night.

This next tale of a time in Pats life came about when he was in VP-24 deployed in Iceland. Captain J Ball was ComFairIce. During one very large ASW exercise when all the squadron aircraft were flying the barrier looking for Soviet subs, the weather turned particularly nasty at Keflavick (no surprise). Pat and the rest of the squadron AC were out there in the soup. The squadron needed at least one plane to return in an up status in so it could pick up the ready duty from another sub weary squadron. All of the other planes, however, had to divert to Scotland because of low fuel states. Pat decided to try to make it in to Kef. As he related it to me, if you could see the red haze coming from the Pizza parlor on final just before the runway, you knew you were close. Pat made 3 or 4 GCA passes and finally saw the red haze through the fog. He then saw 2 landing lights on the runway and brought the plane in. It was touchy to say the least.

So, when Pat crawled out of the airplane, who was there to meet him but Captain Jim Ball himself. J. Ball always called him "boy aviator". J. Ball was not one to mince words and could be a scary guy when he wanted to. He wanted to know how much fuel Pat had on board and whether he had enough to make his alternate. Pat said he had enough to make the alternate with 10 percent to spare. Capn Ball asked him how come he had so much fuel left. Pat told him he had been loitering on 2 engines for the past 8 hours. J. then asked him if he got anything. Pat said he got pictures of 4 subs on the surface. It later turned out that they had pictures of 5 plus localization on 2 more. Pats squadron skipper (can't think of his name) said to him "come on, I'll buy you a beer". He then asked Pat to borrow 10 dollars for the slot machines. (Pat did say he always paid back)

Another time and place was when he was ship's Navigator on the Ranger. The ship's skipper had decided to take the Ranger out to sea at low tide from San Diego harbor. Pat told him not to do that in front of other officers on the ship. The skipper decided to do it anyway. They scraped the bottom and there was a court of inquiry. Pat came out ok but the skipper didn't make admiral. That skipper took it out on Pat after that.

Pat said he was not told the reason why it was so important to take the ship out at low tide when it should have left earlier at high tide. It came out at the court of inquiry that the captain wanted to accommodate the engineering crew by allowing them to have a full day

at Sea World. On that brief event the skipper gamboled both his and Pat's careers ... and lost!

Then there was the much later time while Pat and I were in Pensacola visiting Don Thune. Pat and Don had flown on the same crew for a while in VP-44 and when they got together the years just rolled away and the laughs began. Those two could have taken their act on the road. Don was working as a training instructor at the Naval Air Station and had taken the day off to take us to the Navy Museum on the base. Pat was driving his truck and trying to put it into a tight spot on the parking lot. He had done less than a perfect job and Don said "if I were you I would have parked in that open spot over there." Pat came back quick as a flash "you've been an instructor a long time haven't you Don." We all just broke up. You just had to hear Don laugh. He really got a kick out of that one.

One morning when he was visiting at my house he invited me to share a drink of wine. I told him rather smugly that I didn't usually take a drink before noon. To that remark Pat said "I don't belong to that religion." I still laugh when I think of that one.

Pat was just like that. He was full of humor and good times. I'm so sorry he is gone. Those damn cigarettes did it to him. Even though he had quit about 15 years before, the damage was done. He held on as long as he could.

His daughter, Maggie Skiba, is currently residing in Anchorage, Alaska with her family. Her husband, Randy, is stationed at Elmendorf AFB for a 3 year tour. Randy is an outdoor kind of guy and hopes to make Alaska his home after his time in the Air Force.

Lester Dennis