



**Robert R. Lester, LTJG, USNR
and Businessman**
"Robert"

Date of Designation: 1918 NA # 1473

Dates of Active Duty: 1918 - July 1919

Total Flight Hours: Unknown-All flight time was in trainers

Aviation Commands:
CO, Training Squadron 11, NAS Key West, FL.

Duty Assignment Chronology

1918 - When duty allotments were handed out, greatly to my disappointment, I drew an assignment to lighter-than-air; that is balloons and dirigibles. I had always been interested in airplanes (heaver-than-air (HTA)). Fortunately, word was passed that those who disliked their assignments would be permitted to exchange if they located someone who preferred the other service. I was fortunate and switched to HTA, a step I never regretted. On a cold Saturday afternoon, clad in heavy olive drab wool uniforms, our flight training group boarded the train in Boston and headed south to Key West.

Key West Naval Air Station had only been opened a relatively short time, since December 1917. I finished ground school and took to flying like a duck to water, and soloed after four hours. When I was ready to be graduated and sent to Pensacola for the next stage of flying, I was asked if I would like to be commissioned immediately, and stay at Key West as an instructor (eliminating Pensacola). I was willing, and I immediately became a non-commissioned instructor awaiting the arrival of my commission. I never regretted my decision, but for the time being it did put me in a difficult position. All the other instructors were commissioned. I lived in the cadet barracks, messed with the cadets, took shore leave with the cadets - in fact I was still a cadet. In time my own student class moved on without me. I was neither cadet nor officer. This lasted for several weeks until my commission finally arrived.



There were plenty of planes and everyone was encouraged to spend as much time in the air as possible. At this time, no one really knew much about the potential of the airplane. Senior Officers, even if pilots, knew very little more than subordinates. This meant that a great deal was left to individual initiative and imagination.

There were two school squadrons on the base, numbers 11 and 12, each with 18 active planes. In each squadron six planes were assigned to six instructors per watch with about six students each. Each squadron had a CO, and either he or a check pilot passed each student from one stage to the next. Our school plane at that time was a Burgess-built N-9; a straight-winged, single float bi-plane, powered by an OXX motor (I believe this was a souped version of the OXS of Army Jenny fame), carrying one fairly heavy pontoon. This plane was underpowered with the OXX and would spin quickly and suddenly from a climbing left turn. On very still days it was hard to get off the water. Any wind helped, not only because it boosted the plane's relative speed, but because the choppy waves tended to break the pontoon loose from the water. Later we would have these same planes powered by Hispano-Suiza motors, which gave splendid performance. Powered in this way, I believe they were known as the V2. We also had a few Aeromarines and F-boats.

In March of 1918 when the Germans made a successful penetration of the Western Front, in Key West we heard little about these events. There were no newspapers, radio and of course, no TV. We were busy training pilots and flew from sunrise to sunset, and the mechanics worked all night to keep the planes up. When we arrived at the beach in the morning, the crews would have the first planes in the water and the motors turning over idling, ready for the student and instructor to take off as soon as the first morning half-light made the water visible. We flew until it was too dark to be safe for students to be in the air. On glassy summer days it was difficult for even an experienced pilot to locate the exact surface of the water. I have seen students make a perfect

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“three-point landing” fifty feet in the air, and then drop a wing and spin in; or I have seen him go straight into the ocean without even breaking his glide.

When the flag came down at dark, the officers in command of the squadron checked paper work and the maintenance work going on in the hangar before going ashore. It would probably be ten or after before I reached my room, and it was 4:00 to 5:00 a.m. when I left it.

In these days of intercom systems and all sorts of electronic aids, it is interesting that our only communication with a student was by hand signal. Because of the noise it was necessary to develop formal and generally understood signals. It was convention that the instructor’s hands must be always in sight of the student, resting each one on the edge of the cockpit cowling. In that position the instructor made small hand motions -- two hands to show that the nose was too high or too low--one hand signaling to lift a wing--tapping the cheek to show a skid or a slip--pointing to another plane in the air to avoid a collision. If it was necessary to suddenly take controls from the student, the instructor’s hands disappeared from the student’s sight and the dual controls were shaken, signaling that the instructor was taking over and the student should remove his hands and feet from the controls.

This went on day after day, from morning to night, in the hot summer weather. Our uniform, without exception, was flying helmet, goggles, a khaki shirt, a pair of khaki trousers, and sneakers. No underwear, and no uniform insignia of any kind. Even that many clothes was a concession to the civilized life of the school. Sometimes members of the Patrol Squadron returned from a long day’s patrol in the hot summer weather wearing nothing but their tennis shoes. The rudder was hard on bare feet!

Sometime at the end of the summer, I was placed in command of Squadron 11. I don’t know why I was selected to take charge of this squadron, but I suspect it was because I showed initiative in turning out many students. I developed the practice of scheduling my students, and insisted that the next student up must always be standing on the beach, with helmet and goggles in hand, when I came up with his predecessor. If you were instructing for half a day, and limiting each flight to approximately 30 minutes, which is about all a new student could assimilate, a great deal of time could be lost sending for a student who was, perhaps, shooting craps on the ground floor of the tower.

In addition to our regular duties, we so-called senior officers, although we were still at the time all Ensigns, would experiment. One must again recall that in those days not very much was known about flying. The modern aviator would, I suspect, be horrified to learn that I once deliberately flew into a black thundercloud at about 6,000 feet, just to find out what would happen. I did! I was whirled around and thrown upward and sideways, completely out of control, and finally ejected from the black mass of boiling currents with my flying wires loose and my wings actually flapping. Those old bi-planes were meant to take punishment which would tear the wings off a modern small plane. They were little more

than flying box kites with sturdy vertical struts (wood) connected at the top and bottom with a double pair of “landing wires” and “flying wires” making a cross in each bay, and thus a cantilever truss out of the wings. The wires were galvanized cable, kept covered with grease to retard corrosion by salt water. The wings, of course, were fabric over wooden spars and framing. The wires and struts could be pulled out of shape, but I never knew a wing to collapse except when it was caused by a collision. I once came down through 12,000 feet of violent turbulence, and never really worried about my wings.

We tried everything. In the very early days our skipper had insisted that we fly in bad weather, saying that the Navy was not paying to train “fair weather pilots”. This was wartime days when the skies were filled with students. His policy turned out to be impractical, as after a passing squall, the water would be spotted with downed or wrecked airplanes, and very often, one or two students would be missing, only to be discovered on a strange island, or drifting at sea. We never lost one.

The final test of the student pilot was to make a “dead stick landing” to a mark. Out in the North Bay of Key West was a buoy. The student must cut his engine (we had no self-starters in those days) at least 2,000 feet altitude and land as close as possible to the buoy. Since precision was so much prized, some of the instructors started exercising their talents on other marks. At last I thought I was so good that I decided to land at the crowded beach with a “dead stick”. Since the beach was usually lined with float planes resting nose against the concrete while they were being refueled or embarking students, this called for not only accurate judgment of angles, but of speed and momentum, with absolutely no last minute chance for a correction. I approached on a glide into the wind, parallel to the beach, then turned at right angles to make a landing. Normally one landed on the water off the beach and then turned and taxied into the designated spot. I made my glide, made my turn just off the water in the air, and started for my slot. Unfortunately, I had miscalculated momentum, and hit the beach at such speed that I skipped up the beach on my pontoon, across the concrete apron, and partly into the hangar, while mechanics scurried for their lives, and my colleagues whooped with glee. In the course of my wild ride on land, I damaged two other planes, as well as my own. I well remember the skipper’s words in his office the next morning. “Mr. Lester, we like to see young pilots show imagination and initiative, but if anything more like this happens, I am afraid you will be too expensive for the Navy, and we will have to go outside and find somebody to buy planes for you to experiment with!”

Summary of Significant Career Events

- (1) One of five Kansas citizens who founded Kansas City’s first commercial airport in 1922.