

Speaker: Dennis Turner

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Okay, my name is Dennis Turner. Retired in 1994 from Mobile, Alabama as a lieutenant commander. My commissioning source, I was a direct commission aviator, so I actually started in the Navy in 1971. I was actually stationed in Guantanamo where they had the last Navy HU-16's, and then transitioned to C-131's. When I made the decision to get out of the Navy, the Coast Guard captain at the fleet training group came over, and he knew I was leaving the Navy, so he goes, "Hey, we got this direct commission aviator program. You need to go up to Miami and talk to those guys." That's kind of what I did and that's how I ended up in the Coast Guard, and I came in, in 1978.

Went to Corpus Christi, Texas was my first tour. My first duty day was Tropical Storm Emile. As I was coming in that night, it got real windy and real rainy and they hadn't even forecast it. As I'm coming in, I see a helicopter taking off just sneaking over the treetops below the clouds, and I see a 131 taking off and busting into the clouds. When I walked into the ops center, the ops officer goes ... Took a grease pencil and circled a big area on a map, and he said, "That's your area. Here's all the SAR folders. If you need anything, tell me, but you take care of everybody up there and rescue all those people." So, kind of trial by fire on the first duty day.

While I was there, they knew I had flown helicopters, so they got me helicopter qualified. In the Navy, I'd never gotten shot at or never got to shoot anything really, but my first deployment in an H-52 on a cutter, we jumped the boat south of New Orleans and it started taking off for Mexican waters, got within about 20 miles of Mexico and by that time we determined it was stateless, the country had said it was, they didn't recognize the name, so the captain told the gunner's mate, who was on a 60 caliber machine gun, "Stop that boat." I was standing on a bridge way, and being an aviator I didn't really understand maybe what that meant, and I wondered why they had all these real high bulkheads with pretty thick steel, when he opened up with that 60 caliber I found out why because pieces of boat were bouncing off the bridge wings and stuff, and we stopped it and it eventually sank.

In fact, one of the guys in the boarding party jumped on the boat and ... because the guys in the boat jumped in the water, and they had actually ... We found out later, they told us it actually opened a sea rocks and they were trying to sink it because if you don't get anything, you have no evidence, and then the government

would have to pay for the boat. I think it was like a third or second class petty officer went down a hatch, and the boat pretty quick went nose up and disappeared below the water, and the guy was still there, and we're all going, "Uh oh." A couple seconds later he pops up. He got one bale, and then all the guys that were on the boat that were handcuffed went, "Oh no." You know, we took them back to I think it was Clearwater and they got charged there, that kind of stuff.

Most of the guys in the Coast Guard that know me, knew I was stationed at Guantanamo, and we did a lot of deploying out of there with the Haitians and drugs and stuff, so my nickname and call sign was Gitmo. Anybody that I talked to on the radio probably would recognize that. One of the biggest things that happened while I was at Corpus is the Bay at Campeche oil well blew up and I think it was like 4 or 500 miles south of the Texas border and by the time I left there in 1981, we could take off out of Corpus in a Conveyor, pick up the oil slick and follow it all the way to the well.

Once you went to the beach, like after that started to happen, you had to take bug and tar remover because, even though you couldn't see it, it was under the sand. People stopped going to the beach and using to the pool and stuff on base and that kind of stuff. Eventually, they got it out. We actually, I didn't get to do it, but one of the guys there flew Red Adair who was like the world expert on how to put out rig fires. He went down and looked at it and said, "Well, I can do it for 10 million dollars," or something like that.

I think the Mexican government came back and said, "Well, we'll give you 5 million." He said "You can stick it where the sun don't shine. Don't call me again." I'd heard the President even called him and tried, but Red Adair was one of those guys, once you crossed that line, he wasn't ... So he wouldn't do it, and they tried to put a concrete cap on it. It blew it right in half. I think it went on for a couple of years. There's probably still millions of gallons of oil out there somewhere.

Also, in Corpus, we took off one day in a pattern, it's like, "You got enough gas to get to Key West?" And it's like, "we just took off, of course, we got enough gas to get across the pond, why?" They said, "go to Key West and you know, you'll get further direction there." We were kind of like, what's going on? And everybody always carried a little bit of an overnight bag, but normally just for one night. It was actually the beginning of the Mariel boat lift with the Cubans coming across, so we landed in Key West. And I think we were there about three or four days if I remember right,

doing bow ties and stuff as the Coast Guard moved surface assets down there to try and stop them and send them back to Cuba. And helicopters came down and did rescues for people who had problems or sick or people jumped in the water, that kind of stuff.

But, kind of like I told a couple guys here, even though I was stationed in Corpus for three years, half of that time I think I was in Miami. For either drugs or like I said, the Cuban boat lift. That kind of stuff. From there, went to Traverse City, Michigan. Kind of a different place. That was a helicopter tour with the H-52's and stuff. And you know, probably the most exciting thing up there was I went out on a heart attack. Hoist on a boat one night on Lake Michigan and actually it was just as the sun was setting and so, just like some of the other people said, I was co-pilot and we didn't have rescue swimmers and stuff, so they're like ... we put a corpsman down and the corpsman said, "I need some help." So, the commander said you know, "Dennis".

And I'm like, "okay" you know, so I go back and get on a hoist and they put me on a boat and you know, we kind of get the guy a little bit stabilized with some CPR. And then, we put him in the basket and hoist him up and then the hook comes down and the corpsman hooks himself up to the hook, so I'm standing there waiting for it to come back down for me and the H-52 just leaves. And I'm standing out a boat, so I pick up my PRC 9 and say, "Hey, you know, where are you going?" And he goes you know, "this guy is really bad and the corpsman said we gotta get him to the hospital right now." And the 44 footer out of Frankfurt's 10 miles away. They'll get you. I got to spend the night at the ... well, I actually got to spend most of the night on Lake Michigan with the 44-foot crew getting towed in and slept there until the next morning. Then a 52 came over and got me, so that was a lot of incentive not to be a co-pilot anymore.

Anyway, let's see. We also did, while we were in Traverse City, the Haitian exodus started and because the Haitians believe a lot in Voodoo, they found that red ships, that they would not come out. They took the ice breakers and put them down there because they were the only red ships that we had. I think it was Pug Rundy and I went for about a month on a Coast Guard cutter Westwind and just kind of sit off the Haitian coast. And we had some of the congressmen came down and we flew them in and out. That kind of stuff.

You know, but our main job, we flew pretty much every day looking for somebody trying to leave. Really with the icebreaker where we were, they wouldn't come out. It was bad Voodoo I guess is what they told us, so anyway, that worked out pretty good. After Traverse City, I actually had a civilian flight instructor reading that I had picked up between the Navy and the Coast Guard. I found out that there were instructor jobs open here in Pensacola, so I asked to go to BT6, T34's and got that tour. It was a really good time. I really enjoyed instructing. Got to train. In fact, today one of my students ran into me and he's retired. That's kind of bad because it's making me feel old, but you know, when he walked up. I'm like, "No, you can't be retired." And he's like, "Oh, yeah I am." It's been 22 years since I retired and actually, that was at BT6 around 87, so most of the guys I've trained are retired now.

It was a good tour. I got to, like I said, train a lot of the guys that were coming through and that kind of stuff. I went to Cape Cod because when I first came in with the Conveyor, supposedly I was going to fly the Conveyor for a year and then get transitioned to a Falcon. And then, be a Falcon pilot for the rest of my life. Of course, the Falcon was 10 years later, so by the time I left Pensacola, they finally had the Falcons, so I got picked to go to Cape Cod and transition to the Falcon.

And when I went through training, they kept giving me a hard time about, because the T 34 single engine, about you know, how many students shut the engine off on you? And I'm like, "none". You know, I had a way of blocking the lever that they had to move in order to shut the engine off and I said, if I felt them trying to move that lever, then I just reach up with my knee board and tap them on the back of the head and say, "don't touch that again". And that normally fixed the problem.

But anyway, got through the training. Went to Cape Cod. I think it was around September, October, the Stan team came up for my first Stan check. And Eric Fagerheim who was with me at Corpus as a JO when we first both came into aviation. He was the Stan check pilot, so we took off. Went up and we did all our low work. Dropping stuff to boats and all that kind of stuff. And, he's like, okay, now we're going to go do instruments, so it's like, all right. We're going to climb up and got to Pease Air Force Base, which was normally where we went to do our approaches and stuff. I called Boston Center and said you know, Coast Guard 2105, request pick up 60 miles off of Boston to go to Pease Air Force Base for approaches.

And he said, Roger you know, contact Pease approach on 127 whatever and squawk this, whatever turn right and climb. We had a console on the side, by our leg that we put like the squawk and all the radio frequencies in. About the time the guy finished that, Eric says, "All right, you're at 3,000 feet. Pull throttles back to idle. You have a quick situation. We're going to stop at 1,000 feet. The water's 1,000 feet." And it was a standard thing that they did for Stan checks. Everybody knew it was coming, so I saw the pilot. He had the auto throttles on. There was little buttons on the side of the knobs and I saw him flexing his fingers. You know, pushing his buttons while he was pulling it back, but I'm like, okay he's got that. And I'm putting the frequencies and the IFF code in and all of sudden I hear Eric in the jump seat go, "holy crap, you shut down both engines."

And I'm going, "Nah." I finish entering and I looked up. There's no caution lights. You know, the tapes are all coming down, but everything is still kind of up in the normal range, so I started to turn my head to say to him like, "yeah, right. I'm going to bit on that. You know, you guys have been after me about this engine outtake forever, right?" And then all of sudden, every caution light came on and all the tapes kept going. Yeah. That was exactly what I said, you know. It's like, you know, "oh man, you know." Anyway, the AC though did a great job flying the airplane. Transitioned right to the thing. Well, he ... and I'm trying to think because at that point the Coast Guard had no procedures for both engines out. It was one engine out. And so, I got the checklist for one engine out and I'm trying to think you know, what's going to be the difference here since we only got, since they're both out.

Before I said anything, he reached up and hit a starter button. I'm going, I don't know if we ought to do that or not. And then Eric and Eric did exactly what he said. He said if something bad happens, I'm going to shut up and you guys take care of it unless you try and kill me and then I'm going to tell you. And at that point, Eric spoke up and said, "you took them back up over the hump. The starter's not going to engage unless you put them both back in cut off." Then, the pilot had to lift both gates and put them back in cut off. And he hit the starter and he was going to bring the throttle up as soon as it started turning because the fan speed was still pretty high. And I'm like, "no, no, no. Don't do that because the engine was still really hot." I'm like, "if you dump all that raw gas in there, we're likely to blow it up." And you know, then that's pretty much game over at that point.

I got him to hold off a little bit and we got it down. I can't remember the exact TAT. I think around 850, 900, which was still pretty hot to start, but it's like, all right go for

it. And then he put the throttle up. I mean, that's the fastest I've ever seen any engine start anywhere. I mean, it just like whoosh. Yeah. The avionics in the back used to sit between the engines, so it's like, avionics, everything okay back there? And he goes, "Yeah, I didn't hear any fan blades leaving and it sounds like it's running." We're kind of sitting there and once again, you know, we're coming down. Well, now I'm starting to call altitude. Right there's 2000, there's 17, you know there's 15. You know, there's 1200. Put the throttle up. Let's fly.

And the pilot you know, had been like a goat Conveyor and resets you warm the engine up before you put the power on. Well, he said something like we've got to warm the engine up before we can fly and you know, Eric and I about the same time said, "it's a jet, push the throttle up. See if this thing will fly." And so, he started pushing it up and obviously we were able to fly out of it, but it had a ... there was a cut up in the plane when you start it. When you start an engine without the APU running, it won't let you start the second engine for like 10, 15 minutes, so you don't blow up the batteries in the back of the plane.

We couldn't get the second engine to start. We tried, but it wouldn't start, which was probably a good thing. Like I said we might have blown up the batteries and made even a bigger problem than we already had. We eventually did get the second engine started and obviously got back to Cape Cod. One of my claims to fame in history is, I was one of two pilots that were in a Glider HE25 for, I don't know, about three or four minutes something like that until we got the engines started and flew out of that thing.

Mobile did actually I think put that in a simulator and you know, the Coast Guard safety program is so great in so many ways. In that, in the other services if you say you know, you did something really bad. You know, that's probably the end of your career. In the Coast Guard, not necessarily. You know, I mean, anybody can make a mistake. We're all human. But the big thing is, is they go back and analyze and then they tell everybody. You know this is how ... you know, these are the kind of things you need to think about. And the one thing that made sense after I read the final report too, was there was a switch up top that started the APU, which was the little jet engine in the back. If we had started that APU first, that would power the hydraulics, the electric, we could actually have started the second engine if we had done that, but it would have made sure that we had complete systems all the way to even if we would have went in the water.

At the time, we were just running on spinning fans and a battery. And if we would have killed the battery on the first start attempt, we would have been in trouble. Yeah. We would have been in the water, so something good did come out of it and like I said, I think that became sort of the Stan question or at least in the simulator out here. I saw it a couple times in the simulator after it actually happened to me for real. And I said, "Yeah, okay, that makes sense." Like I said, one of the things I got to do.

Now, the other thing at Cape Cod, the Exxon Valdez ran aground. We got a phone call I think about two or three in the morning. I wasn't on duty, but when I came into work the next day there was an HU25 with a Slater pod. A side looking airborne radar that was taxiing out. I'm like, what's going on? They said, well they had a big tanker run aground in Alaska and we got the only operational Slater pod in the Coast Guard and they're going to Anchorage, so we actually sent two Falcons up there with Slater pods and a C130 showed up that day. And we loaded up cruise boxes and maintenance guys and stuff.

I think that was around February and I went up the first of May for my role in the deployment and we had two planes, two crews, so you'd fly one day. Be off one day. On our days off we had all these plans and places we were going to go. The first day we got off, well each pilot does a route check with the guys that have been there and then you fly together one day. We flew together one day and then we had a day off and we went to Seward, fishing village south of Anchorage. Then we were going to go to Mount McKinley and like I said, some other places.

Anyway, when we come back from that first day they said, "Well, we've got good news and bad news." The good news is you're going to get a lot of flight time probably. The bad news is, is we're leaving to go back and they told you guys to stay here because we're about done. And we kind of went, okay. I guess that's all right. We talked to the air station. They said, "yeah, probably another week and you'll be finished." Well, it ended up it was another two weeks and so it ended up like not a two weeks deployment, but a full month.

Anchorage was expensive. We ran out of money. I did learn one thing about Alaska, was you know, I called and said, "look, all the crews running out of money. All the pilots are running out of money." You know, "I need to get some kind of orders or something so I can go to the Air Force and get advances to pay for all this stuff. You know, if you're going to keep us here another couple of weeks." They sent us orders

for another two weeks and it was like a quarter million dollars or whatever. And so, we flew the morning flight. I ran over to the finance place that the Air Force had. Said, "here's the orders for all the crew you know, we're going to fly in the morning. We're going to come over here tomorrow afternoon and you know, you need to have all this cash ready for these guys." And then they'll sign, take their money and that way they can pay their bills and stuff.

It was an Air Force captain. She's like, "yes sir, we got it covered." Anyway, we flew the morning. Everybody jumps in the vans and we run over to the finance place for the Air Force. And there's one guy sitting there. A non rated and we're going, this can't be good. I was like, "excuse me, you know, I got like 21 guys here to get the dances." And he's like, "Well, sir there's nobody here. It's sunny day liberty." I'm like, what? He said, "Yeah, you know." And it was. The clouds went away and it was a nice blue sky and the sun was shining. When it's sun shining in Alaska, don't try and get anything done. Yeah. We had to come back the next day and get that.

Let's see, after Cape Cod, I got the opportunity to go to the E2 program in Saint Augustine. They were opening an air station there and I had a chance to get a department head job. I went ahead and left Cape Cod a year or two early and went to the E2 program. We went there, I guess it was 1989 is when I went through the transition and stuff. We actually lot one E2 about mid stream there. Down in Puerto Rico, there were only four guys in a plane. Normally we carry five, but they was all killed right there at Puerto Rico. They had a wing fire that they couldn't get out and finally the wing fell off right on final.

The E2, toughest airplane to fly. I had 22 years flying. Over 10,000 hours and it's got four and five tails for a reason. It just wanders all over the sky and probably the big dome has something to do with that. But, spent two years in Saint Augustine. The last, in late September of, I guess it was 91, I was taxiing out to go to New Orleans for a week deployment and the ops officer called me and said, "we got a call from headquarters. The air station has been taken out of the budget. The line item for the whole air station is gone. This is what you're going to do. You're supposed to stay there until like October 3rd or 4th, you have to be back here on the deck before midnight and fueled on September 30th because when the clock hits October 1st, you're going to have to use your visa card to pay for the gas. Because we're not paying for it."

We went to New Orleans I think for like three days and we took off and we landed back in Saint Augustine at like 11:00 and had it fueled by 11:34 I think it was. And I take it inside and then they just sit there. I flew the last operational mission in an E2. Then the Coast Guard's trying to figure out what they're going to do now with E2's. And actually what happened, was the Navy was getting cut back so they were going to lose planes and pilots and they said, "Hey, we'll take that mission." And then we can keep some planes and pilots, so they basically took the mission to save some of their pilots and some of their planes. Kind of makes sense.

But anyway, it was around March we finally had all the stuff to ... and we got money for fuel to fly them back to Norfolk and give them to the Navy. Well, and we had lost one so we had four left now. I was a senior aviator and I was going to be the last guy to go and the captain basically said, "you take them up. You get on a plane. You come right back here because next week there's like 44 tractor trailers coming in here. All the office furniture and all the tools and I mean, everything has got to go someplace. You know, we've got to clear this hanger."

And it was me and like three or four other guys that they had a T44 plan to bring us back that day, so we fly up. And like I said, I was the last guy and the other three guys landed. And then I land and I'm taxiing in and the master chief, King Edward David, calls me and he goes, "you're not going to be happy. The Navy said they're not going to accept the planes. They don't know what squadron they're going to." And I said, "look, they've had six months to do this you know." I'm like, "you other guys listening?" I said, "all right. This is what I want you to do. Take all the aircraft books. Stack them in the middle faux seat in the back. Get out. Lock the doors and bring me all the keys."

That's what they did. They stacked all the aircraft books up. I said make sure there's ... you know, if there's any problems do your last sheet, write it up and then just bring me the keys and go turn the sheets in. We did that and I went into their maintenance control. I think it was the rag and they're like, well we can't accept the airplanes. And I said, "well, here's the keys. Out there sit the four planes. All the books are inside the planes. See that T44 over there? It's waiting for me and this guy and this guy." And they're like, "okay, mast chief let's go. Get in the van."

Well, the Navy guy was like, "you can't leave." And I'm like, "bye. My captain said get on a plane." I got in the van and went over there, by the time I got to the air terminal at Norfolk, there were two other Navy captains and they're yelling at me.

And I'm going, "unless you've got a message or you got Captain Johnson on the phone that tells me I can stay another day, I'm getting on that airplane because my captain was pretty clear yesterday. A direct order to get on there and be back tonight." And the one guy actually followed us on the airplane. He almost went to Mayport with us, but finally, he got off. We came back that night and then there was lots of hate and message traffic going back and forth, but really it was the Navy's fault. They should have done that, so getting the E2's back to the Navy didn't go very smooth and like I said, that was more the Navy's fault than ours.

Once we closed Saint Augustine, I came to Mobile here as an HU25 pilot again. Actually had two things happen here that was my last SAR case on active duty, I was actually supposed to do a scout jamboree. Up here at south Alabama has a place that we set up for the kids to you know, do the Jamboree stuff. One of the co-pilots was an eagle scout so, him and I went out. My son is an eagle. We went out and we're setting it all up for the jamboree. Starts to cloud over. Starts to get cold. Starts to rain. I don't think it was snowing yet, it was just kind of like rain and sleet.

The scout executive was trying to come down the road and it was a dirt road. It's that red clay and it had a little slant to it. He actually slid off in a ditch, so he walked down and he says, "we're canceling the Jamboree because you can't get down here." He said, "I don't even know if you guys can get out." But because we were going uphill, we were actually able to climb out and he had to get wrecker I think with a long cable to pull him out. We had to cancel scout jamboree, so we went home. I made snowballs with the kids and snowmen and stuff. And the phone rings and they go, "it's the base." And I was like, "Yeah." It's like, "Have you had anything to drink?" And I'm like, "No, you know I was at a scout jamboree." He said, "Yeah, we just talked to Jim, so our Falcon's down in Miami and I got trapped by the weather and the 60s are in Clearwater, so we need you to come in to be the pilot for this duty SAR."

I went in and by the time I got in there they had a bunch of cases going on at the district and they were trying to get us to go. And I'm going, it's snowing and you know, it's a jet. I have no de-ice equipment. They can't plow the runways. I mean, the runways are covered in snow and ice. I said ... that was about the time the one bounced off the bridge up in DC after taking off with snow on the wings. I said, "I'm not taking off until it stops snowing." And I said what I'll do is I'll have the petty officer up here call me and wake me up when it stops snowing. I'll get my crew up

and we'll go.

And it was about 5:00 in the morning it stopped snowing. We got up. Went down and started the plane and it was actually kind of hard to taxi because once again, there was no removal equipment. But we got to the runway. Took off and hit the V1, V2 rotate. Pulled the nose up into the command bars and once we cleared the runway, it's like gear up. And as soon as I said gear up I could feel the airplane settling and looking at the right out, we hit about 50 feet and we went back down to about 25. And I'm going, this is not good. Come on you know, kick in there and finally we got enough burn to where we flew out of it. But we flew, actually flew twice and the last time they told me to come back with 7.9 and then they sent us out on a 3rd flight. I ended up with almost 12 hours that day and we went to 20,000 feet.

There was clear turbulence everywhere from here to New England. It was that storm of the century. I think that's the one they even made the movie about. And like I said, I had 22 years. 10,000 hours, but that is the roughest day of flying I ever had. In fact, I was kind of wondering even if the Falcon structurally could handle some of the turbulence we hit. I mean, we were getting knocked over 10, 20 degrees. That kind of stuff.

That was my last big SAR case. And then I got to retirement, right? It's Friday. I'm done. I packed my boxes in my office and it's 2:00 and I'm getting ready to leave. My buddy, Eric Fagerheim who in fact was the Stan pilot when the engines got shut down. He calls me up and he says, "I need you to take a Falcon down to Puerto Rico because a barge ran aground and I need you to take two MSO guys down there." And I'm like, "you know, Monday I'm on terminal leave. I got guys coming to pack my household goods, right? And my wife knows where you live." And he goes, "Yeah, it's just down and back." I'm like, "all right."

I called her. We jumped in the plane. Went to Puerto Rico. Dropped the guys off. Everything going smooth. The Puerto Rican guys, you know, Puerto Rican National Guard fueled up right up. Box lunches, so we could fly back. Come out of the chocks. Hit the brakes. Nothing. Went to system two. Nothing. I'm like, hang on. I pulled the handle which fires some air bottles that lock the brakes up and we locked the brakes up. The commandant for some reason had flown down there and I probably stopped about 20 feet from the nose of his airplane when we finally got stopped. I'm like, put the door down. Now, go load the back. And I knew what he was going

to say. He comes back and he goes, "tail of the airplane's got hydraulic fluid all over it. We blew all the hydraulics, so just shut it down because you can't move."

We shut it down and then we released the brakes and then we had to hand push it back in and they actually I think, had to change my terminal leave date. Which actually was harder to do than what I thought it would be because I didn't get back until like Tuesday or Wednesday of the next week. By that time my wife had all the stuff packed up, so I was real popular. That was my extended last couple days in the Coast Guard was doing the oil spill in Puerto Rico.

Anyway, but I said it had to ... you know, it was a great 16 years in the Coast Guard. Six in the Navy. Kind of like some of the other guys said, I mean, the safety stuff that the Coast Guard does. Some of the flying that we do in the Coast Guard. I mean, I had a couple Navy friends that flew along with me at different times when I could take them and they just couldn't believe you know, it's just kind of what Bruce said you know, with the standardization and commands and stuff. Things like when the Cubans came over and the Haitians or whatever.

You know, I could have a co-pilot from San Francisco or Alaska or anywhere and we could go out and do any kind of mission because the voice commands were always exactly the same no matter where you were. It was due to what they do here at Mobile and then also their Stan checks. They come to the units and they put you through it there and the same thing. They're making sure you say it the same way every time and I think that's why we have such a good record. In fact, Corpus was a Navy base and I found out there that they would actually call the Coast Guard before they would call their search and rescue guys because their search and rescue guys wouldn't go out and there like, yeah we'll go. Once again, because of our standardization, we could fly into things that nobody else really would be comfortable with. And I don't blame them because they didn't have the type of training we had, so I feel really fortunate to have all those people I flew with and like I said, I'm still here.