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Vietnam War

I had attended Texas A&M University and was in the Corps for two years. As I was preparing to graduate, I realized that the situation in Vietnam was heating up and that I was going to have to do something. So I applied for the Navy's Officer Candidate School in Newport, Rhode Island. After I arrived in Newport, I was on security patrol one night when it started to snow heavily. That was the first time this East Texas boy had ever seen that much snow. It was probably ten inches deep. I thought, *Oh, Lord, if you will just get me out of this part of the country, I promise I'll never come back.* Of course, I ended up stationed in Maine.

After Officer Candidate School, I went to a Navy flight school in Pensacola, Florida. From flight training, I went to Patrol Squadron VP26—an anti-submarine patrol squadron—in Brunswick, Maine. I flew two types of aircraft mainly searching for submarines. We had 13 men in each crew, including three pilots, navigator, radioman, ordinance man, and several flight engineers and equipment operators. The third pilot worked as a navigator to learn more about navigation. I started out in the navigator's seat, advanced to co-pilot and finally plane commander.

We worked with Navy ships during the performance of our job. The good thing about being in a large multi-engine airplane was the ability to return to our base while the other guys had to stay on board the ships. Our first assignment was in Key West, Florida, where we flew patrols checking ships leaving Cuba. It was right after the missile crisis in Cuba so we did a lot of reconnaissance work, trying to see what the ships had on their decks.

Originally, I flew the P2V Neptune plane which had a clear, plexiglas nose below the two pilots. One crewmember would sit inside that plexiglas dome and take pictures of ships, submarines, etc. Then we would do a visual profile of the ship identifying details like whether it was a tanker or freighter and number of masts. We also could take pictures from the back of the plane by opening the windows. It was warm enough in the Caribbean to do that. Sometimes we

dropped sonar buoys in the ocean to listen for submarines. But the nuclear submarines were so quiet that it was a challenge to find them.

That was some of the most fun flying I did. We could see sharks and manta rays on the beautiful ocean floor through the clear water, and the crystal white sand of the islands. Of course, we were flying slowly at altitudes as low as 200 or 300 feet. At the time, there were many “supposed” Russian fishing trawlers in the area, but most were loaded with electronic equipment in an effort to monitor the American transmissions. Any time we found a group of fishing boats, we knew there would be some Russian trawlers among them.

VP-26 transitioned to the P3 aircraft, the military version of the Lockheed Electra, that we could use at higher altitudes. At that point, we flew patrols out of Brunswick and were deployed to different places. I went to Keflavik, Iceland and St. Johns, Newfoundland. Our squadron flew patrols over the North Atlantic in search of Russian submarines and checking shipping vessels.

Three months before I left the Navy, our squadron was sent to Vietnam. We flew patrols from the Sangly Point in the Philippines to North Vietnam and from Thailand to Southern Cambodia. From Sangly Point, we flew patrols around the carrier group off the coast of Vietnam. Since we had powerful radar, we could transmit any contacts we saw to the ships. Basically, we were just monitoring the area and watching for seagoing vessels that might be headed for our ships.

After I became a plane commander, I had my own crew. I always tried to display my feelings toward the Lord and my Christian background. Many of my crew members were not Christians. We were preparing for patrol off Vietnam on Christmas Eve night, I told my crew, “Let’s take a few minutes before we leave. In your own heart, pray to your God if you want. I’m going to pray to my God, whose birthday we’re celebrating tonight. Think about your families who are back at home.” I still remember that night because it was pretty emotional for me. Of course, it was wartime, and a lot of planes weren’t coming back. We would hear about friends in the fighter squadrons being shot down and killed or sent to prisoner of war camps. It made a lot of men realize that they needed to depend on something other than themselves.

When my squadron lost two planes, it was tragic. We had no protection really. One plane apparently crashed while flying night patrol three days before I left, and the other was shot down by the Cambodians a month later. When I returned to Brunswick, the first thing I had been charged to do was to brief the Wing Commander about the downed aircraft and personnel. I also visited with three of the wives of the men who had been killed. Lieutenant Commander Meglio, the plane commander of that particular crew and a maintenance officer, had been my boss for my ground job. His wife told me, “He’s got a drawer in a desk here with everything filled out. He told me that if anything happened, everything that I would need would be in that drawer.” I really was impressed with how well he had prepared for her just in case. Though that was a very tragic time for me, my Christian faith was very strong.

I met my wife in Corpus Christi, Texas, while I was in flight training. After we married, she was able to join me at various bases. When we arrived in Brunswick, she and I looked for a church and found a Southern Baptist church that was meeting in a building that was constructed in the 1760s. The church had square box pews that seated three or four people. A member of the church who was an antique dealer had some offering sticks with offering bags attached to them. That was a unique experience. While we were there, the church erected a new building.

Brunswick was quite a religious area with many Catholics and Northern Baptists. Also, there were a large number of military personnel because of the Navy and Air Force installations nearby. Many of the local people supported our church as well. Our pastor was from

Throckmorton, Texas. We became fairly active in the church. Our first child was born while we were members. Several years ago, we returned to the area and went by the church. We found a rocking chair in the nursery that we had donated to the church when we left. Since my wife had rocked our first son in that chair, she cried when she saw it.

From Vietnam, I flew back to Brunswick and was discharged. Then I drove my car home. My wife had already returned to Texas. On my way back, I met a friend in New York who had been in my squadron, and we started looking for airline jobs. It was great to get home to Texas. My wife was staying at my mother's house in Palestine. When I came in that night, I walked in and saw my 18-month-old son standing in his crib.

Looking back, there were many things that could have happened to me during my time in the Navy. Things could have been so different in just a matter of minutes. I think the Lord guided me and took care of me. In Newfoundland, we were returning from a patrol mission once when I walked into the cockpit as the pilot and co-pilot were looking out the window trying to find the water in the thick fog. No one was monitoring the instruments. Suddenly, I noticed the altimeter spinning down through 1,000 feet. I screamed at the plane commander, and he grabbed the controls in time to pull out at about 500 or 600 feet. I'll never forget that moment.

My experience at Texas A&M University helped me develop a deep sense of patriotism. A lot of people raised their eyebrows over the fact that we were involved in the Vietnam War. But my time served in Vietnam created an even deeper sense of patriotism than I had before. After I was discharged from the Navy, I went to work for an airline. One day, I was on a layover in Washington, D.C., and finally made it to the Vietnam War Memorial Wall. I saw the names of the men that I had flown with, and it was a very emotional experience. The tears come now when I hear the Star-Spangled Banner.

Today, we are facing a threat to our country that could affect us all more than we realize. I feel like our leaders have their fingers on the pulse of what is happening in the world, not just what we read in the newspaper or hear on the news. They're doing things to protect us down the road. Since September 11, 2001, we have known we are vulnerable and more things will probably happen. I keep our country's leaders in my prayers every day. Hopefully, I can pass some of my feelings of patriotism on to my children. I have three sons who have never served in the military, so they don't have the same feelings as men who have laid their lives on the line for America.