

## DON SHIRLEY

E-3, U. S. Navy

1967-1969

Viet Nam

In 1967 I had just graduated from high school in Mangum, Oklahoma, when I received my draft notice. I was told to decide which branch of service to get in, and I chose the Navy because that was the only branch I hoped was not going over to Vietnam.

I went to Boot Camp in San Diego. After twelve weeks there, I went to Woodby Island, Washington, to A6 Bombing Squadron. And I thought that it was great to be staying in the United States. To my dismay, we were there for only six months for training, and then we flew to San Diego. We went to the USCVA 64, which was an aircraft carrier. We were going to be in Vietnam for nine to ten months.

I started out at Aviation Storekeeper. The planes kept breaking down, and I ordered parts to fix them. When the planes came in, if they got shot down or got shot up, or radios had gone bad, we'd send off for parts. A cargo plane would come in with the parts, I'd have to give them the mechanics, and they'd have to get them put on real quick because the pilots were bombing 24 hours a day. We had three aircraft carriers, but one was in port.. The Enterprise and the Kitty Hawk are the two that I remember.

There would be two carriers out in the ocean at a time, and the planes from one would bomb for twelve hours. Then the planes from the other carrier would bomb during the other twelve hours. We had to make sure that the plane and the equipment were kept up. We'd bring in bombs every other week (to replenish the supply) because we were bombing so much. After thirty days, we'd go in to the Philippines, and the extra carrier would come out to relieve us. Then we'd go back out and relieve the other one that was out there. The bombing went on all the time. After about three months, the captain announced that we had already dropped as many bombs as were dropped during all of World War II. He said that was just the beginning of it.

We were the only aircraft that had the guided missiles. We had twelve companies of planes that were on board. The A6 was a small Attack Bomber that didn't have any weapons on it. We had a F4, which had guns on it. Our small planes would fly out, swoop down and drop bombs real quick, and then fly straight back up in the air, almost at a ninety-degree angle. We had F4's and A4's as well as photo planes. We had planes flying around the ship at all times protecting it, and we also had two destroyers that followed our ship. We were on the longest aircraft carrier out there, and it was called the "Mother Ship." We had all the officers, including the admiral, on our ship. The men on the other ships were real relaxed on duties and all that, since we had all the officers with us, everything was real strict and had to be ship perfect.

Back in 1967, a Navy ship was captured, and the United States finally got it back. On the way to Vietnam, we went to the exact place where that ship was captured and stayed there for three weeks. There were no lights on at night time. The pilots were up on the flight deck sitting 24 hours a day. Every morning and every afternoon, a Russian plane would circle the ship. As soon as the plane was picked up on radar, the planes would take off and follow it for thirty minutes. The captain came on the ship radio and told us that we were over in territorial waters and all. The reason we were doing this was to show the United States was still the king of the ocean. We might have had a ship captured, but we were showing them now that nobody going to capture the United States ship again. That's the reason we're over here, and we're letting all these eastern countries know that we mean business. The captain said, "We mean business." Just before we left there, they shot the plane down a Russian spy plane that was getting information about the ship, such as when food and ammunition were being loaded, or how many times the planes would fly off. The United States decided they didn't want them to get all that information.

After nine months, I came back to United States and was at Washington for about six months. Then we flew back to Vietnam for second duty, and I stayed five months that time.

I was on the USS Constellation the second time. I did about the same thing, ordering parts and all, but I did it for the entire ship and for all the aviation. I ordered parts, picked them up on the flight deck, and made sure that all the squadrons had all the parts they needed at the right time.

Then I had a chance to get out and I got out in 1969. The war was still going on. About the middle of 1969, President Johnson called the bombing off, and we didn't have anything to do. We were just sitting out there floating around. The men put fuel tanks where the bombs had been carried from the A6 airplane and just flew around. There was just nothing going on. I think Vietnam was a useless war. Even the captain on the ship said that. We couldn't see any reason why we should be over there for a war that was more political than anything else. You had too many commercial companies involved. Cigarette companies were over there making cigarettes for the military. Automobile and soft drink companies were there, and they were all making money. Besides that, there was a list of places that you could not bomb. You could not bomb the capitol, and there were different places that the pilots had to go around and not bomb. So when the pilots would go down and couldn't bomb anything, they'd drop the bombs in the water and come back to the ship. To me, it seemed senseless. I've seen some of the pilots that got shot come in scared half to death.

We had several scares. Once a plane came in with bombs still on, and the men couldn't get them off. The guys on deck kept flagging the pilot off. If they couldn't get the bombs off on that second try, the flight deck men would come in and put pins in to keep them from dropping off.

There are five cables on the flight deck. There is a hook at the back of the plane that must catch on one of the five cables in order to stop. Remember that the plane is coming in at over a hundred miles an hour. It was on the Enterprise that one of the planes hit the cable, and a bomb dropped off. The bomb went all the way down from the flight deck to the bottom of the ship. You could see big old holes. They brought on regular fire trucks and stationed them up on the flight deck. We could never have fire trucks on aircraft carriers. We exchanged places with the Enterprise and knew people who were on that ship when the accident happened.

When the planes leave the carrier, the ship has to be going full speed. The engine of the plane is going as fast as it can go, and the catapult throws the plane up in the air to get it off. Since they don't have a runway, they have to have something to push it up. Then it's up to the plane. It has to have enough power to take over. If it doesn't, or if the engine quits, then the plane falls and the ship runs over the plane. If it misses those cables, the pilot automatically pulls the throttle, goes ninety degrees up in the air to get away real quick because he is going to make a circle and try to land.

I've seen some planes that went over, missed, and didn't get enough power. I flew off the ship when I went back to San Francisco. They make you put your head down in your lap. You've got on a shoulder harness and a seat belt and when they throw the plane up in the air, it automatically throws you real hard back against the seat. I mean you can feel the thrust of the plane, and then after the plane gets up in the air, it drops its speed back down, cuts its speed down about half. You can hardly hear the plane when they cut back the engine, and you think, "Well, did it quit on us? Are we going to go down in front of the ship?"

Morale was good among the men aboard ship. Besides having all the high officers on there, morale was pretty good, especially when we had almost thirty days when we could come and go into port. We'd go to the Philippines and let off the crews. Then we'd go to Japan and then let people work on the ship and fix all the problems it had.

One time when we were going to Japan, we got caught in a hurricane. The aircraft carrier was as long as three football fields. The captain came on and said, "We're going to try to hit the eye of the hurricane because it's real smooth there." On a big carrier like that, you can walk around and do anything. You don't feel as if you're on a ship at all. When we hit that hurricane, the carrier was just like a toy ship with a little boy playing with it in the water. All of the planes had to be tied down, but there was great danger that men would be blown overboard. To prevent that from happening, thirty men would hold hands, make a big circle, and go around to check every one of those tie downs.

The water would come up maybe fifteen or twenty feet on the main deck

which was inside the ship. The guys had to close the doors to keep the water from flooding the whole area. Nobody was allowed to get on the outskirts of the ship. Everyone had to stay right inside. While doing anything, you had to hold on. In the mess hall, you had to eat while holding on to your glass and your tray at the same time. When you slept in your bunk, you just lodged your feet crossways and hoped that you didn't fall out.

In the hanger bay, the men had to tie down all of the planes. You had to go around the planes, the chains, and other stuff. Several people were injured by falls in the hanger area.

The ship was just like a cork in the water. That long aircraft carrier just bounced like a basket ball in the water. You could see those destroyers with their smoke stacks then they would go completely under water and come back up. Fortunately, we did not lose any lives during the hurricane.

We ended up having to pull out because we never could make it to the center of the storm. Captain said the ship was getting so beat up by the water and the waves and all, that he was going to pull away and try to go around the hurricane. We were in that situation about a week. The storm would kind of go away, and we try to go around it. It seemed like it was trying to follow us around.

When I had time in Japan, I was usually on a three-day pass, so I had to stay pretty close. The military had boundaries as to where you could go. I didn't get to travel great distances in Japan. Instead of going to the clubs, I'd go to the outskirts of cities and take pictures of the schools where all the kids had to wear uniforms. The kids all took karate, and they would be on the playground doing karate moves.

Japan was an extremely clean country. In our country, when you see a truck coming and hear music, you can run out to get an ice cream. Over in Japan, the trucks playing music come by every day at five o'clock, and

everyone knows to come throw their trash in the dump truck. A store owner might have as little as a five-by-ten-foot concrete space in front of his shop. Every evening, he would take a bucket of water, soap, and a scrub brush and scrub the concrete slab. Before the shopkeeper left at night, he made sure that everything was nice and clean. Some areas weren't as modern as others, but they were all spotless.

I think every man and woman should join the military and stay in for a year or two where they can learn from programs and experience what it's like to work for the government. If a young person is wild, he or she can learn how to calm down and get a lot of experience. A real quiet person can learn to come out his shell and associate with people. Besides all the benefits the military offers upon discharge, service people usually enjoy the job they do and often go into a career for which the service trained them.

In a way, I wish I'd stayed in longer, but in 1969 I had a chance to get out, and it sounded good to get away from Vietnam so I took advantage of it. After I got out of service, I went back home to Mangrum, Oklahoma, and worked on my uncle's farm. I started computer school on the G.I. Bill, but I ended up getting married and moving to Oklahoma City. I went into landscaping with a company that designed and maintained grounds for businesses. Now I live in Ben Wheeler, but I do landscaping and light maintenance work in Rockwall, for a shopping center with ten buildings in it.

I grew up in a Christian home. My mother taught kindergarten and my dad worked at a Spanish Mission as a teacher and general helper. They were members of the First Baptist in their town.

My wife and I started coming to Green Acres last summer. When we lived in Kaufman, we heard Ken Warren during a revival and learned about GABC. When we moved here, a friend from Kaufman asked us to take her to Green Acres. We did and liked the services. We joined a Sunday School class a couple of months ago.

