

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH LCDR (ret) ALLAN ADDEEB

CONDUCTED BY
JAN K. HERMAN, HISTORIAN, BUMED

25 OCTOBER 2005
WASHINGTON, DC

OFFICE OF MEDICAL HISTORY
BUREAU OF MEDICINE AND SURGERY
2300 E STREET, NW
WASHINGTON, DC 20372

Interview with former LCDR Allan Adeeb, MC, USN, flight surgeon, pilot, and senior medical officer of USS Oriskany. Participated in the Bay of Pigs operation and later was connected with the Forrestal fire of 29 July 1967.

Where were you born?

I was born in Jersey City and I went to school there. I graduated from Bergenfield Junior-Senior High. From there I went to the University of Florida in Gainesville-premed.

When did you decide you wanted to be a physician?

I really didn't know what I wanted to be. I wanted to be a photographer. Photography was a passion of mine. But somewhere along the line-and I can't put my finger on it-when I was in the 10th grade in high school, I decided I wanted to become a physician, and I never changed my path.

Where did you go to medical school?

The University of Tennessee in Memphis.

Did you decide at some point that you wanted to specialize in a particular branch of medicine?

After I left the Navy, I decided that I was going to specialize in anesthesiology. And that's because one of my best friends who was also a flight surgeon went into anesthesiology. He did his residency at Philadelphia Naval Hospital. And he talked me into it.

When were you in medical school?

I graduated medical school in 1957.

How did you link up with the Navy. How did all that come about?

My dad was in the Navy in World War I. He was a real young guy and he got in at the very tail end. But he did have a ship, and he was very proud of it. And he said, "If you ever go into the military, it better be the Navy." So what could I do? I went into the Navy.

When I graduated medical school, we had a deferral program going. You could be deferred from military duty if you had a residency.

You're talking about the Berry Plan.

It was the Berry Plan. When I finished my internship at Kings County in Brooklyn, NY, I went right into the military. I had another friend I graduated with who went into submarine medicine and he loved it. So that sounded like it would be for me-submarine medicine. So I got all these brochures from the Navy. One said, "If you go into

aviation medicine, we will teach you how to fly." I thought that would be more practical than learning how to run a submarine, because I knew I'd never run a submarine.

So I signed up for aviation medicine and, believe it or not, there were three people from my medical school class besides myself, who were in the very same class I was in. We all became flight surgeons at the same time.

And did you go to Pensacola for this?

Yes. I finished internship and went directly to Pensacola in 1959.

What aircraft did you solo in?

The old T-34. It had only been out a couple of years. It replaced the SNJ. It was a good airplane.

So your life was taking an interesting turn.

A very important turn.

Aviation had now become a passion.

It did.

And not all flight surgeons ended up as aviators. How did that happen?

After I left Pensacola, I was at a reserve base at NAS Grosse Ile [Michigan]. It's now closed. There was a big blimp hangar there. I enjoyed that but it wasn't what I wanted. I wanted the carrier Navy. That's where Dr. Hunley came into the picture. I was driving him crazy. I said, "Dr. Hunley. I've got to go to sea. Navy-Sea. Not Detroit. Being on the shores of Lake Michigan just doesn't cut it." Every chance I had, I'd come to BUMED right here, saw Dr. Hunley, and got on my hands and knees.

He said, "Adeeb, I'm going to give you your opportunity. I'm going to move you from Grosse Ile to Cecil Field. Your going to be with Air Wing Three and you're going to go out on the *Saratoga*. Now don't call me again." I still have the letter from Dr. Hunley assigning me to Air Wing 3 in April of 1960.

I said, "Yes sir." So I basically wore this guy down with all my moaning and groaning and got what I wanted. I got into carrier aviation medicine and absolutely loved it.

What was the *Saratoga* assignment like?

I had orders to Air Wing Three, which went out on the *Saratoga*. I wasn't ship's company. I was a flight surgeon with the Wing. Actually, I was on the staff of Air Wing Three. I had a partner whose

name was Hal Hedges, a family practitioner who I still stay in touch with. He was my roommate on the *Saratoga*. That was the year the *Sara* had a terrible fire in the Aegean Sea just outside of Athens. It was 23 January 1961 and we lost a lot of people. There was an oil spill in the engine room and most of the deaths were from smoke inhalation. We lost a chaplain, a doctor, and we almost lost the XO. It was a terrible mess. We lost seven lives in all.

We limped into the port of Piraeus and licked our wounds but in the meantime I had made some tremendous friends. Jack Christiansen, the CO of VF-32, who later became skipper of Air Wing Four and was very prominent in getting me into flight school, and a whole list of friends who were very important to me. We had a great cruise but lost too many people, mostly in F-8s.

When we returned from that cruise, which was late February of '61, the Bay of Pigs was evolving. The air wing commander came up to Dr. Hedges and me and said, "You guys flip a coin."

I said, "What for?"

He said, "One of you is going out on the USS *Essex*." Actually, this was the Bay of Pigs invasion but we didn't know this at that time.

Well, Hal said, "I want to go."

And I said, "Well, I wanna go."

He said, "I know you both wanna go, but only one can go so flip a coin. The guy who wins goes."

Well, I won. So I wasn't home a month when I was back out with VA-34 on USS *Essex* on the Bay of Pigs operation. And we were gone about a month. And that's a story unto itself.

This Bay of Pigs was a secret thing and we couldn't talk about it for a long time. We snuck down the Florida coast and cut through the Yucatan Channel, and nobody really knew what we were going to do. I was up on the bridge talking to the skipper and navigator and he said, "It's a secret, but it's not going to be a secret for much longer. We're here to help the Cuban patriots invade at the Bay of Pigs."

Well, we all had portable radios and were listening to the Cuban radio station from Miami saying that an aircraft carrier was on its way. That's how much of a secret it was. They knew before we knew.

We had a squadron of A-4Ds (VA-34), and a squadron of AD5Ws (VAW-12), and they painted out all the numbers—all the insignia. There was no insignia, no U.S. Navy, no numbers whatsoever. I was not a naval aviator then. I was a flight surgeon but heard the stories and they were unbelievable. At the last minute, with a boatload of Cubans about ready to land, they were shot out of the water. We brought these poor guys who could hardly speak English onto our ship into the medical department and they were all shot up.

They were all looking at us and saying, "Que pasa, que pasa? What happened? Why are they shooting at us. We thought it was supposed to be a surprise invasion. What happened to the air support we were supposed to get?"

Well, at the last second, President Kennedy withdrew the air support. We were only authorized to fly reconnaissance flights, and they were going to leave it up to the CIA. On board the ship, we had the head of the CIA. (It may have been Allen Dulles.) He sneaked aboard the ship at night. Out of the blue we saw a COD [Carrier Onboard Delivery aircraft] land and he came out. They ferreted him to some secret spot on the ship and he was directing operations from the ship.

How close to Cuba were you at that point?

You could throw a stone at it; we were pretty close. We were in the southern Caribbean Sea just below Cuba. By the way, there were a lot of CIA aircraft flying but they wouldn't let us do anything.

But you took care of the casualties.

Yes. And after we could see that the invasion was a complete bust and we had a lot of these Cuban patriots trapped, we kept going in and trying to get them out. We took the casualties and patched them up as best we could. Then we flew them into Gitmo--the naval hospital in Guantanamo Bay. And that's what we spent most of our time doing.

So you were in sick bay taking care of these men. What did you see as far as injuries?

A lot of gunshot wounds. And these poor Cubans just couldn't believe what was happening. The squadron I was with . . . The commanding officer's name was Mitchell. They had a lot of good pilots. They would fly over the action at low level, down a road from somewhere to somewhere and all of these tanks and troop carriers were coming down the road. And when they saw the low-flying jets, the Cuban soldiers jumped out figuring they were going to get bombed and strafed. Well each time they flew over without bombing or strafing, the Cuban troops figured out that they had no reason to jump out of the trucks so they just went on their merry way. Anyway, they just shot these poor Cubans patriots up because there was absolutely no air support. The whole thing was a tragedy.

So that's how I spent my month after coming back from the Med cruise. I then went back to Cecil Field and got off of active duty about June or July of '61.

My wife was not happy in the Navy. I wanted to become a full-blown naval aviator. And they said, "We only let one doc go

through at a time. And that one doc happens to be Joe Kerwin."

I said, "Okay, if that's the case, I think I'll try private practice and see if I can make my wife happy." So I went into practice in Tampa.

Well in 1 year I divorced my wife. We had two daughters--little babies--and she didn't want to go back into the Navy. There were a lot of problems, as you can well imagine but I went back into the Navy in '63.

How did you get into flight school?

I don't know when Dr. Hunley left but he was instrumental as were Drs, Weaver and Snowden. Jack Christiansen was also instrumental. He was skipper of the VF-32. I knew Frank Austin from Cecil Field. Frank took me up on my first real jet ride. He was a great pilot. He took me up in an F9F--two-seater. And he could handle that airplane. We did everything you could imagine. The F9F was the Cougar. The Panther was the straight wing version. That plane was built like a tank. Anyway, Frank took me up and wrung me out. He said, "I'm gonna see if you'll like this or not, and see if you're gonna get sick." We also broke the sound barrier on that hop.

Well there was nothing he could do to make me sick. We went back to Cecil Field and he plunked that darn thing down in a carrier type landing and he became my hero. One day I want to grow up and be another Frank Austin. So he had a lot of influence on me.

Where did the flight training take place?

Pensacola. It started at Pensacola. Again, I went through the T-34. Actually, they abbreviated that. In between the time the time I got off active duty the first time and came back in, I got my private pilot's license and bought an airplane. So I was actively flying. I had an old 1951 Navion Super 260B. It was built by North American Aviation as an Army trainer but it was towards the end of the war so they went into private production. It was a rugged airplane. I had it for 5 or 6 years. I had a partner in it but when I went to Vietnam, I sold my half to my partner. That airplane is still flying somewhere up in Oregon.

So now that you're in flight school, the physician part of your life is now in the background.

Just about.

You're a physician by training, but now you're starting a new career as an aviator. So you graduate from flight school, get your wings, and then what happens?

Then I got assigned to Air Wing Four, which was the replacement air wing back at Cecil Field. There was a magnet pulling me back there.

I have to tell you that in the interim after I finished at Pensacola, I reported to NAS Meridian, MS. That was about the time those three civil rights workers [Michael Schwerner, James Cheney, Daniel Goodman] disappeared. A lot of our flying was suspended and they enlisted the Navy to help look for them. They eventually found them buried under a dam in Philadelphia, MS. Anyway, the Navy personnel doing this work were getting a lot of insect and snake bites. So I ended up working in the dispensary for awhile. Then it was back to flying and basically that's all I did until I got my wings.

I got my wings in Beeville, TX. But I have to tell you, it was competitive. I had to compete. They didn't say, "Oh, you're a doctor so you're gonna go through the jet pipeline." You had to compete. You had to get your grades in flying, preflight-in everything. And I did. I wasn't number one in the class; I was number 2. I was older than the other guys and sort of lagged behind in the obstacle course and things like that. But I earned the jet pipeline. From there it was Meridian, then Pensacola. There we did our carrier qualifications out at Mayport on an aircraft carrier there. I think it was on the old USS *Lexington*.

Do you remember your first carrier landing?

The first carrier landing was a demo in a T-28 when I was going through flight surgeon school.

You had to land on a carrier to get your flight surgeon wings?

Yes, but it was just a demo. They said, "This is what's it's like. You're going out and you're going to shoot a few touch and go's." I checked my logbook: One touch and go and two traps on the USS *Antietam*. It was so exciting and so much fun. And after this to get stationed at NAS Grosse Ile.

What happened after you completed your carrier quals? What kind of aircraft were you flying then?

We qualified in the T-2. We flew all these T-2s from Meridian, MS, to Mayport and then we did our daytime carrier qualifications. That's all it was. It was probably a couple of bounces and then a few traps. Then we went back to Meridian. From there I went to Beeville, TX, for Advanced. We had three types of aircraft. We had the single seat F-9s and the two-seat TF-9Js. Then, when you got into the really advanced, you flew the F-11s. That was an experience. You know, the Blues flew the F-11s for many years back

in the late '50s and '60s. It was one of the first of the Navy's supersonic trainers and a hydraulic nightmare.

Why was it a hydraulic nightmare? The hydraulics didn't work?

They leaked all the time. I had my first aircraft accident in an F-11. The hydraulic system failed and there were a series of seven air bottles on the side. You had one shot at each one. One air bottle was to drop the gear. The other air bottle was to drop the flaps. And the other air bottle was to drop the tail hook. We were up on a flight and I had my instructor with me. I was doing something; I don't remember what, and he said, "I think I see hydraulic fluid leaking out of your airplane."

I said, "Okay. What do you want me to do?"

He said, "Well, I just want you to fly straight and level and I'll come up and look you over. Oh, yeah, there's a pretty bad hydraulic leak. Let's head back to Beeville."

So I felt the controls getting a little mushy and said, "I'm getting a little bit mushy here."

He said, "I think we're going to call them. Then you're going to drop the gear, drop the flaps, drop the tailhook. We can't trust that the brakes are going to work. There may not be enough hydraulic fluid."

So I took my first supersonic tailhook at NAS Beeville and, of course, the first thing that happened was that the left landing gear collapsed and broke off. So I started skidding down the runway sideways. Of course the cable held and everything was fine except that I had a roostertail of sparks behind me. It was pretty exciting with the fire trucks and medical trucks coming out. To tell the truth, I didn't know what was happening.

I wasn't charged with the accident because it was a hydraulic failure. And second of all, they had put the wrong wheel mounting on the airplane. Instead of someone changing the tire, they simply took the mounting off and put another one on. Well, they put the wrong one on. They found the tire had bounced down the runway and they found it intact about a mile away. It had just sheared off from the strut.

After I got my wings, I ended up back at Cecil Field with Air Wing Four.

When did the physician half of this come back into the picture?

I was assigned to the replacement air wing and basically under two commands. I was under the senior medical officer and also under the air wing commander who happened to be Jack Christiansen. The senior medical officer was a flight surgeon and a great guy and loved to fly. He had his own airplane. We split my time between flying

and doctoring. I took calls at the dispensary and did all of those things.

It was then that I relieved Joe Kerwin, who was the air wing flight surgeon when he was accepted into the astronaut program. We flew together a couple of times in the F-9 and he gave me a lot of good pointers. Joe was a good pilot; no two ways about it. He had gone through the A-4 RAG, too.

The A-4 what?

The replacement air wing--the whole program. You got your wings but you were not a fleet pilot until you went through the replacement air wing. That's when you're going to fly a fleet aircraft. And Jack Christiansen, who had known me before, just thought I'd do well in the A-4s. And we had the A-4 program there at NAS Cecil Field. The F-4 program was down in Key West. The A-6 program was up in Oceana. So he said, "Al, you fly A-4s. You're the right size. You're gonna love it. It's got an attack profile and you will do real well in the A-4."

Were you now considered a dual designator?

Yes, I was.

What did you wear on your collar?

I wore the medical on the collar and the naval aviator wings on the shirt. But you were really allowed to wear both pairs of wings. But I knew very few flight surgeon-naval aviators who did. They always wore the naval aviator ones. They were considered the senior set of wings.

So you're still in the Medical Corps but now you're a dual designator. You could do either job or both.

Or both.

How many of you were there at this time?

We used to go to these aerospace medical conventions and Frank Austin, who was sort of the honcho of all of us, would always have these little meetings of us who were actively doing this. They told me that I was number 13. Some guys were naval aviators first. They went back to medical school, came back into the Navy, took a refresher course in flying, and they were dual designated. So they came in a different way. We had a few like that. But, never to my knowledge did these guys go through the whole bag--where they went out to weapons school, learned to drop nuclear weapons, shot Zunis, or fired rockets, did air-to-air, and all of that. I'm not sure about that. They may have gone through all that at one time, but I don't know

if they went through it in jets.

Jack Christiansen sat me down and said, "We're going to make you a real naval aviator. You're going to go through the entire A-4 program, including day and night carrier quals." The day part sounded like fun; the night part was a little scary, but I did it.

I went out to Yuma, AZ, and Fallon, NV, and all of those places and went through the entire A-4 everything. I did it all, including all of the weaponry. We then flew to Pensacola and I did my day and night quals on the *Lexington*.

Do you remember your first night landing?

Yes, I do. It was really dusk. That's how they started you out. It's just at sunset but you can still see a few things. They didn't have any lit up carriers then. They just had the line down the middle and the meatball-the Fresnel lens. And that's how you landed. It was an inkwell until you rolled out and saw that line down the middle and picked up the reflection in the mirror. Until you did that, you didn't really know where you were. It was pretty scary.

It got dark so gradually that you didn't realize you were doing it in the dark. I think we had to make six night traps.

So you really liked the A-4.

Oh, yeah. I loved it. You just strapped it on; it was so tiny. It was the only carrier plane that the wings didn't fold.

Did you go to Oriskany, then?

No. I did my tour with Air Wing Four and then it was time for me to be assigned to a carrier. I was very unhappy as a dual designated naval aviator-flight surgeon because I was going to an anti-sub carrier, the USS *Bennington*. But I was going to make the best of it. They were flying S-2s.

So when I got to San Diego, I talked to the skipper and said, "I'm going to fly off an aircraft carrier. I'm allowed to. I've earned it. So if I can't fly jets, I'm going to fly S-2s."

So the guy said, "Okay. We'll start you in the S-2." They gave me all the books and I was gonna study and learn how to fly S-2s-twin-engine prop. As much as I hated it, I was gonna do it.

When was this?

This was in early '67. Then I got orders to Vietnam. My wife just couldn't believe it. A lot of our friends from Cecil Field were assigned and went to Vietnam.

So now you were assigned to Oriskany. Did you pick the ship

up at Hunter's Point.

No. They were already floating around in Southern California waters. So when the COD came in bringing the poor alcoholic doctor from the *Oriskany* off, I went back to the ship aboard that same plane. And that was it. The orders actually followed after I got on the ship.

Were they doing their qualifications when you arrived?

Yes.

You now knew that you were going to fly in the squadron and be flight surgeon?

I didn't know that yet.

What did you know?

All I knew was that I was going to be the senior medical officer on the *Oriskany* and that we were going to go to Vietnam in a short period of time. At this point I didn't know much else but then I found out that I knew the navigator of the ship and the skipper of VA-163, Bryan Compton. I knew Bryan Compton really well. I had flown with him at Cecil Field.

Now you were responsible for the entire medical department on the ship.

Right.

How did you make that transition to be the senior medical officer, and what condition did you find the sick bay in? Was it in bad shape?

No. Lenny Julius was taking care of it all. It if weren't for Lenny, I couldn't have done what I did. More or less, he just told me what to sign and I signed it.

Before we went on our cruise, we were getting that ship ready for disasters. I had already lived through the *Saratoga* disaster. I had already lived through the Bay of Pigs disaster. I had learned a few things about trauma and triage firsthand. So it wasn't like I didn't know anything. And Lenny was absolutely a great guy. He was the hardest working guy I ever met. He was a detail person. I looked at the big picture but Lenny put it all together in detail. He was my right hand man.

When I was doing his interview, he told me that the fire that had taken place in October of '66 had really traumatized that ship. He said that the conversation would always go back to "the fire." As he put it, it was always the fire this and the fire that. Did

you find that to be the case when you arrived?

Yes. The medical officer that I replaced had replaced the one who died and there were still a lot of ship's company who were aboard that carrier.

So the senior medical officer who you replaced, who had the alcohol problem, had replaced the doctor who had been killed in the fire.

Yes. They lost the senior medical officer and the flight surgeon with VF-162. That was the one that Blair Edwards replaced. As I said, the guy I replaced-Dr. Ahearn-had no carrier experience at all and I guess he just couldn't take it. He couldn't go through whatever he was going through. Richard Donahue was the SMO and Lloyd Hyde was the Air Wing Flight Surgeon. Both perished in the fire.

Lenny Julius kept the thing going so when you reported, everything was shipshape and ready to go.

No. We made it shipshape together. We worked real hard. We were about a month away from actually departing San Francisco. We were stationed at NAS Alameda. But Lenny already had things going. It was just a matter of me going in and learning what Lenny had already taken care of and then adding my input and the other two doctors' inputs, too. We all worked together. The corpsmen were outstanding. Chief Rapp and Chief Careon were experienced workhorses and knew the ropes.

So you went out and arrived on Yankee Station. What was a typical day out there like for you when flight operations were underway?

Of course, I was jealous that I wasn't flying in the A-4. When I wasn't in sick bay, I used to hang around . . . I had a lot of things to do. I took my share of call and took my share of seeing patients in sick bay. I was still a flight surgeon even though I was senior medical officer so I hung with the naval aviators in VA-163.

We took a lot of losses that first month on the line. Our losses were tremendous. We lost a lot of aircraft and three or four pilots both in VA-163 and VA-164. They were getting short of pilots. So we pulled into Cubi Point in the Philippines. I went up to Bryan and said, "Is there any chance that I can fly the A-4?"

He said, "When's the last time you were carrier qualified?"

I said, "Well, it's been awhile."

He said, "We've got to get you qualified."

So I said, "Okay, get me qualified."

We were just about ready to start the monsoon season when he

said, "Jump in a plane. I'm gonna send an LSO [landing signal officer] out there and we're gonna let you take at least six traps and see how you do."

So I went out there. On one side of the runway there was a big mountain and the other side was water and water at either end. It was pretty tight. Anyway, I made five or six simulated traps and was coming around again when I noticed there was no LSO. It was pouring rain and he was getting soaking wet. He had decided that I had had enough and he didn't even tell me about it. He just disappeared. So I landed, climbed out, and went back. "What happened to my LSO?"

The skipper said, "Oh, he said that you did fine. But now you have to do at least six traps on the ship before we consider you qualified."

We got permission from the captain of the ship and as we were just pulling out from Cubi Point, I was already taxing up to the catapult and boom, with Cubi still in view, I made four more traps, and then we got into bad weather. The skipper then said I was qualified.

After the first month on the line, we had taken so many losses at night, they decided we weren't going to do any more night flying. We flew a lot at night that first line period. You can't see what you're doing. You can't see the target to begin with and then the enemy had you on radar. We had guys flying into mountains. Don Davis was one of them. He was going in on a target and didn't have it in sight and just crashed into a mountainside.

We might launch at 4 in the morning but we would circle and not go in until dawn. Or we might launch late in the afternoon and might come back and make a carrier landing at night, but we weren't going to be over North Vietnam at night. We had enough problems with day missions.

During this first line period, were you starting to fly missions?

I missed the first whole line period because there were a lot of kids just out of flight school so I didn't fly at all. It was after we came in. We had had the losses and were short of pilots. I went to Bryan Compton and said, "Skipper, I can be a pilot." After Cubi Point, I started flying.

What kind of missions were you flying?

Tanker missions--air-to-air refueling. That was basically my mission. They didn't want me over the beach but several times I did. And when I did, I got chewed out.

How did you manage to go over the beach?

It was sort of a subversive thing. Some pilot was probably grounded by me and they were really short. Sometimes we would do a weather reconnaissance. We'd fly up and down the entire coast of Vietnam. When you did that, you'd get shot at. So I had bombs and 20 mike mike. And that didn't make them too happy because . . .

But you were a tanker.

Not at that point.

You mean you were flying a regular A-4?

I was flying a regular A-4 loaded.

And that was unauthorized.

That was unauthorized. I got away with it twice.

Did you draw any fire?

They fired at us. And we weren't allowed to come back with any bombs so we just dropped them on any target of opportunity. It was a lot of fun but they wouldn't let me do it anymore.

You were too valuable. You were the doctor. If they lost you they'd really be in trouble.

When CAPT Billy Holder, who was my real commanding officer on the ship, called me up to the bridge to chew me out, he said, "If you ever do that again, you'll never fly off of this ship. You're gonna fly tanker missions and that's bad enough."

One of the things the tanker did wasn't just to refuel people in the air. If somebody took a hit in the wings and was losing fuel, I'd go out and find them. They'd plug in and I'd take them back to the ship. When we came around to make the landing, then I'd separate and pull away, and then they'd go in to make the landing. I would dog them. I'd come around in case they missed the wire and came back up again. Then they'd plug right back in and I'd take them around again. They would have enough for at least one pass and if they were leaking fuel, they were leaking fuel. They either had to get down or eject, or refuel. And, of course, we were short on airplanes as it was. And nobody really wanted to eject. I picked up a few guys like that. And you had to go over the beach to do it.

How many of these tanker missions did you fly?

Seventy-five. I flew 77 missions altogether. Some of them were what they called "double hops" but it still only counted for one mission. Most of our missions were an hour to an hour and a half. You went in, did what you had to do, and then you came back and landed. But sometimes I'd fly an hour and a half, then I'd refuel from an

A-3 Skywarrior, which were the big tankers, and I would stay up another hour and a half.

So you had two jobs. You were senior medical officer, chief of the medical department, and you were also flying A-4s on tanker missions. Who decided what role you going to play on any given day? I'm going to be a doctor today or I'm going to be a pilot.

I decided. But in general, I flew early morning hops. Sometimes I'd fly two hops, sometimes I'd fly a double cycle hop. It depended on the work load and what was going on. But I always managed to get in one hop. I remember CAPT Holder calling me one day when I was still treating him for hypertension. He said, "Doctor, you're not flying today."

"Yes, sir. May I ask why?"

He said, "Yes. You're going to do my flight physical."

You were pretty valuable as a physician, probably more so than as a pilot.

You know what CAPT Holder told me? He said, "Allan, I have to tell you something. Docs are hard to come by. I can reach in my right-hand pocket and pull pilots out one right after another. But doctors are hard to find.

[Describes a photograph]

This is LT Dennis Earl. He was a jaygee at the time. While on a mission over North Vietnam, he took a hit on the port side of the cockpit, which shattered his left leg completely. He was bleeding, getting weak, and trying to make it back to the ship. I was in the air flying as a tanker. Jim Busey was nearby and I heard all this conversation that he's bleeding and doesn't know if he's gonna make it back.

So I called Jim and said, "Tell him to inflate his pressure suit. That will act like a tourniquet."

So Busey says, "Inflate your pressure suit." He did and made it back to the ship. He didn't want to catch the barrier but they told him just to make a normal approach. They didn't want him to miss the wire and have to go around again. He successfully did it. In fact this incident was in the national news. When they interviewed Busey, he said, "I told him to inflate his pressure suit." And I said, "Wait a minute, Busey. Who told you to tell him?" But it didn't matter.

Did you treat Earl in the sick bay?

I landed when they were already getting him ready for surgery. Al Gallitano was the general surgeon. I came down right from the

flight deck, took off my flight suit, put on my scrub suit, went in, and helped operate on this guy without missing a beat. And Al was such a great doc. In those days, they taught the surgeons a lot of orthopedics—a lot of orthopedics. He put a pin in his leg and did this, that, the other thing. We had Denny off of the ship and back to the States in about 36 hours.

And his name is Dennis R. Earl.

Yes. And when they got him back, they took him to Bethesda, and from there he went to the Naval Hospital in Pensacola because his girlfriend was from Pensacola. They got married. He still looks good. He flies training planes for the Navy as a civilian.

And he recovered from that injury?

Yes, he recovered. And they sent word back to us that we had done such a good job, we meaning Dr. Gallitano, they never had to touch his leg again.

Is Gallitano still around?

Yes. He's the one I told you called me up in Boston. He's from there. When you asked me earlier whether I still keep up with these guys . . .

What do you recall about the day of the *Forrestal* fire?

We were all supposed to go out on an Alpha strike that day.

What was an Alpha strike?

An Alpha strike involved several carriers coordinating a major strike on a major target. Later, John McCain was on one of these missions when he went down trying to hit a hydroelectric plant in Hanoi. That was a major target. The airfields were major targets. We had two types of targets. One was the "target of opportunity." If you were flying and saw a train, you'd try to knock it out. If you saw something that looked like an ammunition dump, you would try to knock it out. But an Alpha target was a pretargeted thing. It was either going to be a military barracks or the airport, or a bridge like the Than Hoa Bridge, which was tough to knock down. We finally knocked it down after a hundred sorties. Here we are dropping hundreds and thousands of pounds of bombs and losing airplanes to knock down a little bridge. And as soon as we blew it up, they rebuilt it. These guys were ingenious.

So an Alpha strike might involve three carriers?

We usually had two, sometimes three. The Gulf of Tonkin was small. You didn't have too much maneuvering room. And it was shallow so we didn't have to worry about submarines. We had the *Kitty*

Hawk and the *Oriskany* and the *Bon Homme Richard*, the *Intrepid*, and the *Forrestal*.

So there was an Alpha strike scheduled for that particular day—the 29th of July.

Yes.

What happened then?

I was down in sick bay. I don't recall if I was scheduled to fly that day or not. And someone said, "Hey, the *Forrestal's* on fire!"

So we all ran up topside and looked over and there's the *Forrestal* pretty close by with smoke billowing out of it. At that point, we didn't know what had happened. Then the word was that something had blown up. A couple of us docs and a few corpsmen then flew over to the *Forrestal* on helicopters and landed there.

Lenny Julius remained behind and recalls a phone call he got from *Oriskany's* skipper wanting to speak to you. Lenny then realized that the skipper didn't know you weren't there. Lenny covered up by telling him that everybody was very busy taking care of patients. "Everyone is busy busting their butts. I don't even have time to talk to you, Skipper. I have to get back to my work." He figured the captain knew you weren't there. And then the captain said, "I wish all my officers were as loyal as you are to your senior medical officer."

Oh, I got away with a lot with CAPT Holder. He liked me but got mad at me a lot, too.

When you initially landed on *Forrestal*, the fire was aft and that's where all the activity was taking place. What did you see?

The *Forrestal* and it was already listing and burning. There were fire hoses all over the place. Everybody was running around trying to put out the fire. The *Forrestal* was the sister ship of the *Saratoga* and I knew exactly where sick bay was because they're all the same. I went right down to sick bay. Dr. Hermann was there and a bunch of corpsmen as well. My guys were following me down. Everybody sort of acted independently trying to find people who were injured and wounded. Where were they? Some were just lying there. Some were bleeding. Dr. Hermann, God bless him, was overwhelmed because all of a sudden all these people came into sick bay. All of them. It was a very confusing period. He had some patient in the OR he was trying to sew up. There were hoses all over sick bay, and the place was full of smoke. I said to him, "Louie, I'd evacuate these people. They can't stay here. You can't operate here. We've got to get these people over to the *Oriskany*."

So somehow we instigated the evacuation. We started picking up the real injured ones, putting them on the helicopter, and taking them over to the *Oriskany*. Of course, I knew that there was communication between the skipper of the *Forrestal* and Billy Holder on the *Oriskany*. There had to be. You're just not flying helicopters back and forth without having the flight deck ready and all of that.

But it was a mess. I probably stayed on board the *Forrestal* for an hour and a half to two hours. Will Williams, the surgeon aboard the *Oriskany*, was the only doc left. And he sent an urgent message to us. "I need help. I can't handle all these people. You've got to send some of the guys back."

I flew back as did Blair Edwards and Dick Fahrenbruch. We had evacuated just about everybody we could evacuate. We figured Dr. Hermann's docs and corpsmen could do the rest. We had relieved the real pressure off of him. And we were loaded. We were overloaded on the *Oriskany*. We had guys on the floor, in cots.

I'll tell you an interesting aside. We had a sick bay full of patients before all this happened. They had aches and pains. "I've got a cold." "I've got the flu." "I can't work today."

We came in there and said, "We got some serious business." And all these guys just got up and left. All of a sudden they became well, well enough to help.

So we had our sick bay, the one OR, a little treatment room, and Will was operating as hard as he could. We were all pitching in and trying to patch up all these wounds. We had a tremendous number of men die en route. We had a heck of a time trying to figure out the casualties. One of the hospital ships-[*Repose*]-came over and we started transferring the people who were still alive on our ship over to the hospital ship by helicopter.

We had an interesting thing in our sick bay. We had a bomb elevator that came right through the middle of sick bay. We put these patients on the bomb elevator, took them up to the flight deck, and then flew them over to the hospital ship.

Weren't there were other carriers around helping out?

You couldn't keep transferring them from one place to another. Somewhere along the line you have to treat them. So when they were all on the *Oriskany*, we got two docs from the *Intrepid* to come over and lend us a hand. And, of course, we had triage areas all over the place.

And these were just grievous wounds-burns and traumatic amputations.

Unbelievable! Unbelievable! I can't remember seeing anything like it before. Even in the *Saratoga* disaster, it was smoke

inhalation. Most of those who died on that were from smoke inhalation, not tremendous injuries like we were seeing.

We worked around the clock until 5 the next morning. By then we had all the patients transferred to the hospital ship and we were all completely exhausted, absolutely beat. I don't think we flew even the next day.

When the *Forrestal* came into Cubi Point, we went on board. That heavy duty metal was buckled and all of the quarters at the stern of the ship where a lot of the sailors lived—I don't know how many died in there—was all melted, the heat was so intense.

What happened after you got back aboard *Oriskany*? Did the skipper want to speak with you?

No.

So there were no repercussions as a result of you going over to *Forrestal*?

No. I actually never knew about that phone call he made to Lenny Julius until you just told me about it.

I have to tell you, we really had a good medical department on the *Oriskany*. I love to say that it was all my doing, but I couldn't have done it without Lenny Julius and the other two docs. They were great. The whole team was a great team. They were so devoted, especially the corpsmen!

How long were you on board?

A year and a half. We were almost a year in the Gulf of Tonkin and then we were in Hunter's Point for about 6 or 7 months.

So that assignment aboard *Oriskany* was about 2 years.

Right. But we had to go back into the yard when we came out so we didn't have a quick turnaround and short repairs and then back out.

So how long were you actually on Yankee Station?

We'd be out there for 30 days at a time.

Then you'd go back to Cubi Point?

Yes.

And this went on for almost 2 years?

No. It went on for about a year. You have to think of the transit time to get from San Francisco out and then the transit time back. And about 2 or 3 days after we left Yankee Station, the Tet Offensive began. We were heading in that direction (back toward

Vietnam) but we only found out that we were doing an underway replenishment. We had already offloaded the planes and everything was gone. We were going to Cubi and then from there back to the States.

Where you assigned after you got back?

Well, I was still on the ship when it was in Hunter's Point. I had to report every day.

Did you still hold sick call?

Yes. There were still a lot of shipboard injuries when we were in the yard and undergoing repairs. They had to do some repairs in sick bay so we actually took sick call in the Hunter's Point dispensary. The ship was actually in dry dock.

When were the repairs completed?

About 5 or 6 months later, we were ready to go and I was on her when we came out of dry dock. That was an experience watching them fill the dock with water and see the ship floating again. The engines were not running. It was pulled out into the bay by hand. It was magnificent to see these guys moving an aircraft carrier by hand. There wasn't even a tug involved. Finally, when they got the ship out far enough, they threw lines out and pulled it out that way. The captain wanted a full company on board. And we did it at night when the tide was high.

We went out and had sea trials to make sure everything worked. Then the air wing came back aboard and did their carrier quals. We got a new captain, CAPT Kenyon, a great guy. And that was about the time I got out of the Navy.

When did you leave the Navy?

I left active duty in November of 1969. I then went into my residency at the University of Miami.

Why did you decide to leave the Navy?

It has to go back to my wife. She just did not like the Navy. She was unhappy with the moves. She just wanted stability and I started my residency. And I really missed the Navy. So the first thing I did was join the Naval Reserve unit up in Jacksonville. And fortuitously, they flew A-4s. So I got to fly again.

How long were you in the Reserves?

From '69 to '76. In the Reserves, you stay on forever. You get older and get promoted every once in a while. The next thing you know, you're in an overgrade billet, then you're in a double

overgrade billet. I was holding down a lieutenant commander's billet as a captain. When the new skipper of the reserve air wing came in, who happened to be regular Navy, he was very upset. My lineal number was higher than his. He couldn't take it. He couldn't tolerate it. I told him I was not a line officer but a medical officer. Plus I was getting to be age 45. So he called BUPERS and told them he wouldn't have me in his squadron because I outranked him.

I called Frank Austin, who was up here at the Bureau at that time. I said, "Frank, they want to get rid of me. They want me out of the cockpit. I don't want to leave."

He said, "I don't know what I can do for you but I'll try." But there wasn't anything he could do. I got angry and felt that the Navy owed me something. I wanted them to say, "He's a good pilot. He can stay in the cockpit until he's 80 if he wants." It was totally unrealistic on my part.

But I can't complain. I had 15 years of good flying out of it. And I wanted to do something other than just to go into a dispensary to spend my last years as a reservist. But they had no billets for me at that stage of the game so that was it until I finally retired at age 60.

It's been many years since you were flying and serving aboard Oriskany. Do you ever think about it much anymore?

Oh, yes. I'm in constant contact with the squadron.

So those days were maybe the high points of your life?

There are no two ways about it. I always felt that I was trained as a naval aviator. After we took our losses, we were going to go out on a strike. The air wing commander would call each squadron. "How many pilots do you have? How many planes do you have?"

When they'd call 163, they'd answer, "We have 12 pilots plus the doc." It was always "plus the doc." The next flying period it wasn't "plus the doc." It was just, "That's how many pilots we have." And I was one of them.