

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH LTJG (ret.) DENNIS EARL, USN

CONDUCTED BY
JAN K. HERMAN, HISTORIAN, BUMED

14 NOVEMBER 2005
TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW

OFFICE OF MEDICAL HISTORY
BUREAU OF MEDICINE AND SURGERY
WASHINGTON, DC

Interview with LTJG Dennis Earl, Navy pilot of Squadron. Earl flew with Air Wing 16 off USS *Oriskany*, 1966.

When did you join the Navy?

I joined the Reserves when I was 17 in 1958. Then I didn't go on active duty until I started flight training in November 1964.

Where were you from?

A little town in northern Utah named Mendon. It's in the Cache Valley.

Is that where you lived when you joined the Navy?

Yes.

Where did you have your flight training?

Back then, they didn't have the single base concept. You started off at Saufley Field after going through pre-flight. They have a new name for it now. They call it ACI. That was primary. Then I went to basic up in Meridian, MS, flying the T-2A. Then I went back to Pensacola for gunnery and CQ flying the T-2A again. I finished up in March thru August of '66 flying the F-9 Cougar in Kingsville, TX.

How about qualifying for your carrier landings?

We qualified on the *Lexington* [CVT-16] out of Pensacola. I was with VT-4 back then. Then we re-qual'd in the F-9 Cougar in advanced training, again on the *Lexington*. That was in August of '66.

Were you assigned to a carrier after that?

No. You went from flight training to the replacement air group in Lemoore, CA. They called it the RAG. There I transitioned to the A-4 Skyhawk, which was my choice.

Everybody seems to have loved that airplane.

Yes. It was a good airplane.

When were you assigned to carriers?

When you finished the RAG, you were assigned to a squadron to requalify in the type of airplane you were flying; in this case, the A-4. I went to VA-163 and we Car-qual'd on the USS *Yorktown* (CVS-10).

What happened then?

We deployed on the *Oriskany* with the VA-163 Squadron and Air Wing 16. We were on the line in July of 1967, meaning we were on Yankee Station.

How many missions did you fly before you were injured?

I flew 63 missions.

What do you remember about that very bad day in your life?

We launched off as a flight of four. Two of us--Jim Busby and I--were flak-suppressors for two other A-4s that were carrying Walleye air-to-surface missiles. The objective was to take out a bridge and we were to knock back the flak, if there was any. They vaporized the bridge with the first Walleye.

Then we split up and went two for two into different areas. Jim Busey and I were flying back-up to check out some WBLCs in the Yellow River area.

What were you checking out?

WBLCs. That stands for Water-borne Logistics Craft. They were barges camouflaged on the banks of a river. We were headed back to take those out with our weapons, and were doing some road recce en route. I was flying behind Jim Busey weaving down a road at 3,000 feet. I was a little above and behind him crossing from his left to right. I think I flew through some triple A that was being shot at him and ended up catching it on the other side.

When you say on the other side. . .?

I was finishing up the cross from his left to right about a mile trailing him. That's the usual formation for road reconnaissance. You stay out of phase with each other and usually leave a mile separation. So if the lead can spot a target in time . . . He could tell you there are trucks at a road intersection and describe it. You could then pop into a roll-in position and roll in on them. Anyway, in the middle of doing this, I got hit by the triple A.

Where did it hit your aircraft?

It came in the lower forward nose section just above the nose wheel well, then penetrated a couple of bulkheads, and split in two on the left rudder pedal. Half of it got my left foot and the other half got the tibia of my right leg.

Did they ever figure out what it was?

Oh, yes. The projectile was 12.7mm, about the size of a .50 caliber. But it just had enough energy to do the job because the boat tail was laying on top of the boot that had split. The other half was projecting out the other side of my G-suit after it had gone through my tibia.

At that point, you probably figured you were in some kind of trouble.

Yes. I wasn't sure what it was. I thought it might have been a surface-to-air missile because we didn't have any indications of anything happening. I knew right away I was in quite a desperate situation.

You must have realized you were seriously injured and probably bleeding.

I started off bleeding pretty well. I had a nose wheel and unsafe gear light flashing and a couple of other annunciator lights. There was also a little bit of smoke in the cockpit. I wasn't sure if I was going to be able to fly it out of there.

Where were you at that point?

Just south of what they called the Hour Glass River close to a karst ridge, geographically pretty close to Phu Ly, a major center for North Vietnamese transportation.

How far inland was that?

North Vietnam is kind of narrow. Down in that area it was probably no more than 40 or so miles wide. We were only about a third of the way in, maybe less than that.

But now you were flying at less than 3,000 feet.

I was probably at 3,000-3,500 feet when I first got hit.

What did you do once you realized you were injured and you had warning lights flashing and smoke in the cockpit?

I jinked to make sure there wasn't anything else coming up, then checked out the airplane--checked out the engine instruments to make sure there wasn't a compounding problem. Then I notified my lead--Jim Busey--that I had taken a hit and had two broken legs. Of course, that got his attention.

I'll bet it did. How did you work the rudder pedals?

In a jet like the A-4, the rudder pedals aren't really needed in normal coordinated flight. In most jets with swept back wings, you don't need the rudder unless you're trying to exaggerate a turn rate or something.

So you could just use your stick.

Yes.

Physically, you were not in great shape. After you checked your instruments and realized the plane was still flyable, what did

you do?

I notified Jim Busey and he told me to turn toward the coast. Your first inclination is to get away from the land so you wouldn't get picked up and incarcerated. So I turned to the east and pickled off the weapons I had left.

What did you do with the weapons?

I pickled them off. Jim Busey said I hit a road with them. Later, they made a lot of fanfare over the fact I pickled over a road.

So that's what it's called when you get rid of your ordnance before you come back to your ship?

You can pickle them either deliberately over a target with all the parameters lined up or, in this case, I pickled them off just to get rid of the weight and be able to make the coast. The airplane was running fine so I did make it back over the coast.

Did you have bombs at that point?

Yes. I had six Mark 82s-"daisy cutters." That was about 3,000 pounds.

It was about a 25-minute flight back and this is when Doc [LCDR Allan] Adeeb came into the picture. He was listening to the calls on the radio. He suggested that I inflate my G-suit to put compression on the injury to reduce the bleeding.

Wasn't the G-suit punctured at this point?

It was. At least the lower bladder was. But if I held my hand on the G-suit actuator, I could actually inflate it without pulling Gs by pushing down on a plunger. That would restrict in the upper bladders which weren't damaged. And that did reduce the blood loss. But, at that point, things were starting to clot up anyway.

You must have been in some kind of pain, too.

Oh, there was a lot of that, especially in my left foot.

What about your right leg?

The bullet had just about enough energy to do its job. It wasn't like a lot of overstress or overpressure damage. It was just enough energy to take a chunk out of the tibia about a half-inch wide. I was able to fly with my right hand and lift the weight off my right leg with my left hand. So that was 25 minutes of flight time in that position to get back to the ship.

Were you feeling somewhat weak from loss of blood?

I never felt like I was going to pass out but the ship's crew

thought I might. So they rigged the barricade for my recovery. It was probably the best landing I ever made. I had told them I didn't need that barricade but they had already rigged it just in case. I wasn't gonna argue with them.

When you hit the barricade, that must have been a pretty abrupt stop.

What they did in technical terms was to adjust the roll angle for the optical landing system so that instead of targeting the "Three" wire, it targeted the "One" wire. And that meant I touched down on the deck earlier, grabbed the One wire and most of the energy was taken out of the landing by the time I got to the barricade. Normally, a One wire is not a good deal. If you pick up a One wire, you won't get a very good grade from the LSO [landing signal officer]. But in this case, with the roll angle set for the One, I got an "Okay One wire," which is the only one I've ever gotten.

The ship must have looked pretty good to you.

Yes. They were still in a turn as I made my approach. I didn't do the normal 350 knot break turn and come back around and land. I just did a long left base entry, and when the ship steadied up, I steadied up and made it straight in to an arrested landing.

Now that you were safely on the ship, what happened then? Did they just pull you out of the cockpit?

As soon as I felt the tug on the wire, I pulled it to idle and the airplane nosed into the barricade. Then I shut the engine down. You can find that photo on the *Oriskany* website. They had a forklift with a pallet and mattresses on it which they pulled alongside the cockpit. A couple of corpsmen helped me stand up on my left foot and then they eased me into a litter. Then they strapped me down and lowered the forklift.

The next thing I knew I was in a weapons elevator going below right to sick bay. With a shot of morphine, I was starting to feel quite a bit better.

That's when I first met the doctors who were going to work on me—Dr. Gallitano. Shortly after I landed, Dr. Adeeb landed and the two of them went to work.

I remember them cutting off my G-suit and my boots. They started a drip and the next thing I knew I woke up in a cot in sick bay.

Apparently, they did one hell of a job on you.

They did. I had a cast up to my hip on the right leg and a half-cast up to my knee on the left leg and foot.

What was the damage to your foot?

The round went through the ball joint of my big toe so I don't have a joint there anymore. The adjacent toe was fractured but they didn't have to anything beyond splinting it. The docs put two K wires through the tip of my big toe down through the ball joint into the bone extending back from the big toe. So they stabilized the bones and had them all lined up. They did a skin graft over the missing skin. They got the skin from my left thigh. That's one thing that amazed the doctors here at Pensacola. They had done this grafting and I had no infection like they had seen in patients coming back from Vietnam.

About a month and a half after I got back, they pulled those K wires out. I was still in a half-cast on my left foot but I could walk around on it. They put a walking cast on it and I used crutches for my right leg.

What was the condition of your right leg? What did they do for that? Dr. Gallitano remembers that they debrided the dead tissue and then simply casted it. They didn't use any rods or anything. The bones were just aligned and that was about it.

That was it. That and a cast that went past my right hip all the way down the leg so it was held in that position until it knitted across the gap. There were no wires, screws, or anything.

When were you evacuated from the ship?

Two days later, I coded off to Danang aboard a C-1, then aboard a C-141 thru Anchorage, Alaska to Travis Air Force Base into Washington, DC, back down to Pensacola. I don't remember too much about that trip.

How long did it take you to get out of the body cast?

I was married in February without the cast but was still on crutches. My brother carried my wife across the threshold for me.

A real family affair.

Yes. Then I was on limited duty attached to VT-4 until December of '68. I was flying T-2s in a gunnery and CQ pattern then. I then went back through the RAG in '69.

Did you stay in the Navy after that?

Yes. I did 20 years' worth. I retired in 1984 but moved across to a different hangar and started flying for them as a contract pilot. So I'm still flying for the Navy.

What aircraft do you fly now?

The T-39 Sabreliner.

Isn't that an executive jet?

It was but they put an F-16 radar in it and they use it to train weapons system operators, WIZOs, Echmos, and all the other O's that the military uses for navigators. After this training, they go on to F-14s, F-15s, F-18s, and B-1s. There are also some foreign nationals who go through.

You also train Air Force personnel?

Yes. We have Air Force, Navy, Marines, and some foreign nationals-Italians, Saudis, some Germans, and Singaporeans.

So you've been doing that since when?

Since 1984-21 years this month.

That's a long career of flying and I bet you must love it if you're still doing it.

I do. And I still get paid for having fun. And I don't have to go to sea to do it.

And you don't have to fly off carriers or fly over North Vietnam anymore.

What I need to do is link up with Doc Adeeb and fly around in his float plane. We all got together in Demopolis, Alabama about 6 years ago for a reunion.

I guess you haven't seen Dr. Gallitano for a long time?

No. I'd sure like to shake his hand if I saw him.

You haven't had any aftereffects from those injuries, have you?

They couldn't have done any better for me but I have just a little hesitation from that missing ball joint. That's about it. I wish they had taken out the cant in my leg so I could ski without cant plates.

Cant plates?

That's just to make up for being bow-legged.

You were bow-legged to start with?

Yes.

Well, I guess they weren't trying to make you a beautiful guy. They just wanted you to walk again.

Well, they did a good job. My foot isn't beautiful but it works.

I want to thank you so much for sharing your experiences with me. I consider myself very lucky. Now I've spoken to all three people in this drama-the patient and the two doctors.

Well, I will be shaking their hands any opportunity I have.