

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH AO3 PAUL FRIEDMAN, USN

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7 NOVEMBER 2005
TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW

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WASHINGTON, DC

Interview with former AO3 Paul Friedman, crewman aboard USS *Forrestal* and injured during the fire of 29 July 1967.

I thought we'd talk about your experience on the *Forrestal*. You say you grew up in Rockaway.

I was born in Rockaway Beach in 1946, the oldest of five children. It seems like every time my mom got pregnant, we moved to a bigger house. We spent a lot of time in the Rockaways-Far Rockaway, Arverne. I think then they moved to Queens Village for a while, then back to Rockaway. I enlisted in the Navy when we were living in Beach 64th Street, which is in the Arverne section of Rockaway. That's where I enlisted.

When did you enlist?

I enlisted in April of 1966. It was sort of a delayed entry program, where you signed up but really didn't go in until 4 months later. I was promised an aviation school. I wanted some control over my destiny because I received my pre-induction physical my last year of high school. That was in '64. You had to make some decisions. Even though I went to college, at that time my family wasn't really prepared to put a kid through college. I figured I could learn something in the Navy. I wanted aerographer but when they did the testing at Great Lakes, I guess my math scores weren't that high. There were a couple of other things I had on my wish list. Besides aerographer, I think I had parachute rigger, ordnanceman, and a couple of other things, also.

Well, I got ordnance. That was in Jacksonville, Florida. And that wasn't bad being in Florida from October to March.

So you became an ordnanceman.

Yes. I went to A school for aviation ordnance. After I finished A school they sent me to Sparrow C school to learn how to test the Sparrow missile. I think they were running out of aviation electricians mates so they went into the A school and pulled the guys who scored the highest in the missile phase.

So I spent another 6 weeks in Florida. I knew I was going to the *Forrestal* and thought I would be going to GM Division, which was the guided missile division. When I reported aboard the *Forrestal*, I was sent to G Division instead of GM Division. I think I was an E-3 at that time-an airman. And when I reported aboard *Forrestal*, the first thing they did was send me mess-cooking. I think everybody new to their division had to do their 90 days there. I was wiping tables and working the scullery. Since I was the highest rated guy, they called me the "captain of the scullery." It was my first command [laughter].

When I reported aboard *Forrestal*, I was just awed by how big it was. And that was a good thing because *Forrestal* was the first super carrier commissioned in 1955. The new one was the *Enterprise*, which was the showcase of the fleet. It was the first nuclear carrier. The only problem being on a carrier like that was that there was a lot of brass shining and a lot of going by the rules. I guess we called it chickenshit. So everyone said that I was better off on the *Forrestal*. It was a proud ship with a proud crew.

What do you recall about July 29th? Where were you when everything happened?

I was sleeping on the second deck, the deck right below the hangar bay. That's where most of the ship's activity was. The mess decks are there. My berthing compartment was not with the guys from G Division since I was on temporary assigned duty mess-cooking. I was back by the fantail and probably in the middle of the ship.

I didn't hear the bombs going off. I didn't hear general quarters. I didn't hear the first alarm, which was "Fire, Fire." Usually there were fires on the carrier all the time. That's the way it was. And they were usually small fires and they were quickly put out. But there was "Fire, Fire," and immediately after that the GQ went off, and seconds later the first bomb went off.

Did you hear that?

No. I didn't hear that either. A lot of guys didn't hear that. And then I was awakened by the 2nd or 3rd bomb blast. I woke up and noticed that I had a wound.

You woke up with a wound?

Yes. I was injured. I think one of the bomb fragments came all the way down to where I was sleeping. The bulkhead next to me was cracked, and there was fire. And right away, I noticed that I had a wound.

How serious was it?

I noticed that I had a red hole in the sole of my foot, right by the instep. I couldn't walk on it so I had to hop. One of the guys was standing next to my rack checking to see if I was alright. We both decided it was time to get the hell out of there. I hobbled to the port passageway where everybody else was headed. Everyone was trying to make their way forward away from where the bombs were going off. I made it over to the port side and then another big explosion rocked the ship and went right down the stairway. I saw them carrying a shipmate with a head wound. By now, everyone was in the passageway heading forward. And all the while I was hopping,

trying to make my way forward. I must have been slowing everybody down because one of the guys grabbed me like a twig under my arm and helped me into sick bay.

He carried you?

He put his arm around me and sort of supported me. I still had one foot on the ground but he got me to sick bay. There, I saw people burned, others lying waiting for treatment. I thought I shouldn't be here because I saw things I never want to see again-people with burns all over their bodies. A guy sitting next to me named Howard had a compound fracture. All I wanted was a battle dressing and a tetanus shot. That's how much I thought about my wound. I wasn't really in any pain.

Was it bleeding?

I don't think it was. I just wanted to cover it up. I was worried about what my mom always used to tell me. "Be careful. You'll get blood poisoning."

The chief corpsman came over to me and asked if I wanted morphine. I said no. "Give it to Howard." He was the one with the compound fracture." But he didn't want to give any morphine to him.

They also brought in a chief or a warrant officer who didn't look like he had a scratch on him. Nevertheless, the corpsman told the guys who brought him in, "We can't do anything for him." He was already dead.

So what did they do for your foot?

They gave me one of those big battle dressings. Then time went by as I listened to the bombs going off, praying that they'd be able to stop them.

And they were going off pretty frequently.

They were exploding for the first 5 or 10 minutes.

How many explosions did you hear?

I heard nine detonations. I heard later that this was most of the old ordnance we had been forced to take on board.

Eventually, I was taken through the smoky sick bay up an elevator to one of the choppers. Right now I'm looking at a letter I wrote to my mom.

Reads from letter:

"We were taken to the carrier Oriskany, which was half a mile away. When we landed, I was the first one off. They put me on a

stretcher and carried me across the flight deck. Crewmembers and press were taking pictures but later they were ordered to stop photographing the wounded.

"I was placed on a bomb elevator which took me and my shipmates down to sick bay. They placed me in a rack next to a shipmate who had burns to his arms and his face. He was on the flight deck when the accident occurred and had jumped off the flight deck to escape the fire and burns he was experiencing. I remember him saying that during that eighty-foot descent into the ocean, he had seen his whole life go by and hoped he wouldn't hit any debris in the water below. Luckily, he was picked up by one of our destroyer escorts. Either the *Rupertus*, the *Tucker*, or the *McKenzie* came alongside to fight the fire and pull survivors out of the water.

"When I arrived around 3 p.m. the doctors had many bad burn cases to treat, so they didn't get around to me until 5 p.m. When they did, the doctors decided not to stitch my wound but leave it with an open dressing. They cut off some skin around the wound. The doctor gave me a shot of Demerol before treating me.

"Around 8 p.m. we found out that we would be flown off again, this time to the hospital ship *Repose*. So at 3 a.m. July 30th, I was helicoptered off to the *Repose*, where they x-rayed me and said I had shrapnel in my wound and that they would take care of me. I didn't know when I'd be getting off the ship. The *Forrestal* is in bad shape and might be heading for Subic Bay or the States. The damage and loss of life is catastrophic. We have lost 134 of our brothers.

"Aboard hospital ship *Repose*, Danang, Vietnam. After surgery, I found that they removed the shrapnel while I was on the *Oriskany*. All they did was clean my wound. They said it was a pretty dirty [wound] and needed cleaning plus they might have removed some muscle tissue. I felt numb in my right leg. . . ."

While I was aboard the *Repose*, they gave me a shot in the groin and it numbed my whole leg. They kept poking me and said, "You'll know. It's like hitting the funny bone." I guess it was a block they gave me. Anyway, that's what they did on the *Repose*. I got one shot of penicillin in the morning and another one at night. I guess they gave penicillin to everyone so they wouldn't get infection.

Continues with letter:

"I was taken by bus through the streets of Danang to a US Air Force dispensary on the air base. We passed people in black pajamas; I wonder which ones were VC? The dispensary had a hole in the wall. It was hit by a rocket three weeks prior."

By the way, when I was first brought up the gangplank of the *Repose*, a Dr. Goldberg looked at my name tag and saw Friedman. And he says, "Friedman, where are you from?"

I said, "Rockaway."

He said, "I'm from Flushing."

That's interesting. My brother was born at Flushing Hospital and we lived in Bayside when I was a kid.

We all ended up somewhere in Brooklyn or Queens and migrated out to the Island. We ended up in Long Beach, Baldwin, and Oceanside.

We ended up first in Bayside and then in Babylon. When you landed on the *Repose*, what were your impressions of the ship? Did you get to see it at all?

I was taken right to the ward. There was the nurse's station up at the front. There was a guy near me who might have had a circumcision just to get out of the jungle. All the others were *Forrestal* guys, and many of them were badly burned. I didn't want to use a bedpan so I hopped around the ward, down and then up towards the bathroom. And as I did that I stopped and tried to give aid to some of my severely burned shipmates. The nurses were encouraging me to talk with some of the guys.

The nurses were very attentive. Actually, Robert Stack, who played Elliot Ness on the TV show "The Untouchables," came aboard and spent a lot time with our guys.

We left you in Danang. What happened there?

Continues reading letter:

"I think I was in the 95th Evac Hospital on the air base. I was only there for one night. The next morning I was put on a C-130 to Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines. Spent the night at their hospital and remember a blonde teenage girl who was a volunteer at the hospital, maybe 17 or 18. It was nice to talk to an American girl after two months at sea.

"After a night's sleep with the help of a sleeping pill, I was loaded onto a C-141 Starlifter for my journey back to the States. There was a New Zealand flight nurse with blonde hair who came by to check on us and also to give me a twice-a-day shot of penicillin.

We landed at Yakota, Japan for refueling. Japanese nurses came on board to care for us. Our next [stop was], Elmendorf, [Air Force Base] Alaska, then on to Scott Air Force Base, Bellevue, Illinois, Andrews Air Force Base, Washington, DC, then NAS Floyd Bennett, Brooklyn."

Then we were taken to St. Albans. In fact, H. Rap Brown, the black militant was protesting right around the hospital and there were Marine guards. So we were going from one war zone to another in the summer of '67.

Here's a Western Union telegraph that my parents received:

Reads from telegram:

August 5, 1967

US Naval Hospital St. Albans. Emanuel Friedman, 414 Beach 64th St. Arverne, N.Y.

Your son AOAN Paul Howard Friedman B109083 admitted this hospital 5 August '67. Overseas diagnosis: shrapnel wound right foot. Present condition considered good. Your presence is not medically indicated. You are assured he is receiving best possible care and treatment. You will be notified of any significant change and condition. Visiting hours are 2 - 8 p.m. daily. His proper mailing address is St. Albans Naval Hospital, Long Island, N.Y. S. L. Arje, Commanding Officer

So there you are at St. Albans. What did they do for you there?

When I first got there they put me on the second floor, two to a room. There was a guy from a sub. He was just there getting some surgery. I was on this ward for about a week. I remember the Navy coming in and asking me questions about the fire.

For my wound, they basically, didn't do anything. They just let it heal by itself. It was still open and about an inch deep. The doctors would come by and look at it.

This wound was on the sole of your foot.

On the sole.

And you were in your rack when this happened?

Yes. If I had been sleeping at the other end of the bed, the shrapnel would have hit me in the head. So, in a way, it was the million dollar wound.

It got you out of that place, that's for sure.

Yes. Here I'm being medevaced and the guys next to me at St. Albans are amputees. I felt a little strange in their company with my minor shrapnel wound but they made me feel comfortable. Not many Navy guys were patients at St. Albans. They were mostly Marines and corpsmen.

And you didn't even qualify for a Purple Heart.

No. It was an accident.

How long did it take to recover and be discharged?

I was in a wheelchair, then went to crutches. As I was recuperating, I was getting pain in my left wrist. I went to the orthopedic section and Dr. Parks, who was the Mets physician, was in the Naval Reserve and doing his time. He said that I had a non-union of the navicular bone. How did you break it?"

A year before I went into the Navy, I was skateboarding in Oceanside going down a hill and I set up a slalom course and when I wiped out, I hit the palm of my hand. The doctor just put an Ace bandage on it but it never healed properly.

Dr. Parks said he could take a bone out of my rib and insert it between the two broken pieces. And I would be in a cast from 9 months to a year. My mom said that I should see our doctor-Dr. Jermanski in Far Rockaway. He examined me and said, "Paul. Are you going to be a truck driver or ditch digger for the rest of your life?"

I said, No. He said, "Don't have the surgery."

So I went back and since it was not service connected, I told Dr. Parks I had decided not to have the surgery. And he said, "Well, we can't keep you in the Navy."

And I was ready to jump for joy because I said to myself, "You only get one chance to kill me."

So you got out on a medical?

Yes. I got an honorable discharge because this had happened before.

And they had never picked it up in your physical.

No. And another thing they hadn't picked up was that I only have one kidney. And I didn't find that out until 1990 when I had a kidney stone.

You were born with one kidney?

Yes. I had been to Vietnam. I had been wounded. And I only had one kidney. The only way they picked it up was when I had the stone and they did an IVP and then a sonogram to see if my other kidney had been collapsed or something. And it wasn't there.

Has your wrist given you problems since that time?

Yes. I've gone to the VA and had it looked at and they weren't too impressed. As for my foot, I get 10 percent disability. It's gone from \$21 to \$108 after so many years. It's still a painful scar. If I step on it. . . If I'm on the beach and step on something, I

feel it.

So the medical discharge was not a result of foot but the wrist.

That's how I got out. I would have been returned to light duty with the shrapnel wound. Who knows?

When did you get out?

I was in St. Albans until my discharge. I arrived at St. Albans on August 5th and I was discharged on November 16th 1967. I don't think I was ambulatory until October. It took me at least 2 months until the wound healed.

It's been many years since all of that happened. Being that your involved in the Forrestal reunion organization, you probably still think about those times pretty frequently.

Oh, yeah. Every day we think about the guys we lost. In fact, we're reprinting our cruise book with a pictorial insert of all the guys who died that day. We spent the past 3 years getting all the pictures and putting faces with the names. We've been successful. We've made contact with some of the families and the guys. It's been a healing.

Do you have a position in this group are you a volunteer?

I am not a president but I'm very involved. I help out whenever they need a mass mailing or something like that. I go to all the reunions and am always helping out.

What is the group called?

It's called the USS Forrestal Association. It's really easy to find online.

What are you doing now?

I have my own business here in Coral Springs, Florida. I have a recruiting background but I primarily specialize in . . . people coming in here and writing their resumes. People have a hard time being objective about themselves. They come in here, tell me what they do, and I put it into words for them. So I'm a professional resume writer.

What's the name of your company?

PHF Career Services.

Thank you for spending time with me this afternoon.

It's been my pleasure.