

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH LCDR (ret.) AARON MODANSKY, USN

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Telephone interview with LCDR Aaron Modansky, F9F Panther jet pilot and member of VF-831 aboard USS *Antietam* (CV-36), Korea, 1952.

Where are you from?

I was born and raised in Brooklyn. Then I moved to Massapequa, and from there to Huntington, then to upstate New York. And when I stopped working, I moved down here. We were in the wholesale lumber business.

You were in the Naval Reserve?

Yes. I joined the Navy in 1942 and went on active duty in '43. I joined a fighter squadron--VF-24 in '44, and we went to the fleet and were very active in the battle for Okinawa. Then I was released from active duty and stayed in the Reserves flying. I was in a reserve squadron at Floyd Bennett Field, Brooklyn. We were the only squadron at that time in which all the pilots were checked out in jets. They activated the entire squadron, including all the enlisted men, and sent us out as a unit--VF-831.

I want to ask you about your earlier career in World War II. What kind of aircraft were you flying off Okinawa?

We flew Hellcats--F6Fs. I can't speak enough about the Grumman aircraft. They could stand so much punishment. We flew a lot of missions. Between World War II and Korea, I must have made 300 carrier landings and takeoffs.

How did you get to Korea?

I was on the *Antietam*, CV-36. We went to Korea as one of four fighting carriers on the line. There were about eight or nine that they slotted in. We operated with the *Boxer*, the *Valley Forge*, the *Bon Homme Richard*, all those Essex class carriers.

When did you have your accident?

I crashed in January of '52 flying a F9F Grumman Panther jet. I don't know whether you want to get into it right now.

Yes. Why don't you tell me about it. What kind of mission were you flying that day?

I really don't know because, if I look in the logbook, it will only tell me that I had an accident. All the other entries before and after show the missions I was on.

What was the standard mission that you would fly?

We flew two types of missions. One was to fly over the enemy territory and we did what they called interdiction. We would shoot

up railroad trains, tanks, trucks, airplanes on the ground; we saw very few airplanes in the air by that time. Their top pilots had been killed and most of the aircraft had been destroyed. So we had superiority in the air. We would destroy their supply lines dramatically.

The other type of mission was the combat air patrol where we flew cover over the fleet while these other people were going on these other missions over enemy territory. So those were the two things. We used to have a joke. We'd put our wings on sideways because when you are on combat air patrol, you fly in a left-hand turn for maybe 2 hours in a circle.

So you flew a lot of missions over North Korea?

Oh, yes. I got a few decorations. I have two distinguished flying crosses, eight air medals, and three Presidential Unit Citations. I got my hardware.

How did the accident happen?

I was having a catapult shot to take off and the aileron controls were frozen. There were certain ports that were supposed to be cleaned because we were operating in sub-zero conditions and ice would build up. I was wearing what they called an immersion suit, a heavy rubber suit that gave you a few more minutes of protection from the cold if you landed in the icy ocean. Anyway, when I was shot off the catapult, the plane started to roll. Had I continued to let it roll, I would have gone on my back into the water. I didn't want to do that so I flew the plane down into the water out of the path of the carrier to the ship's starboard side.

You were at flying speed when you hit.

Yes. I might have achieved 120 or 130 knots at that point. You're taught to make these split-second decisions, and I knew very well that I didn't want to go in on my back because that would minimize my chances of getting out. So I opted to fly it down into the water. We were trained pretty good. We were young. I was a veteran of another war. I knew a lot about it. I was maintenance officer of the squadron. I knew much about the airplane.

What kind of ports weren't cleaned properly? Were they like pitot tubes?

Yes. They should have stuck something in there like a pipe cleaner. We know that ice got in because of the way the controls were reacting. They just locked up.

Did you have any kind of rudder control at all?

The plane was flying; make no mistake about that. The controls were frozen and the plane was making a roll to the right.

The left wing was coming over and the right wing was dipping. Exactly.

So when you hit the water, you were in that attitude--right wing low and left wing high?

Yes.

So the impact just tore the left wing off.

Yes. Both the wings and the tail section, the whole 9 yards. I recall that went I went under, I didn't panic. I knew that I somehow had to get to the surface. They say that I tore this heavy duty webbing that would take 10 guys on the deck to tear. But evidently, adrenalin was flowing.

We did a lot of swimming training in our pre-flight situation. So we got to swim a lot. We also trained to get out of an airplane that was inverted underwater and swim away. Then swim to the surface, take your pants off, put knots in it and make a temporary inflatable thing out of it. All that training seemed to help. I also remember having sat on a safety board regarding the death of a guy named Bill Callahan. He was killed in a similar circumstance. He did not have his shoulder harness and his seat belt on tight. And when I knew that I was going in, I had everything so tight that I couldn't blink.

You mean that you had enough time that when you knew things were going bad you had enough time to cinch everything tight?

Absolutely. I could fly with one hand and cinch it with the other. The proof of the pudding is that I'm here. Conditioned reflex.

Anyway, the plane hit and broke into thousands of pieces and I went under. Both my legs were paralyzed. I had a 2 ½-inch-long hole in my left thigh from the ejection seat post. Somehow I tore myself free of the parachute and breast-stroked to the surface. When I got there, the chopper was directly over me. They threw a frogman into the water and he put a sling on me and they winched me up. However, I couldn't get into the chopper because I couldn't move my legs. So they held me to the side of the chopper and flew me back to the carrier which took approximately 4 ½ minutes. They estimated that I went about 30 feet under. As a matter of fact, I have Navy pictures of me hanging from the chopper on the outside as well as in the stretcher when I got back to the carrier.

Once they got you back aboard the ship, what do you remember?

I remember everything pretty clearly.

Concerning your injuries. . . When they got you on the stretcher, did they take you right to sick bay?

That's right. I couldn't move my legs for 5 days. I had broken every small blood vessel in my legs. They were swollen giants. After 5 days they started a rehabilitation program where they used hot packs, cold packs, minimal exercise until I could do more. In 2 ½ months, believe it or not, I flew again.

So you stayed on the ship?

I had a choice of being detached from the squadron and going to Tokyo to a Navy hospital or being treated aboard a Navy hospital ship or to stay with the squadron and be rehabilitated on the ship.

So, they did all this work while you were on the ship because you chose to remain there with your squadron. Do you remember the name of your doctor?

Wayne Erdbrink. I think he wrote a paper on me. I might have it somewhere in my files.

It was winter when you had your accident.

Was it ever. It was vicious cold. They estimated that with that immersion suit, I had about 10 minutes. And the whole thing took 4 ½ minutes to return me to the deck.

You talked a little bit about the harsh conditions. Those Korean winters were absolutely brutal from what I've heard. Flying off a carrier in weather like that, didn't you have problems with icing on the deck and all that?

Don't forget. You've got a big, hot fan in a jet engine. That would pretty much keep the deck clean. When you come in to land, you have a tail hook that stops you from rolling as opposed to landing on a regular surface that may be icy.

Did you have to worry about icing conditions on the wings?

We had some but they seemed to take care of that pretty well. Our maintenance was pretty damn good. It's unfortunate that these ports weren't bled before I took off.

What was the first thing they did when they got you in sick bay?

They got all my clothes off. They might have given me some booze, for all I know.

Medicinal, of course.

Of course. That's the only kind there is. They did everything. I was a big, husky guy. I weighed 234. But today, I am left with the residue of bad legs--bad wheels. I get a minimal pension for that.

Was there nerve damage?

There was blood vessel damage. I have something called venous stasis. My legs are almost black and its because when the blood gets down in my legs, it pools and doesn't pump back up toward the brain fast enough. I wear these stretch stockings that the VA gives me.

Did they ever figure out exactly how your legs were injured in the accident? Were they crushed under debris?

It was the impact of the airplane hitting the ocean. The only thing that was left was the cockpit going down, and that's what I struggled to get out of underwater. The rest of the airplane was completely demolished after it hit.

You were one helluva lucky guy.

Oh, yes. No doubt about it. I think a lot of that is attributable to the fact that I really was in tight when I hit the water. I really used the shoulder and seat straps to the maximum.

Did you fly anything else besides the F9F?

No. The only time I flew anything else was the SNJ when I was ashore so I could get my 4 hours a month for flight pay.

Do you have any memories of the medical staff and how you were treated.

I have to tell you. In retrospect, the Navy would do anything to recover a pilot, to rehabilitate him. It's not like watching the JAG program today, which is fiction. I never saw a JAG officer in my 12 years in the Navy. They really worked hard on us naval aviators. They worked hard to keep their aviators in top shape and to rehabilitate them, if needed.

Did you ever have much contact with your flight surgeon, Dr. Erdbrink, before your accident--lectures on how to take care of yourself. Or was your main experience with him after your accident?

I think it was after the accident.

But, apparently, he treated you pretty well. He knew his stuff.

Oh, yes. We had three flight surgeons aboard. We had a pretty big complement of people on that ship.

And you were flying again after a while.

Two and a half months. I was concerned. We had done a lot of flying. Our maintenance as a reserve squadron was better than the regular Navy squadrons. If they put up 80 percent of their airplanes, we put up 88 percent. I was concerned that if our squadron was relieved and sent home, or I was detached in Japan, they would reassign me when I got better and put me in a different squadron and I'd have to start all over again. So by staying with the squadron, when we got relieved, I home like everybody else.

What did you do after the Korean War?

My family and I had started a wholesale lumber business in the waning months of 1945. My brother and my father and I started this business. They were home while I was off in the Navy and I just went back and I took up my life as before.

Where was your lumber yard?

It was in Lindenhurst, NY, at that time. Then we moved up near Newburgh, NY. We built a very large plant there--14 acres. After that, we acquired yards in Tampa, Columbus, Ohio, and Charlotte, North Carolina. We had a pretty big operation.

When did you leave the Navy?

In 1953. After I came back from Korea, they sent me to Washington, DC, as the cadet recruiting officer for the Washington district. I used to go around to colleges and make speeches about the V-5 program. I also had collateral duty flying. We would go on trips.

Did you stay in the Reserves after the war?

At age 35, I had already been promoted to lieutenant commander. I sent my resignation in because I didn't want to take a chance of being called a third time. It took me 3 years before they processed my resignation. I had approximately 12 years at that time.

When did you retire from the lumber business?

In 1990. And then I moved to Florida. I was with the Civil Air Patrol in Florida. Up to a year ago, I was commanding officer of the Boca Raton Senior Squadron, Civil Air Patrol. We had about 50 expilots. We flew search and rescue for the government. We flew Cessna 172s. At 78 I hung up my spikes. I figured I had enough wiping of noses and it was time for me to go. I love to fly and I enjoyed every minute of it. And above all, I love to be alive to talk about it.