



UNSCRAMBLE

The Official Quarterly Newsletter of
Valiant Air Command, Inc.

Quarter 3 2024

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MUSEUM AND GIFT SHOP - OPEN 7 DAYS A WEEK - 9 AM TO 5 PM

Closed Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Day,
Air Show and Special Event days as required

Beginnings...

The Oxford English dictionary defines the word scramble as “an effort to perform an action or achieve a result hurriedly, clumsily, or in an uncontrolled and undignified manner”. Originating during the Battle of Britain, scrambling has come to be known in military aviation as the act of mobilising aircraft as quickly as possible in reaction to an immediate threat, usually to intercept hostile aircraft.



It thus stands to reason that a busy facility such as the Valiant Air Command, Inc. would need a place to “UnScramble” after the flurries of activity described in each edition of our quarterly newsletter. This literary collection serves as a reminder to each member of the staff, the board, and the public that the VAC is a living, breathing entity, and that each event planned and project undertaken works toward a common goal set forth by the museum’s original 12 founders in 1977: finding, acquiring, and preserving a collection of legacy military aircraft with which to educate visitors about the significant contributions these aircraft and their pilots made to history.



Fouga CM.170 Magister (also featured on front cover)

Volunteers are the backbone of Valiant Air Command, Inc. We operate with a minimal paid staff, but it is our community of volunteers that is responsible for most of the major activities in the museum – from maintaining and flying aircraft to educating and guiding our guests, or organizing our social and special events. We are always looking for good people to join the VAC family.

Many volunteers start out as tour guides and then move into an area that interests them. While we do ask for a minimum commitment of 4 hours a week, most people contribute much more. Our volunteers come from diverse backgrounds – some have years of experience in aviation, while others have no prior experience with warbirds but are interested in finding a rewarding opportunity to support the community. The minimum age for volunteer applications is 18. To fill out our volunteer application, visit our website at www.valiantaircommand.com/volunteer.

Statement of Purpose

The Valiant Air Command Inc. was formed to perpetuate the history of aviation, to encourage gathering of men and women in camaraderie, research and Warbird restoration, to serve as an educational tool for young and old alike; and to assure that the memory of those who gave their lives in service to their country shall not perish.

Commander's Report



It is with a heavy heart that I begin to pen this note for the UnScramble.

The Board of Directors asked me to fill in for the remainder of Norm Daniels' commitment as Commander. Fill in, I can do; replacement, I cannot. Norm was an outstanding Commander, leader, and manager. The management and people skills he developed over his years in the industry served him well at the Valiant Air Command. He is an Icon, and we deeply miss him. In his place, I promised the Board of Directors that I would do my best to lead the VAC in the coming years as we continue to expand and attract more visitors.

At another location in this edition, there is a flyer announcing the Member/Volunteer Appreciation Dinner on Saturday, 19 Oct. I am pleased that we are hosting this event, and we will continue to find ways to show our appreciation for all that our Members and Volunteers do. Without their support, we could not exist.

Looking forward; our Veterans Day Weekend Open House is just around the corner, to be held Saturday and Sunday, November 9th and 10th, 9:00 am to 5:00 pm each day. The Open House is Free to all Veterans (active, retired, or separated) and all Florida Residents. We are asking you to bring a non-perishable food donation, like a canned good, that we will donate to a needy food bank in the local area. As always, we are looking for volunteers to help.

The local permitting process has once again delayed the construction of our new Event Center, and has continued to increase the cost to complete. As of now, the builder is planning to pour concrete in mid-October. Once we have the steel structures in place, there will be a public construction media event. We are still looking for a completion date in February. At whatever date the construction is complete, we will have a public dedication ceremony.

Our Space Coast Warbird AirShow planned for March 2025 has been rescheduled by our Board of Directors for March 2026. The airport has a construction contract to re-surface the main runway 18/36, which is planned to start in February 2025 and run for about 4 months.

Thanks in advance for everyone's support in the coming years.

Bob Boswell, Commander
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(321) 268-1941 ext. 4101



Executive Officer's Report

Welcome to our 3rd Quarter Newsletter. Much has happened over this last quarter. For starters, our new Event Hangar is now well under development. Layout of the building with most of the underground plumbing has been completed, and the perimeter footings have been dug. What we need now is steel rebar and concrete poured. The first concrete should be poured by mid-October along the north quarter of the flooring where all the underground plumbing is. Most all the building steel frame work is on site waiting for installation. The second entry road from TICO Road to the new Event Hangar along with its large parking lot has all been filled with many loads of fill dirt and leveled out. The retention area in front has been cleaned out and is ready for grass. When will this project be done??? Hopefully in February 2025. We have in Restoration a left C-47 wing under construction/ modification to be used as an overhead canopy for the main Event Hangar entryway. The Event Hangar has been long coming and is now starting to come together.

Also in restoration is the OV-1 Mohawk that used to sit out front. It is currently being refurbished, and once completed, it will stand as our gate guard with its new paint job.

I'm sure you all heard or have perhaps already seen that we have moved our new acquisition on loan from the U.S. Army into the Main Hangar: the MQ-1C Gray Eagle Drone. It will soon be joined by another new acquisition that the team is very excited about. Flying in on loan from our U.S. Navy, the MH-53E Sea Dragon helicopter will arrive in mid-October. And to go one step further, we will be getting another Navy helicopter on loan in spring 2025.

Coming up, we have the "Membership Volunteer Appreciation Dinner" on Oct 19th. If you haven't already signed up, please do so by contacting the front desk. Reservations are needed for the head count for our dinner. Then on Nov. 9th and 10th (Sat. & Sun.) we have our Veterans Weekend Open House, a community favorite that we're excited to host once again this year.

One can obviously see that the VAC is continually growing and we're bursting at our seams for room... Which, of course, means we need more volunteers for our growth. Let's grow together in becoming one of the most sought after places to visit in Florida.



Refurbished C-47 wing to be used as an overhead canopy at the new Event Center



MQ-1C Gray Eagle

Marvin Juhl, Executive Director

Email: ExecutiveOfficer@valiantaircommand.com

(321) 268-1941 ext. 4104



UPCOMING EVENTS

October 8

Board Of Directors Meeting
12:00PM - Boardroom

October 16

MH-53 Sea Dragon Arrival
TENTATIVE at time of writing

October 19

Members / Volunteers Dinner
6:00PM Vietnam Hangar

October 31

Halloween

**November
9 & 10**

Veterans Day Open House
09:00AM - 5:00PM

November 11

Veteran's Day

November 12

Board Of Directors Meeting
12:00PM - Boardroom

November 28

Thanksgiving Day
Museum Closed

December 25

Christmas Day
Museum Closed

Finance Officer's Report



I met Norm Daniels at the Space Center in 1997. We have worked together in one capacity or another over the last 27 years. Around 2010, he called me and asked me to meet him at this place called the Valiant Air Command. After driving around the airport area for a while, I finally found the place. At that time, Norm volunteered in restoration working on projects with Larry Mathis. He lured me in with, "Come on over a day or two a week and sand some airplanes". Fourteen years later, I find myself still here and missing him terribly. He truly cared for this place, the people, and the planes. He worked as hard as he was able for the last 8 years to protect and grow this museum, even in the face of severe health issues and advancing age. I hope to carry his care and diligence forward and continue what he has started with the Event Hangar project.

On the topic of the Event Hangar, we need help getting the project completed. Any donation large or small will gratefully be accepted. Many people have asked how to contribute to remember Norm and honor his commitment to the VAC, and I'm sure that his response would be to donate money to help bring the hangar project to completion.

Norm firmly believed the Event Hangar will help grow the museum, be a focal point for future growth, and bring more people and companies to the Valiant Air Command. We already have corporate clients that are eager to book with us for multiple-day events. Bob Boswell has been instrumental in helping to drive future business to the Event Center and will, as Commander, carry on the work started. For myself, I am committed to helping complete this project and grow the museum. The PX has done outstandingly this year and we are on pace to exceed last year's visitor count. Maureen, Sheryl, and Rich welcomed every guest and have been able to exceed expectations for PX sales. I can't thank them enough for all they do.

Below is the Event Center site progress to date. Hopefully we will be able to pour concrete in October, and after that, start erecting the building. We are on track for opening the building in the first quarter of 2025.



Event Center construction site showing current progress.

Tracy Bohrmann, Finance Director
Email: FinanceDirector@valiantaircommand.com
(321) 268-1941



Facilities Officer's Report

The Facilities Team continues to support event setup, aircraft movements, aircraft restoration/ maintenance assistance, event teardown, aircraft movement back into the hangars, facilities infrastructure work, and support to other VAC teams. Tom Etter, David Shores, Terry Nies, Roger Tonovitz, Joel McGinley, Jim Bowers, Larry Dickinson, Dave Cann, Dale Hoth, Greg Goetz, Curt Reus, Rob Shaw, Tom Wilke, and periodic support by docent Chip Chamberlain provided excellent support to the team and museum over the past quarter.

Events during the quarter included the Space Coast Auto Rally, Southeast Region Florida Wing CAP Tour, the Lily Renzetti Event, the Villages BMW Club, Women in Aviation meeting, Rock Oyster Media Film Production Company shoot, Governor DeSantis' visit to present a check to Space Coast Regional Airport Authority, and the Raul Villafana Senior Chief NAVY Retirement Ceremony.

Around the publishing of the last UnScramble, a mini-split HVAC system was installed for the B-52. Positive comments continue from patrons. Midwest Roofing also completed the re-roof of the Vietnam Hangar Pocket Doors with a new TPO roof. Midwest Roofing used the leftover materials from the Main Hangar low roof project and a few additional materials the museum purchased.

The toilet in the break room bathroom was resealed. A 20-Amp socket outlet for IT UPS use was added in the copier room.

The wooden ramps and blocks used to transport the Advent Lutheran Genie lift between the church and VAC were strengthened and labeled, allowing for easier loading and unloading onto the VAC blue trailer. We appreciate Advent Lutheran allowing VAC to use their lift after we restored it to working order.

A flush and coolant change and clean out of coolant reservoir for VAC pickup was completed. The compressor line leak to the bead blaster in Restoration was fixed. The Bad Boy mower got an oil and filter change. Various golf cart cables were replaced due to corrosion and we have an extra assortment of new ones. All golf cart batteries were watered and charged with the new charger that can treat sulphation, which should extend the life of our batteries. The starter on the Harlan tug checked out okay, but the battery had to be replaced.

Ceiling tiles were replaced in the Vietnam Hangar restroom alcove and the Gift Shop in the cash register area. The LED lights in the B-52 lower deck area were returned to operation.

The Reilly dragster trailer was moved behind the Restoration Hangar, and the north driveway and main tarmac were cleared of equipment to maximize space for aircraft tie down during hurricane season/inclement weather and for events requiring additional ramp space.

The inventory of all National Naval Aviation Museum (NNAM) aircraft and equipment on loan to VAC was completed and sent to the museum. All aircraft and equipment were accounted for in spreadsheet form with designation, bureau/serial number, description, NNAM accession number, and photo with photo date as requested by NNAM. The inventory is viewable in Dropbox [HERE](#).

The emergency shutoff cable was replaced on the mobile forklift along with other minor issues. The JLG manlift was returned to operation.

The team assisted with the movement and flipping of DC-3/C-47 wing being prepped by Resto for use with the new Event Hangar.

A sump pump was added to pump condensate water up and over to the janitor's closet sink after instances of flooding from the HVAC units in the back of the Main Hangar. Wood shims were also added to one of the air handlers to facilitate better drainage of condensation from unit pan to the lines, and to the sump pump. All requisite paper HVAC air handler filters were replaced and the washable filters were washed and replaced for the air handlers at the back of the Main Hangar.

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The leak issue in Restoration Mechanical Room was assessed. Water had been pouring onto the platform over the mechanical room for years due to items placed onto platform that crushed and displaced a vent pipe to the outside of the building. The platform is rotted in places and will need to be partially replaced. There are also small, corroded areas of roof over the mechanical room that have been patched temporarily. AMAC will help assess damage to red-iron beams that are corroded from the leaks. The mechanical room is dried out and mildew will be mitigated once the assessment is complete and a way ahead is determined.

The team added air to the port side Learjet main tires. The port strut needs servicing. Air was added to the F-9, SBD, Wildcat, F-18, Me-208, and F-11. Both F-11 nose tires had lost their beads. The aircraft was jacked up and a strap was used to reseat the beads and fill.

The team helped air up the main tires and move the Fouga out and back into Main Hangar for short notice photo shoot. (See the front cover and pg 4 for examples from that shoot.)

The electric circuit from the Vietnam Hangar STEM area was extended into the pocket doors for tarmac camera use. The team ran two Cat-6 cables from the Vietnam Hangar man-cave, across the hostess room, out into the hangar, and back to the pocket doors for a camera overlooking the South tarmac.

A blind was installed on the man-cave door facing the Event Hangar construction. The blind keeps people from seeing everything stored in the man-cave and reduces the temperature in the room.

The Facilities Team worked with the Restoration Team to remove the MQ-1C Gray Eagle container with drone from the delivery flatbed trailer, add container wheels, remove the cover, and display the drone next to F-14A in the Main Hangar. The team moved aircraft and assisted with the preparation of the museum for U.S. Navy contingent for future MH-53 arrival.

Behind the scenes, the entire team continues to do a great job supporting the day-to-day operations of the museum.



Volunteer team moving the MQ-1C Gray Eagle container into place beside the F-14A Tomcat.

Hawk Moore driving forklift to move MQ-1C Gray Eagle in its transportation case into the Main Hangar.



**Hawk Moore, Facilities Director
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VALIANT AIR COMMAND, INC.

19 OCT 2024

Member Appreciation

★ WWII STYLE HANGAR DANCE ★

* SOCIAL HOUR *
* DINNER *
* DANCING *

* 6PM - 7PM *
* 7PM *
* 8PM - 10PM *

NO
CHILDREN

18+

Member +1 = Free

Active Non-Member Volunteer = Free

+1 = \$10

Reservations required by 16 OCT 2024

Contact VAC Gift Shop @ (321) 268-1941



PR Officer's Report



We have received six leads from ZOLA from brides looking for a place to hold their weddings.

We have finally received our Gray Eagle Drone from the Army. It is in a large fiberglass container, where it will be stored until space opens in restoration.

I will represent the museum at the Starr Event for Hospitality Workers put on by the Cocoa Chamber on September 19th.

The Toronto Sun newspaper will be visiting the museum on September 10th. They are one of the largest newspapers in Canada.

The Bradenton Times included our museum in an article about things to see on the Space Coast.

On September 5th, a group of veterans from Sonata will tour the museum and present us with a beautiful 2X2 sign from Grumman.

Our Facebook page has a excellent video of the unpacking of our new Gray Eagle Drone provided by Martin Pring and our team of photographers.

David Shores, PR Director
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S-2F Tracker after a rainstorm, as photographed by our newest member of the Social Media team, Tim Jeror.



Webmaster's Report

By Martin Pring

Soaring Higher: Valiant Air Command Website & Social Media Performance Update

Dear Members and Supporters,

We're thrilled to share the latest results from our website and social media efforts, and the numbers speak for themselves! With your incredible support, the Valiant Air Command's digital presence is not only growing but thriving. Let's dive into the highlights of our recent performance:

Expanding Our Global Reach

Over the past 90 days, we've welcomed visitors from around the globe, underscoring the international appeal of aviation history and our museum. Here are the top-performing countries by session:

United States: 13,850 sessions (up from 5,868)

United Kingdom: 392 sessions (up from 189)

Russia: 280 sessions (up from 105)

Canada: 162 sessions (up from 82)

Germany: 104 sessions (new entry)

Brazil: 94 sessions (new entry)

This impressive growth shows that aviation enthusiasts worldwide are discovering what makes Valiant Air Command so special!



Traffic Overview: Unstoppable Momentum

In the last 90 days, our website traffic has skyrocketed:

17,131 site sessions (up from 7,098)

13,191 unique visitors (up from 5,736)

The numbers are clear: more people are discovering and engaging with our content than ever before. This surge reflects the growing interest in the rich history of the aircraft we showcase.

Visitor Behavior: Where They're Coming From

Our website traffic is driven by a diverse range of sources, showing the effectiveness of our outreach:

Google (Organic search): 9,155 sessions (up from 3,715)

Direct traffic: 5,500 sessions (up from 2,153)

Facebook (Organic Social Links): 478 sessions (new category)

DuckDuckGo (Organic search): 331 sessions (up from 162)

Our search engine optimization strategies are clearly paying off, with organic search still leading the way. We're also seeing increasing engagement from social channels like Facebook!

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Engagement Trends: Weekends Are Key

A significant spike in traffic occurred around June 22, likely due to recent events and promotions. Our busiest days? Sundays and Saturdays, with over 300 sessions each. This suggests that weekends are prime time for our audience to dive into our content.

Device Usage: Mobile Reigns Supreme

The majority of our visitors are accessing our site via mobile devices (68%), followed by desktops (30%) and tablets (2%). Ensuring a seamless mobile experience remains a top priority to keep our growing audience engaged.

New vs Returning Visitors: A Growing Community

An impressive 96% of our visitors are new, with 12,659 fresh faces exploring the Valiant Air Command website in the last 90 days. It's exciting to see our community expanding, with so many people discovering us for the first time!

Facebook Performance: Growing Engagement, Organically

On Facebook, we've maintained a strong presence over the past 30 days, despite not running any paid advertisements. Here are some key highlights:

Post reach: 42,892 (down from 73,818)
Post engagement: 13,195 (up from 8,061)
New Page likes: 52 (up from 42)
New Page followers: 95 (up from 89)

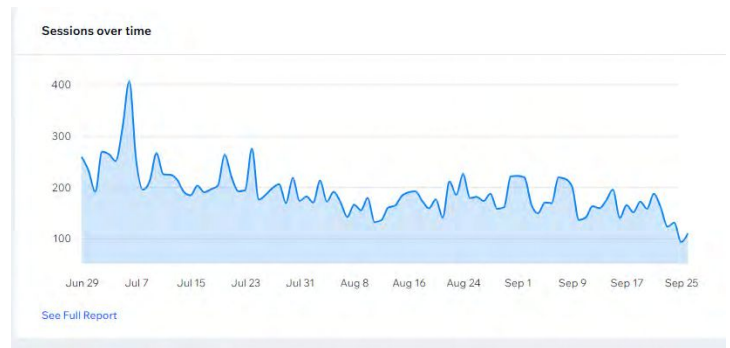
Interactions at a Glance:

Reactions: 3,815 (down from 4,402)
Comments: 560 (up from 270)
Shares: 219 (down from 301)
Photo views: 3,098 (up from 803)
Link clicks: 52 (down from 240)

The slight dip in reach and reactions is expected, as we've focused exclusively on organic (non-paid) social media efforts since our last update. However, we're excited by the massive increase in photo views, driven by several factors, including the arrival of the Gray Eagle, anticipation for the MH-53e, and the exceptional photography of our newest contributor, Tim Jeror. His fresh perspective and stunning imagery have undoubtedly captured the attention of our audience!

With these positive trends, we're eager to continue bringing you engaging, high-quality content. Thank you for your unwavering support—it's because of you that we're reaching new heights!

Warm regards,
The Valiant Air Command Team



Curator's Corner

By Jack Bradford



The past three months have seen slow but steady progress with efforts to update, organize and catalog our extensive memorabilia and documents collection. We collated documents, filed and sorted through items, and donated space-related books in our possession to several local organizations that have gratefully received them. We have re-organized operation and maintenance manuals in type order (i.e. Fighter, Bomber, Transport, etc.). This also included numerous pilot handbooks and logs. One interesting find was a copy of the transfer for a B-17G from Boeing to the Army Air Corp in 1943 with a price tag of \$132,000.

The memorabilia inventory is currently being updated by Christine Reynolds to account for artifacts that we have on display and in storage. When this effort is completed, it will give us a better way to keep track of all the items in our possession.

Documents and photographs continue to be integrated into the Flip Chart display in the Vietnam Memorabilia Room, which will help give guests a better understanding of the Vietnam conflict.

The Curator staff has obtained two complete female mannequins that will be outfitted and used in the MASH display area. Additional mannequins are still being sought for use in the MASH display as well as other display areas. There are many serviceable uniforms and flight suits that could be displayed once these additional mannequins are secured.



USS Hornet model

In the “Doolittle Raid” display case, we installed a model of the aircraft carrier USS Hornet (CV-8). It is configured with B-25 “Mitchell” bombers aligned on the deck just as they were during this historic mission. The display case has also been outfitted with a 1/48 scale B-25 model painted and lettered as one of the aircraft from the “Doolittle Raid”. Thanks to Chip Chamberlain for his masterful assembly and detailing of these models which helps to illustrate this important event in WWII history.

A new CD player was purchased for the 1940's era radio display located as you enter the WWII Memorabilia area. We now have the ability to provide our museum guests with a reliable rendition of FDR's famous “Day of Infamy” speech as well as historical broadcasts detailing the Normandy D-Day invasion.



B-25 Mitchell Bomber model

A small 9/11 memorial display has been set up alongside the F-16 “Fighting Falcon” in the Main Hangar. The display shows a model of the World Trade Center Twin Towers atop a narrow 3 ft vertical stand. This display will help highlight the significant role this Vermont Air National Guard F-16 played in providing critical air cover over the Manhattan area following the Twin Tower attacks on September 11, 2001.

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A new tabletop display case was donated to us from the community of Viera. It has been set up in the WWII Memorabilia section by our Main Lobby and is currently being used to display the uniform and historical items of Colonel W. N. Dillard, a famous World War II, Korea, and Vietnam-era Air Force pilot.

Reference:

<https://airandspace.si.edu/support/wall-of-honor/col-william-n-dillard-usaf-ret>



New Tabletop Display

Word Search

K P E R F O R M A N C E Z C P S U K Y U Q K E Z B
W L I E Y I P L A B R Y T H D S V Z B J Z U T Q S
D M D J U E Q Z H R O I I F E V V R U V W B W A U
O S A X W D I Z V S M Q G G V I S I T O R S Y U S
O O P I F O X I Q A Y Y E V E N T C E N T E R S N
L Z F C N C B Q C R L I A F J A S I H C D S S A A
I I B O S T F S Z J E I L I B K T D C E B U R I V
T B M M U P E I N U P S A N R B X K R J N S V R Y
T O M M K G A N G O F U T N Z C K E J O Y A I F S
L R J A P M A C A H P G B O T D O Z M K E R E O O
E Y T N G C B M E N T T W L R A N R R U U M T R C
R S U D H I V M A C C I Y I I A I P P O K Y N C I
A U X E U M F I N G O E N X L C T R U S B I A E A
I S J R Q D M T L L I A G G V D R I C C W G M M L
D S L T F X X C S C Y S S Q F Q C E O O M E F G M
E H Y O A V T H E H S F T T G A Q A L N M V D H E
V O C M C Y X E S T O A D E B Q L R T A B M W H D
L R P C I C W L Y R T P E W R P E C W G T D A W I
S N L A L U L L U A Q V K A G K R C O H B I O N A
D E K T I R T B A C D K C B M E P K O N N T O U D
C T H U T A R O F K L G D W E B M A S T E R O N D
A H G C I T I M M E R L G K X A W F I N A N C E S
A P U K E O D B S R A W J F A C E B O O K J U B U
Z Z E J S R M E O H A N G A R D A N C E Y U A V W
V H A N E M J R H E L C O N R V K K W N F Z U H S

How many words from this edition can you find in the word search?

“Another Flight of the Intruder”

By CAPT Don Fraser, USN (ret)



Every story needs a starting point, and I guess this one could start with service selection for the Naval Academy Class of 1967. Choices included surface line, submarines, naval aviation, and the Marine Corps. In the aviation branch, the obvious choice would be pilot training, but a newer category was Naval Flight Officer - someone who would perform non-pilot duties as an aircraft crewmember. In 1967, this road did not lead to a chance to command a squadron and beyond, so for the Naval Academy class of 1967, there were only around thirty billets available to the entire graduating group of 890 midshipmen. By luck or happenstance, four of the thirty wound up being assigned to Attack Squadron 196, the Main Battery, flying in the Grumman A-6A Intruder — the Navy’s all weather attack aircraft — out of Whidbey Island, Washington. This intrepid group of newly minted bombardier/navigators (B/Ns) included Dick Deuter, Jay Sandlin, Pete Young, and me.

In the Vietnam era, VA-196 would deploy to Southeast Asia on five combat cruises, the first two aboard the USS Constellation, the third on USS Ranger, and the final two on the USS Enterprise. In the course of those five deployments, the squadron would lose twelve aircraft in combat and an additional two aircraft to operational mishaps. Of the twenty four combat aircrewmembers lost to SAMs or triple-A fire, only nine survived. Of the nine who made it to the ground alive, five became prisoners of war. Only four of the twenty four were rescued by Navy or Air Force assets. Of these four fortunate aircrew, only one was able to immediately return to a flying status — my pilot. In large part because of its sturdy airframe, A-6 Intruder losses in the Vietnam era totaled sixty-nine aircraft, with VA-196 leading all other active A-6 squadrons in losses- an unenviable statistic.

Team building between pilot and bombardier/navigator in the Intruder is not always an easy process. In my case, I was two pay grades junior to my pilot — Lieutenant Commander Evan “Pee Wee” Reese, who was transitioning from the single-seat, propeller-driven A-1 Skyraider to the two-man crew A-6. As Evan and I were learning how to work together in the air, there were often times when I believed he would have preferred to have 200 more pounds of jet fuel in the tanks rather than another person in the cockpit. Eventually, I was able to prove my worth during training flights around Hawaii as we were heading to the Western Pacific aboard USS Ranger in the fall of 1969. On a night lit with a full moon, Evan and I were flying on the squadron skipper’s wing to a live-bomb training exercise. Unexpectedly, we became the flight lead as the navigation system in the skipper’s plane failed. With the commanding officer in tow, and as a smooth working crew, we successfully led the way to the target and back to the ship. The rest of this tale is a story for another time, but from that day forward we worked well as a team. Notably, it was my twenty-fourth birthday, and I couldn’t have asked for a more meaningful present.



Don Fraser and Pee Wee Reese on the flight deck of the USS Ranger

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In a book penned by an Air Force pilot assigned to Search and Rescue (SAR) efforts along the Ho Chi Minh trail in April 1968, he related the advice he was given as the “new guy” when he arrived in Thailand for his one year tour. He was told, “One day, you will have a bad day, then another time you will also have a REALLY bad day!” Those words held true, even for Navy aviators.

Ranger’s first line period on Yankee Station off the coast of North Vietnam began on 17 November 1969. Our squadron veterans from the previous cruise filled the flight schedule on this first day. The rookies got involved the next day, and as it happened, Evan and I once again found ourselves flying as the squadron skipper’s wingman. In an effort to bring the North Vietnamese to the peace table, President Richard Nixon had suspended bombing targets in the North. Unbelievably, flying into enemy skies over North Vietnam was, for this time period, not allowed by the skewed rules of engagement dictated from Washington, D.C.

Starting as early as 1959, North Vietnamese troops invaded neighboring neutral Laos to establish a supply route south to the battlefields in South Vietnam. Five years later, the US began air attacks in an attempt to stem the flow of troops, supplies, and munitions streaming south. (Our nation had signed the Geneva Convention, which should have meant we shouldn’t be bombing a neutral sovereign nation.) Both the United States and North Vietnam were guilty of fighting a secret war in Laotian territory. Unlike earlier squadron combat cruises, all our missions would be flown against targets along the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos.

“Life is about choices” and “life isn’t fair” are two mantras that have guided my time on earth. I quickly learned you have no choice of when and where your “bad day” might occur. When it does, fairness is not part of the equation. On my very first combat hop, our bomb load was twelve Mark 82 500-pound bombs and two Mark 20 Rockeye cluster bombs. The A-6A Intruder’s state-of-the-art bombing system was an excellent one when it worked, but when a system failure occurred (as it did frequently following a catapult shot), old fashioned dive bombing became the primary delivery method. Typically, we would fly from Yankee Station across South Vietnam near the DMZ, and once over Laos, turn north to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail near Ban Karai pass or Mu Gia pass. Our flight of two Intruders would meet an Air Force forward air controller (FAC) who would locate and mark targets in the area for us to strike. Combat rules suggested only two dive bombing attacks should be made on any one target. (Since the Rockeyes were reserved for only high-value targets, we were expected to bring them back to the ship.) On our second dive bombing pass, delivering the remaining Mark 82s, our right engine fire warning light began to flash — our “bad day” was underway.

To Be Continued...



A-6 Intruder on display in the Vietnam Hangar



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- 2nd Quarter** - April, May & June • Submission deadline - June 24th NL Published - June 30th
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