THE PEACETIME YEARS

Ron Haag

Contrary to what many people think, the years between the Korean conflict and the Vietnam era were not all fun and games. Carrier aviation was among the most dangerous of peacetime military occupations, second only to the Rangers, if my memory is correct.

In 1957 I was an AT3 in VA 195. We flew AD6s. We deployed aboard the USS Yorktown CVA 10 which is now a museum in Charleston, South Carolina. I worked for the electricians on the flight deck as a troubleshooter. I was on the flight deck for every launch and every recovery. During the almost 6 month cruise we lost several enlisted men on the flight deck due to death or injury and only one pilot who flamed out just off Waikikii beach and was never recovered. As the Yorktown came back to the states at the end of the cruise we got a bulletin requesting volunteers to go to air crew school. We had a detachment of those planes aboard at the time so I was kind of familiar with what they did. In spite of my training to never volunteer for anything, I did. My shipmates all told me that is dangerous. I told them to just look around and see where the danger really is. I figured the safest place on one of these ships was in the cockpit. As soon as the Yorktown got back I transferred to North Island Naval Air Station and started my aircrew training.

My name is Ron Haag. In 1958 I was a 22 year old 2nd class petty officer flying as a Combat Aircrewman in AD5N's with VA(AW) - in the Vietnam era.) I had Combat Air crew wings but we never saw comb- -ense of Taiwan could be considered combat. It was the height of the Co- w wings had no stars on them.I alternated with the other aircrewma- n one hop I would sit in the front seat on the right side of the pilot and opera- the ASW gear, do the D.R. Navigation or man the sonobouy dispenser, deper- - mission was. The next hop I would sit directly behind the pilot and operate the radar. We had the capabilities of Anti-Submarine duty, Pathfinder, All Weather Attack, Long Range Communications and our primary mission which was to deliver the "special weapon". (nukes)

One day as we were getting close to our deployment date, I and another AT were waiting for two of our aircraft to return from a training hop so we could work off the electronic gripes. (Fix whatever electronic problems the pilots said needed repairing). We saw the planes fly overhead in the landing pattern but they didn't show up back at our squadron like they should have. Finally, one of our chiefs drove up in a pickup and told us to get back to the barracks, pack our gear and get down to the ship, (The USS Lexington, CVA16) as it was going to leave the next morning. Approximately one week earlier than we originally were told. Our planes had taxied directly to the quay wall and were being loaded aboard with the aircraft crane. (As we left the states we thought we were Van Team 58 Detachment Lima. Our cruise books were printed with that information. We even had a patch made up. But there was a lot of turmoil on the west coast about that time due to unexpected maintenance of some of our carriers. The records got all snafued so we are not completely sure what van team we were.) It seems our Marines had just gone ashore in Lebanon and we were going over there to support them. It took us about five days to get to Hawaii where we usually spent at least a week going through ORI, (Operational Readiness & Inspection). We were there one night. We sailed the next day for Guam, another week or so and spent one night there also. Then the situation in Lebanon calmed down so we didn't have to hurry over there. The next thing we knew the Chinese Communists started shelling those offshore islands of Quemoy and Matsu. At that point we spent the next 45 days sailing up and down the Straits of Formosa. At one point 'they' decided we should send our prop planes through the straits at twenty thousand feet to see if we could decoy the Migs to come out and play. The idea was our Jets would be up much higher and would jump the Migs and maybe break out of this stalemate we had been in for so long. We couldn't get our AD's past 16,000 ft. and no Migs came out to play. And none of us in the AD's even cared. Another time they called 'flight quarters' just after taps. We all knew there was no flying scheduled that night but as the aircrewmens duty station was in the ready room we hurried down there. It seems we were going to go bomb the Chinese mainland. Every carrier in the area was going through the same thing that night. And it was a very long night. They were so serious that we had our planes fueled and armed with conventional weapons, we had been briefed on targets, etc. They even had us remove all of our ID except our dog tags and issued us those little silk flags that said in many languages that I am a US serviceman, etc., etc. To our credit no one, not pilots nor air crewmen said "no way, I'm not going to do this". On the other hand when they eventually called it off no one said, oh no, I really wanted to go. We figured we would have started world war 3. The Taiwanese government eventually gave us all medals for the 'defense of Taiwan'. (If we could be located, that is.) Eventually, we were relieved by another carrier and we proceeded to Subic Bay, The Philippine Islands. We were only in port for seven days and it rained the whole time. Now, up to this time I had never had a lot of sympathy for any Marine but our shipboard Marines marched down the gangway and spent the whole time out in the jungle playing army. That time I had to feel sorry for those poor jar heads.

When we eventually got back to the Formosa area the British Carrier Centaur was also operating in that area. One day our squadron was supposed to make a simulated attack on the British ship during war games. We sent two of our AD5N's and had just made a simulated bombing run on their ship. We were climbing back to altitude when our wing man, Lt.(jg) W.E.Bartels came up on our radio, "Hey Smitty, did you see that plane go into the drink?" My pilot Lt.(jg) R. E. Smith immediately put the left wing down so we could see directly below us. There was a big oil slick in the water and the rings were still moving out away from it. When we got the wings level again we looked up and saw a big orange parachute. We found out

later that two planes from the Centaur had had a mid air collision. One pilot had to eject but the other one made it back to his ship.

It was a beautiful cloudless day, no white caps, just the kind of day you would hope for if this sort of thing were to happen. I had our IFF (Identification, Friend or Foe) squawking "emergency" which put a special code on the Lex's radar screen that told them we had an emergency and exactly how far we were from the ship and in what direction. We had the rescue Helo on the way before that Limey even got his feet wet. I had my 35mm camera with me so I started taking pictures. I got a photo of him while he was still above us and when he was even with us. My pilot then told me that his camera was in his Nav Bag and it had a telephoto lens on it. So then I took more pictures and got him hitting the water. We dropped a smoke light right next to him so the Helo could judge the wind speed and direction. We got pictures of the Helo coming in and picking him up. When we got back to the ship I mentioned to one of the ship's photographers what we had seen and done and told him that I had some of it on film. They took my film and tried some new type of developing solution and promptly washed my film out. It was as transparent as a pane of glass.

This was about the time the Navy decided that they had too many men. They had a 30 day 'early out' program and it was not optional. My time left was such that I had to be flown back to the states for discharge. Against my wishes, I might add. It took me a week to get back to San Diego where they promptly tried to get me to reup. The first night back I was watching TV at a buddy's house when they interrupted for "an important announcement". There had been an accident out in Westpac. Two aircraft from the Carrier Lexington and VA(AW) 35 had a midair collision. One pilot and one aircrewman had bailed out and were rescued. No injuries. The other pilot and the man with him went down and were declared 'lost at sea'. It was fairly late in the cruise, both radars were 'down' so there was no one in either back seat. The Navigation Officer from the ship had wanted to "go for a ride" so he took the place of the front seat crewman. The lost pilot was my pilot, R.E.Smith. Unfortunately for them, the outcome was not as lucky as it was for the English pilot. Before, when I was on my way back to the States I was in the big Enlisted Men's Club in Yokosuka, Japan when I ran into a group of British sailors. Most of them were wearing aviation insignias on their uniforms. I inquired if they were off the Centaur? They were. Was the pilot who had the midair collision from their squadron? He was. How did I know about that? they asked. I told them about our part in his rescue. I left the address of Mr. Smith and told them that he had pictures of everything after the collision and ejection. I hadn't mentioned to the ships photographers about my pilot's camera. I don't know whether he ever said anything to them or not. I believe that he had his camera with him on his last flight. I never felt comfortable about writing to his parents and inquiring about his camera. Aside from the obvious sorrow that I felt about losing my pilot and the other officer, I was very upset about never seeing any of those photos. How many times would anyone be a witness to such a thing, have two cameras available to them and never get to see a picture of any of it?

Carrier Aviation is seldom 'fun & games.

IN THE OTHER PLANE

Before we left on the '59 cruise, I had made a statement, over a few beers and being a 23 year old male who was invincible, immortal and stupid, that seeing as how this would be my last cruise that I wanted to do something memorable. Like making a parachute jump or having to ditch at sea. Our planes had a bottom on them that was almost as flat as a water ski. The only thing better for landing in the water was a seaplane. (You can see how very stupid I really was because that is what I thought at the time.) One of my fellow air crew buddies, Don Waring AT2 CA heard me and took it upon himself to keep reminding me of my statement. He would say things like, "Well Ron, you only have two months left, one month left" etc. right down to the very last hop before I had to be flown home for discharge. It just so happened on that very last hop as we were astern of the ship in the landing pattern our plane got a severe case of the hiccups. The engine sounded like a popcorn machine. I said to my pilot, "put it in, put it in". We were low and slow, out of our parachute harnesses, canopies open. All we had to

do was raise the wheels. After I kept it up he told me to "shut up, we can make it back to the ship". We did. So much for my big adventure. The next day was the day I had to leave for the states and discharge. The aircrewman who survived the midair collision was none other than my old buddy Don Waring.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"We were practicing that zigzag maneuver where two planes cover each others tails. We were in the lead. All of a sudden there was a big explosion and all kinds of junk came flying up through the cockpit, I looked over at my pilot, Lt. Comdr. Snyder. He was gone. He had bailed out. We didn't have ejection seats so we had to unbuckle and jump over the side. We had to dive for the wing so the tail wouldn't come along and bonk us. There was no tail. The other plane had sheared it off. When I unbuckled my seat belt I immediately popped up out of the cockpit. I was wearing 6 inch boondocker type shoes and one of them got caught on a screw under the instrument panel. It took all of my strength to pull myself back down and get my foot free. When I did get it free I sailed right up out of the cockpit. I pulled my ripcord and floated down to the water. Best feeling in the world. I got out of my parachute, inflated my Mae West and my raft and had climbed into it when my pilot came floating down. I had ridden the plane down that far. Mr. Snyder had jumped in such a hurry that he didn't take time to tighten any of his parachute straps and the opening shock drove him right through the chest straps and he came down hanging by his knees. We were picked up by a Japanese fishing boat and returned to our ship."

As I said earlier, Carrier Aviation is seldom 'fun & games'.