

# VA-165's Vietnam cruises aboard USS Constellation (CVA-64)

By

Norman R. Blinn, Captain, US Navy (Ret.)

I never realized that I was one of the “old guys” until I attended an F/A-18 Dining-Out hosted by PMA265, where I worked as a contractor. Like all of the retirees, I wore a tuxedo with miniature medals. RADM John Weaver, a retired AEDO, was the principal speaker. As we mingled during the cocktail party and again after the dinner, I noticed that none of the active duty guys (including the Flag Officers) were wearing Vietnam-era medals like the Admiral and I were. Then it suddenly hit me ... we lived in another era that these guys don't even know about!

I started thinking about the past and what it was like to try to keep sixteen airplanes flying from the decks of USS Constellation (CVA-64). No that's not a misprint, in those days fossil-fueled flattops were either CVAs or CVSSs.

From 1970-1973, I was AMO and MMCO in VA-165, a Whidbey Island-based A-6A squadron. My family spent over 36 months on the “rock”, but our squadron was in its homeport for less than ten months during my three-year tour with the “Boomers”. During the war years, the Navy ran its carriers and squadrons hard and put them away wet. Ten-month cruises were common, as were short turn-arounds between deployments.

After returning home from deployment, we'd cut everyone loose for the post-cruise standdown which was supposed to last a month, but rarely exceeded two weeks. We'd work a day shift for the first month, increase to two shifts for another and then go round-the-clock as we prepared for the Airwing's NAAS Fallon weapons deployment, FCLPs, carrier qualifications and pre-deployment workups.

The maintenance system was different back then. We did daily, pre- and post-flight inspections (turnarounds weren't invented yet). Instead of phased maintenance we did calendar checks, a five-day look/fix evolution at 16 week intervals for A-6s. Usually you'd have to rob the incoming checkbird to get the other one out and you could be sure of doing a “rug dance” for the skipper if you had two planes overlapping in check for more than a day! Depot maintenance was on a progressive cycle and hadn't migrated to SDLM yet. As an aside, the F/A-18 reverted to an Integrated Maintenance Concept (IMC) which is a phased depot maintenance system. It's a lot different from what we had in the seventies, but isn't it interesting how the new-ideas pendulum swings!

During the turn-around cycle (usually less than six months) we were all taxed to the limit. Immediately upon return, AIRPAC would take at least 12 of our 16 planes. They would be transferred to other squadrons or go to NADEP Norfolk for PAR (Progressive Aircraft Rework). We called it “Paint and Return” because A-6As would come back with shiny white/gray polyurethane paint jobs and a logbook full of NNC gripes (Noted, Not Corrected.) Airplanes would dribble into the squadron as we prepared for Fallon and CQ. Configuration control was a nightmare as we received planes modified with various TDs and NADEP LESs (Local Engineering Specifications). We never really had a full bag of A-6s until we were close to deployment. The Maintenance Chiefs had a nightmarish challenge to get everything configured similarly and ready for sea.

Our big problem was “tired iron”. Everything was stretched to the limit. Grumman built a tough bird, but its avionics reliability was poor. Aside from the ordies, the strongest guys in the squadron were the AQs who lugged those heavy fire control system components in and out of AIMD daily. Sometimes, we'd only get one flight out of a box and it would go back for repair again. We tried everything; the “Golden Box concept” which matched components together and groomed them as a complete system or the “Loser Box

concept” which identified and scrapped problem boxes. Each program worked for a while, but the press of flight ops and the constant movement of airplanes for deployment or repair precluded any long-term benefit.

When a squadron was leaving for deployment, all outstanding requisitions were cancelled and the wing-weenies filled their holes by cannibalization from the remaining squadrons. More than a few tempers flared as we were forced to tear apart a perfectly good airplane that our troops had groomed into a good flyer so that another squadron could leave whole. Parts shortages affected everyone in the wing. CVW-9 had A-6A, A-7E, E-2B, EKA-3B, F-4J, RA-5C and SH-3G aircraft. To eliminate stragglers and avoid transpacs for our duds, AIRPAC’s policy was to fly the airwing to North Island and hoist each airplane aboard by crane.

We survived through cannibalization. As the cruise began, each squadron would “bury” one or two airplanes in their most inaccessible corner of the hangar deck and suck it dry to fly the rest. As the cruise ended, we’d try to resurrect our hangar queens so we wouldn’t have to crane them off and have to worry about a derelict many miles from home. Our chiefs took pride in getting everything up for the flyoff, but there were always a few that were questionable. If they had two good engines and could get home safely, they went. Our most experienced pilots and B/Ns wound up with the shakier birds. Some went NORDO after launch and I saw more than one plane pop it’s RAT after the cat stroke!

Today’s maintainers are technocrats compared to the guys in my squadron. Every night, you’d see the QA guys huddled around airplanes with the shop chief, shift supervisor and his troops as they dug through a maintenance manual with a red-lens flashlight to fix a gripe. We didn’t have computers, fault isolation, BIT or work-packages, but we did have “B School” graduates and they were sharp! We didn’t even have VIDS-MAFS then! We used two- and four-part MAFS and SAFS. The most advanced piece of equipment was an OCR typewriter in admin until maintenance got one to type its messages in OCR format.

Shortages of everything were a fact of life. Everyone tried to circumvent the system to keep their airplanes flying and stashes of much-needed repairables were hidden in each shop. There was lots of animosity between AIMD, the ship’s Supply Department and the squadrons. The main problem was that we were all driven by separate goals. Squadrons got banged for the numbers of non-flyable airplanes. But if a plane was down for parts, the monkey was off our backs and on supply’s. Supply got banged for the number of off-ship NORS (now NMCS) requisitions so, to keep their performance numbers acceptable, they put lots of stuff into EXREP to stick it to AIMD and wouldn’t BCM long-standing AWP’s (Items with parts on order.) AIMD performance was graded by its RFI rate and turnaround time, so they always seemed to do the easy stuff first. We were screaming for parts, but as long as an item was in AWP, they had the monkey on supply’s back again and the daisy-chain continued.

The Navy supply system just couldn’t keep up with the war’s demands. AWP lockers routinely exceeded 1000 items and Rotatable Pools never reached their arbitrarily-set count of 300 items. Everyone worked hard to satisfy their performance goals. But the entire support chain functioned without seeming to worry about the number of warfighters that were up and ready to go.

ADP support for the Aviation 3-M system was in its infancy. No-one could ever stay abreast of the sheer volume of paperwork. Requisitions would just vanish and we’d lose track of parts in the AIMD repair cycle. Long-standing orders with good status would be cancelled inexplicably. Supply would double-issue some things and squadrons would order parts and transfer them between planes until multiple requisitions were out for the same part. Every squadron kept cruise boxes of “spare parts” and the FUNCWINGS generally ignored the issue until shortages reached critical mass. Then an amnesty would be declared, we’d turn-in most of our stuff, a few surprise inspections would occur and we’d go back to rat-holing again. You know, I never did get those CSD oil stains out of my car’s trunk carpet!

The whole system was adversarial. Squadron skippers cooled their heels as XOs for 18 months and then were in command for 18 months (later in the war, it was reduced to 15 months.) With so much at stake (selection as CAG or promotion to Captain) and so little time, readiness was a key ingredient to every CO's success. His planes had to look good around the boat, so all a CO wanted (in addition to one or two combat hops each day) was a good airplane, OK-3 wires for his aviators, no flight deck aborts for his squadron and 100% availability. Fun, huh?

Luckily, deployed manning was fairly stable. EPMAC and BUPERS would play their games with "one up/one down" detailing which meant that your replacement maintainer was usually one rank junior to the billet he filled and the guy who just left. Once we got home, we had to contend with training replacement aviators and maintainers who relieved folks that rotated to shore duty. But aside from the nuggets, Whidbey kept a fair pool of experienced A-6 people aboard so we got some really talented and experienced guys. Good thing too, because the A-6A required 44 maintenance manhours/flight hour. We had 300 enlisteds in each of our squadrons. After subtracting the admin-types, we mustered about 240 O-level and 50 I-level NECs. Our AIMD support was a marvel of technological advance ... in the decade before VAST, we had Semi-Automatic Checkout Equipment! We'd finally get the squadron humming and go to the ship and then CAG would grab nearly 20% of our people for three-month stints as mess cooks, MAAs, compartment cleaners and other housekeeping tasks. On cruise, we usually had about 190 guys split into two twelve-hour shifts taking care of 16 airplanes ... they were busy puppies!

The most inventive and exotic TAD assignment conceived by our CAG was the "Duct Cleaning Team". Short turnarounds were hard on us, but were even harder on our ship. Between overhauls, rather than visit the shipyard in San Francisco for upkeep, Connie got most of her maintenance pierside in San Diego. Engineering spaces and launch/recovery gear got much-needed attention while other maintenance was deferred. Due to neglect, the ship's air conditioning was really poor, so each squadron was tapped to provide a few small guys who pulled filters and access panels and crawled down air ducts to clean them. We almost had a slight mutiny on our hands when the team was directed to do officers country first, but a new plan of attack was devised and soon temperatures in berthing areas and the 0-3 level were reasonably comfortable.

A-6 squadrons had an AVCM as Maintenance Chief and ours was a phenomenally professional guy. In addition to the Master Chief, we kept a Senior Chief Metalsmith and an ATC or AEC in Maintenance Control. Ashore, they each ran one of the maintenance shifts. Afloat, the E-8 and E-7 would run one of the two 12-hour shifts while the AVCM worked flight ops. They'd take turns working the "roof" for launch and recovery and were solely responsible for deciding if an airplane had to be stricken below or could remain on the flight deck. In those days, we ran 1 ¾ hour cycles with seven launches/recoveries. After flight ops secured, the fighters would keep two birds strapped to the cats on "Alert 5" while we kept a tanker on "Alert 15".

Our line periods were 60 days long and then we'd make the two-day transit to Subic for five days inport. We'd fly off everything we could to NAS Cubi Point, Philippines the day before Connie entered Subic Bay and moored alongside Alava Pier. Flight crews would get a well-deserved extra night's jump on the rest of us at the Cubi Point O-Club bar and would also take every available bed in the Cubi BOQ. Rooms off the ship were in great demand, so the enterprising stewards maximized availability by filling each room with as many cots as it could hold. When you got to your room, bunks were lined up tightly and there was only about a one-foot-wide walkway between the racks and the head. No-one complained!!

Days were spent lounging by the BOQ pool or loading up on stereo gear and other NEX bargains. As night approached, everyone would either head for the O-Club or to the town outside the NAVSTA Subic's main gate (often we did both). Liberty in bawdy Olongopo, universally known as "the Po",

offered diversions for every taste. Who can forget Marmont III with its cocktail dress clad ladies, Bert and the Bonanza Boys (Filipinos singing country and western songs) or the street kids selling baby ducklings to feed the alligators in front of Paulines. Ice cold San Miguel beers were 15 cents and with only ten dollars worth of pesos in your pocket you could spend a full night on the town.

We kept a Beach Det at Cubi manned by two people from each squadron. As we took combat losses, there was a steady stream of airplanes and people in and out. Fleet Air Western Pacific Repair Activity (FAWPRA Cubi) was our on-site depot repair facility. Staffed by an AEDO Commander, planners and engineers and Filipino artisans, they worked miracles on our battle damaged and otherwise broken airplanes.

When the A-7's TF-41 engines began disintegrating in flight, I was tapped to go ashore and run the engine mod line. The Allison guys and FAWPRA folks changed engine bearings in two planes at a time. When they were ready for test hops, the ship would send two more in and the pilots took the good planes back to war. Being a Beach Det O-in-C had its ups and downs. Almost every night's sleep was interrupted by classified Op-Immediate messages from the squadrons or CAG. Most were aircraft repair status requests, but others were directions to call someone's home base and pass important messages. I remember when CDR Tom Watson, our P-CAG, came through to relieve CDR Gus Eggert. After feeding him and bedding him down, I got him a COD ride the next day. Knowing that my XO was running short of his favorite libation, I packaged two Beefeater "40 pounders" and asked him to carry them aboard. Drinking was tolerated aboard ship in the combat zone, but CAG did give me a quizzical look as he accepted the gurgling package. That night's 0300 Op-Immediate was a simple "package received, thanks" from the XO.

As we left on our second cruise in January 1972, CINCPAC decided to fool the Russian Bear bombers that always overflow us in mid-Pacific. Instead of the normal transit north of Luzon, our route to Subic Bay took us south through the Mindanao Sea. With two destroyers as escorts, we made a fast 30 knot transit outbound from Pearl Harbor to further fool the Russian planners. In those days, we didn't do blue water ops, so there was no flying (except for Bear intercepts) until a bingo field was available. In mid-afternoon, halfway between Wake Island and the Philippines, boiler problems developed and one after the other, as loads were shifted, safeties blew and each boiler in succession dropped off the line.

In short order, every motor on the ship stopped, ventilation fans wound down, emergency lighting illuminated and the ship got awfully quiet. Even the IMC was inoperative. Connie drifted helplessly for over 16 hours as the engineers frantically tried to boil water and get us moving again. Dinner by candlelight was a novelty, but we were close to the equator and the ship got real hot inside. Troops were milling about the flight and hangar decks to get fresh air. By nightfall, the flight deck looked like a giant boy scout campout as all ranks dragged their bedding topside in search of sleep and relief from the heat. The ship finally got underway in mid-morning.

Our squadron had an extremely professional, tight-knit readyroom. Their skill and bravery in combat was matched by exuberant rowdiness afterwards. We'd work hard and play hard. I still remember the letters "QDLW" on the readyroom blackboard. When we were in-port at Cubi it meant that all officers except the Duty Officer would assemble in the Cubi Officers Club for happy hour followed by "a quiet dinner and with a little wine". We always ate dinner together, but it was rarely quiet and we drank far more than a little wine! One evening our Executive Officer was at the bar and asked the bartender how much drinks cost during Happy Hour, "ten cents" was the reply. The XO whipped out a fifty-dollar bill and ordered 500 stingers. It was a night to remember!

The "Red Horse Cat House" adjoined the Cubi O-Club. It housed a hollowed-out 300-gallon drop tank fitted with a seat, restraining harness and an arresting hook. Launched down a 30-foot track by

compressed air, it crossed an “arresting wire” before passing through swinging doors and dropping into a four-foot deep pool of water. A wedge four inches before the wire caused a hook skip for those who tried to cheat and drop their hook early. Cat shots cost a dollar each and everyone in the squadron had to qualify. It was tricky, but a few guys trapped on the first try. Most took a dozen or more soakings before achieving success. You could always tell when a squadron had qualified by the wet guys standing in puddles of water at their end of the bar.

Five months into the cruise, Connie we visited Hong Kong for six days and were met by a planeload of wives. Unfortunately, we got underway less than 24 hours after arriving because of the Tet offensive, leaving our lonely wives to fill five days with shopping. Three months later, we stopped in Yokosuka before returning to CONUS. Déjà vu struck again! Within 48 hours, we were heading back to Yankee Station for three more months of combat. But no one complained. We finally got to wage unrestricted warfare against North Vietnam in Operation Linebacker!

Our Vietnam involvement promoted a divisive political debate for America and was a bittersweet experience for those of us who served there. We made some history, but lost good men doing it. Most remembered are VF-96 Lieutenants Randy Cunningham and Willie Driscoll who became the Navy’s first aces during Operation Linebacker. VF-92, their sister squadron, lost over half their F-4s and their XO, CDR Bob Blackburn. VA-147 lost their skipper, CDR Tom Wilkinson. A SAM downed Boomer 506. Our joy at recovering LT Bill Burton from the South China Sea was dampened by the loss of LCDR Fred Holmes. And so it went with most of the squadrons.

In all, I believe CVW-9 lost more than a dozen airplanes on that cruise. The flight deck was equally hazardous. A blueshirt died after being sucked down an A-7 intake, as did an AQ trapped in an A-6 cockpit fire. A yellow-shirt, blown over the side during night ops, was never found. Our squadron gunner was sucked halfway down an A-6 intake but was saved by three burly flightdeck crewman who hung onto his waist and legs until the unaware pilot throttled back.

It was a time of great challenge and some importance, but our piece of history is now mostly forgotten. There were no “John Wayne heroics”. All of us did what we were trained to do and fate was the hunter. It would have been nice to have some recognition when it was over. But we had our squadron-mates and our families, and the greatest reward of all was to be reunited with our loved ones when we came home.

Epilogue:

Both CAGs made flag, as did my XO. He later commanded CVW-9 and NAS Whidbey Island and pulled the ultimate one-star hat trick by returning to command Whidbey’s FUNCWING. Randy Cunningham didn’t make Captain, but he did represent his San Diego district in Congress, before going to prison for selling his votes!. One of our Boomer Lieutenants (call sign, Grumpy) recorded most of his combat hops on tape. His brother-in-law incorporated many of my squadron’s escapades when he wrote the book “Flight of the Intruder”. If you read the book “Box Man” and Jake Grafton were real people.

In the summer of 1996, I re-visited Whidbey to attend VA-165’s decommissioning. Many of my Vietnam-era squadron mates were there. Although we were grayer and heavier, the magic of our camaraderie was still strong. Less than a year later, VA-75, the last active A-6 squadron, was decommissioned at NAS Oceana. As the “Sunday Punchers” were piped over the side, the Navy’s medium attack mission was completed and we all faded into history.