

TRIDENTS in the Vietnam War

Recollections from a Generation Ago

by

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LOOKING BACK

As a former pilot in VP-26 I was proud to hear about the safety milestone reached by the "Trident" squadron in 1996, namely 250,000 accident free flight hours over 33 years. The early years of than run go way back to when we still flew P2V-5s, and I was part of it. My 1500 flight hours with the Squadron were logged during the period when we transitioned from the oldest Neptunes in the active fleet to the newest Orions, the P3B model.

Now I have extra reason to be proud of that record setting achievement, since my son, Lt. Gordon Wilson, was one of the Trident pilots who helped fill it out. But the news of that safety record raised some questions and stirred up vivid memories,... What about the two planes we lost during the Vietnam War? Apparently, they are considered combat losses and not included in the accident statistics. Still it bothers me that not much has been recorded about the circumstances surrounding those incidents,... nor, for that matter, about the Squadron's operations during that fateful six month period.

I was a contemporary participant in those events. And as it happened, I was as close as anyone to both the losses we incurred,... just one sortie removed in each case. The direct cause of the first was somewhat obscure, but the next was a clear shoot down. Because of similar conditions and location, reasoned speculation could reach the same conclusion for the earlier incident. But whatever the cause, the complete destruction of two P3's and 24 airmen killed within less than eight weeks is an intense rate of loss under any circumstances.

Still, looking back from a historic perspective nearly three decades removed now, it's understandable that except for our own little community, hardly anyone took note. There were plenty of war casualties to fill out news reports of the times. In South Vietnam, hundreds were being killed in action weekly. Over the North, SAM's and AA brought aircraft down daily. And monumental events stunned the world during that very brief stretch of history.... North Korea captured the USS Pueblo on January 23, 1968.... A week later in Vietnam, communist forces launched the TET offensive, the seminal event that turned the tide of public opinion generally against the war.... President Johnson surprised everyone in a broadcast statement to the nation on March 31, that he would not seek re-election.... And four days later, the assassination of Martin Luther King rocked the country.

If all is relative, there's little wonder that the combat service record of VP 26 in that protracted war was treated as only an obscure footnote. But prior to our deployment in November 1967, we had no special apprehension about going to Westpac. According to public statements of national leadership at the time, there was 'light at the end of the tunnel'. The war was supposedly entering the mop up and wind down stages. Heck, we were lucky to be getting our tickets punched before it was all over!

That summer I had been honored to get my own crew as Patrol Plane Commander of CAC-12, "the Dirty Dozen". Although several other j.o.'s would move up during the deployment, when it started we were the junior crew across the board. But I had also just been named as NATOPS/Standardization Officer for the Squadron, so we planned to get everyone upgraded, starting with PPC quals for my copilot, Lt(jg) Stu McLellan. Stu was a newlywed; recently married to a schoolteacher he met during our last deployment in Argentina. Now, we were all undergoing the usual emotions attendant to an anticipated six-month separation from our families.

The Squadron celebrated Thanksgiving that year by flying all twelve of its aircraft half way around the world,... from Brunswick to Moffet Field on the west coast,.. to Barber's Point, Hawaii,... to Guam,... then to Naval Station Sangley Point in the Philippines. That was to be our principal home for the duration, with a detachment operating from U-Tapao air base in Thailand.

ON YANKEE STATION

We arrived at Sangley on November 29th. That night I caught a ride as an observer on one of the last missions for the outgoing squadron so I could get certified for the "Yankee" patrols. These missions conducted surface surveillance during nighttime hours around the perimeter of the attack carriers operating from Yankee Station in the Gulf of Tonkin. The purpose was to detect any enemy surface craft that might sortie forth toward our floating bird farms. It was strictly a "radar flooding" operation with no attempt at stealth. We wanted the bad guys to know we were watching.

The pattern was flown at a restricted (and supposedly reserved) altitude of 1000 feet and below,... up along the coast of North Vietnam, outside a three mile limit,... past Vinh above the 20th parallel to just below Haiphong,... then continuing clockwise around the formation,... staying at least 25 miles from the carriers and 10 miles away from Red Chinese territory on the island of Hainan. There were usually two, sometimes three attack carriers on line.

Along with the CVA's, there was a single CVS deployed with its complement of S2F's and choppers. The "Stoofs" would fly the perimeter surface coverage, fanning out into sectors, when the CVS was on station. The VP squadron from Sangley picked up the job whenever the CVS was off line. The typical cycle was fifteen days on,.. fifteen off. Whenever VP took over, one aircraft would report on station by sundown, stay until midnight when a second aircraft relieved them to continue the patrol until 0700. So operations from Sangley stepped up every other fortnight as two crews daily were needed for "Yankee" patrols.

It's interesting to note that for all intents and purposes, one P3 aircraft at a time replaced an entire carrier in this role. Another curious aspect of the P3's "Yankee" mission was how we got to and from work. The commute was 2.5 hours each way. We filed an ICAO flight plan with the civilian control in Manila, and flew the international airway at about 20,000 feet from the Philippines to a designated spot east of Danang. Along the way we shared the corridor with Pan Am or China Air, and made the same position reports as the commercial airlines. Then we would simply sign off with the civilian controllers, announce that we were "going operational" and descend into the area while trying to contact the appropriate military control in the Gulf. What a way to go to war!

When coming off station we had to file a flight plan by radio through the military controller at Danang and hang out at low altitude until he confirmed our clearance. It was usually granted within minutes. Then we would climb out again to intercept the airway and proceed back home toward the Philippines. One of the more critical parts of our indoctrination to the Philippines was how to deal with Manila air traffic control. They were notorious for ignoring you when asking for clearance to descend toward destination at Sangley Point. So it was advisable to simply cancel your flight plan about a hundred miles out,... just broadcast in the clear and don't expect an acknowledgment,... then switch to the USN controllers at Sangley tower. If you didn't assert yourself in that way, and weather was bad, you could wind up circling at 20,000 feet over Manila waiting in vain for a Philippine controller to talk to you.

When VP-26 began flying its first cycle of "Yankee" patrols later in December, we found the most confusing aspect of this mission to be the cacophony of communications necessary to navigate the airwaves. We had VHF and UHF voice radio and single side band HF for teletype messages, with different protocols for all sorts of contingencies. There was even a UHF scrambler,... literally a red phone in the cockpit,... for the pilot to talk directly with the bridge of any ship having compatible equipment. (Most of the times we tried it, nobody answered the phone.)

Contact reports were made to "AS" the surface search coordinator, an assignment that moved about among various screening ships. But there were also requirements to check in with "AW", the air warfare coordinator, usually on one of the carriers,... with "Red Crown" when the black shoe's gunline was active,... and even with the Air Force "Big Eye", a Super Connie flying a racetrack pattern at 5000 feet above the 20th parallel. They were the air surveillance equivalent to our surface search. Then there were the North and South SAR destroyers on their appointed stations. It was a far cry from the lonely patrols out on the north Atlantic. Everybody crowded into a relatively small pond, and in the dark they get nervous about any low flying aircraft unless they knew who you were.

To top it all off, there were also clandestine missions going on,... highly compartmentalized, so we would have only need-to-know identifiers. When ARVN Special Forces were operating small boats to infiltrate to the North, they were to shine a colored light pattern at the approaching aircraft, say red over white over green. The colors of the day would identify them as "our side" so we were not to circle that contact on the theory that this would alert the "other side" watching us on their radar screens. On occasion, we would come across a destroyer sized contact hanging around Haiphong all by itself, darkened ship. I never did learn what that was all about, but whenever we reported it to "AS", they told us ..."never mind".

MARKET TIME

CAC-12 flew only one "Yankee" mission before it was our turn to cycle out to Thailand for "Market Time". The Squadron kept a five plane detachment at U-Tapao (pronounced (oo'- tah - pow) on the Gulf of Siam, and we would rotate crews through there for three week stays.

U-Tapao was technically a Royal Thai Naval Air Station. (They did have a half dozen S2F's on the ground there,... although I never saw them fly.) But its principal tenant was the U.S. Air Force Strategic Air Command. The single N-S runway was enormous, built by Navy Seabees, but designed to handle bomb laden B-52's in temperatures that rarely dropped below 90 even at night. It was more than 10,000 feet long, (those BUF's needed every inch of it) and so wide it was disorienting to us Navy flyers, especially after a month spent landing at Sangley Point.

On the Sangley runway you had to stay real close to centerline or your wingtips would overhang the edge. It was 5000 feet long,.. plenty enough for our P3's, but there were no overruns at all. It terminated in rip rap at water's edge giving the appearance of a carrier deck, albeit rock steady. But here we were on final for landing at U-Tapao, approaching a massive expanse of concrete, heat waves radiating from its white hot surface.

When we touched down and looked around, it appeared we could take off sideways on that runway. It was that big. Ground control directed us back to the south along a parallel taxiway until we spotted the Navy's sublet patch of concrete on the most remote end of the base. This was our operating hub,... headquarters for Detachment 72.3.5. We shut down, deplaned, and trundled over to the little trailer that served as our operations center for a mission briefing.

"Market Time" was a continuous operation involving U.S. Coast Guard cutters, swift boats from the "brown water" Navy, and patrol aircraft all along the South Vietnamese coast. Its purpose was to form a barrier shield against seaborne infiltration from the North. The principal targets were armed supply trawlers and junks that could mingle with the local fishermen, then surreptitiously run to shore and deliver supplies to the VC. Patrol planes roamed the skies, operating at 1000 feet and below out to about 20 miles from the coast. They coordinated with the surface forces in their sector,... directing them to intercept suspicious contacts they could then board to inspect. VP-26 operated aircraft equipped with all the latest anti-submarine detection electronics and weapons capabilities. But this mission, just as the "Yankee" patrols, utilized only the surface search radar and twelve pairs of eyeballs.

The "Market Time" barrier was divided into four Coastal Zones. VP-26 was assigned to Zone IV, the southern most sector,... running from the Cambodian border on the west, around the Ca Mau peninsula,

then part way along the eastern coast. Patrol squadrons operating from the Tan Son Nhut airport in Saigon, and from Cam Ranh Bay serviced the other zones.

The pace of operations at the detachment was constant. We always had a plane in the air patrolling Zone IV, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. We relieved on station, and tried to be at the western end of the patrol area to minimize transit time. CAC-12 was on the schedule for the next day, so now we were off to find our quarters,... home, away from home, away from home.

The detachment had a couple of pick up trucks and a panel van for crew transport. The trip from our line to the BOQ a few miles away took us around a huge surplus supply yard filled with equipment left behind by the Navy Construction Battalions,... payloaders, bulldozers, trucks. I guess that's where we got the beat up van we were riding in. There were also tons of unopened crates marked "U.S. Air Force". They contained such war fighting essentials as refrigerators, and air conditioning units,... never been used! It's not that our brothers in blue disdained such luxuries,... they already had all that stuff in their units. This was backup, just in case.

We passed the personnel housing area for the Air Force flight crews, individual air conditioned mobile homes nearby the O'Club. I decided we would try to eat there whenever possible. The first place I ever had escargot was at an Air Force club in Thule, Greenland,... so they probably ate well here too. Finally we arrived at the Navy BOQ, a two story concrete block structure nestled at the edge of a fetid swamp,... air conditioning provided by screened windows and doors,... with a communal head located at the end of the building nearest the swamp.

The most dominant environmental feature of this exotic place, beside the oppressive heat, was the pungent odor that permeated the atmosphere,... a sickly sweet mixture of rotting vegetation and eau de "binjo ditch", the open sewers that served as public sanitation for the local villages. There was some small comfort in having that swamp guarding our perimeter,... if the Commies ever tried to overrun the base, they wouldn't come that way.

CAC-12 flew its first "Market Time" patrol on December 23rd. We relieved the returning crew on station near the large mountainous island of Phu Quoc. It lies about 30 miles west of the mainland on a line projecting out from the Cambodia/Vietnam border. At its southern tip was the town of An Thoi that served as the base for Navy swift boats and had a 3500-foot airstrip for small aircraft.

Although Phu Quoc was part of Vietnam, it was less than 10 miles from the Cambodian coast to the north, and that country laid claim to its ownership. Cambodia was officially a declared neutral. But Prince Sihanouk was outwardly hostile toward the U. S. In the capital city, he defiantly displayed wreckage from an American helicopter and a transport plane they claim to have downed during border incursions.

Many other small, rocky islands in those waters were also in dispute. One cluster about halfway between Phu Quoc and the mainland bore the colorful name, "Isles of the Pirates". We were cautioned not to overfly any of these islands because the natives were known to take potshots with small arms. No one was ever sure whose side they were on. We never felt the effects, but occasionally a flight line inspection by the tinsmiths would reveal a bullet hole in the underside of a wing surface.

Communication with "Market Time" surface units was carried on as necessary on UHF and VHF circuits, but we also made hourly position and status reports to our own Ops base in U-Tapao via HF. Likewise, aircraft executed a formal turnover by exchanging an encrypted teletype situation report before departing station. But our most popular radio was the ADF navigation beacon receiver, because it could be tuned to the AM band that picked up Armed Forces Radio out of Saigon. The long, boring patrols were spent listening to the Army disc jockey spinning the latest hits from the Supremes and the Beach Boys.

TIME OFF

The detachment handled its own scheduling, and since the only obligation was to have one of our planes on station at all times, the trick was to work out liberty time for the crews. The local town, a rural village named Sattahip (appropriately pronounced: 's - 'at - a - heap?), was a dump. Most of the structures were built of shipping crates, still stenciled with the original USAF markings. But Bangkok was a brief 20 minute flight away. The Squadron agreed to endure a slightly more intense pace so we could free up a single crew every few days for an overnight liberty in Bangkok. It was just the luck of the draw that CAC-12 moved into the liberty slot the day after our first "Market Time" patrol.

That next morning, Christmas Eve, we flew up to Don Muong Airport in Bangkok. Its two parallel runways were separated by about a quarter mile of open grasslands. The western side was the commercial area, and the east side was the military airfield, with a USAF contingent holding fort. It had no pretense of operational status, but served as a VIP depot for R & R runs and visiting dignitaries. The U.S. Embassy had an arrangement with a hotel in the city that catered to military and diplomatic personnel. The routine was for us to tie down the aircraft on the USAF ramp, then catch the shuttle bus to the hotel.

As we were walking toward the terminal, a bird colonel came bursting out the door demanding to know what we were doing there.

öJust up from U-Tapao for an overnight. We'll be leaving in the morning.ö

öI have no notice of this. Let me see a copy of your orders.ö

öLook, we operate independently there,... nothing to do with the Air Force. This is a simple liberty run. We know it's Christmas, but we don't need any fuel,... and we won't need any of your services when we start up tomorrow.ö

We weren't exactly front-line troops, but compared with this REMF, CAC-12 may as well have been a crew of clandestine commandos. And I wasn't about to cancel their Christmas liberty, -- the only time off we could expect for weeks. But while I debated desperately with the colonel, my flight engineer/plane captain went on a recon mission, armed only with a greenbacked picture of Andrew Jackson.

Twenty minutes later, he came back from the other side of Don Muong with a tow tractor for the aircraft (now I know why we called them "Buddha's") and a broadly smiling civilian Thai ally. To hell with the Air Force,... LK-12 would spend that night in the Thai Airlines hangar!

When we got back to U-Tapao, the SOP for Bangkok liberty was changed. Instead of leaving an aircraft at Don Muong overnight, we would have a local "training flight" drop off the liberty party, and another to pick them up the following day. The slight up-tick in flight time for a ferry crew was well worth it. CAC-12 got its first extended exposure to the operational pace, as we flew six sorties over the next eight days.

These "Market Time" flights were 10-hour patrols. So 'round the clock sequencing meant that your regular diurnal cycle was completely wiped out. Night and day had no meaning,... you were always returning from a full day's work at a different time on the 24 hour clock. The problem was,... the O'Club followed regular hours. We needed our own, in-house lounge,... something like the "Brass Nut" we had at the BOQ in Keflavik,... operated by the Squadron on the honor system with the boot Ensign in charge of supply and accounting.

Fortunately there were some other compatriots relegated to U-Tapao who felt a similar need, but more importantly had the means to make it happen. They were the U.S. field superintendents for the civilian contractor building the facilities there. In exchange for a "membership" to our club, they came over with a crew of local laborers, all the equipment and materials needed,... knocked down the wall between

two rooms in the barracks,... and converted it into the "Brass Nut East". Within two days we had a complete wet bar, with foot rails,... indirect lighting and bamboo shades for atmosphere,... and it was always open.

But that idyllic facade still had to compete with the local environment and the swamp that was home to some strange flying Siamese bugs the likes of which I've never seen before or since. Every so often they would rise up in swarms and make a nocturnal raid on our barracks. Drawn by the lights, they plastered themselves against the screens attempting to invade a room. The only defense was to darken down. They had a particular affinity for the wet tile in the head where the lights were always on. After such an attack, the shower stalls and urinals were coated with a blanket of lime green winged creatures that had given their all in the defense of their swamp. Interment was conducted by hosing the entire mass down the drain. I suppose the bodies ultimately found their way back to the swamp by way of binjo ditches. Such is the cycle of life. But I digress. Back to the other war....

ROUTINE OPERATIONS

It was quite a spectacle whenever a B-52 "Arc Light" strike was launched from U-Tapao. The grand production was precisely choreographed with the 15 to 20 aircraft taking off at two minute intervals. But, for 30 minutes before the first one rolled, the runway was shutdown and service trucks did a complete FOD sweep. Nobody could land or takeoff once the clock was started on a BUF launch. While the sweep-down was underway, all the B52's were cranked up and assembled in the assigned order. Two standby aircraft were also cranked and in position in case of any pre-launch aborts.

With a belly full of iron bombs and more slung in bunches on external pods along the entire length of the underwing, each lumbering juggernaut seemed to take forever on its takeoff run. They roared ponderously down the runway, slowly gathering speed, and barely lifted off before hurtling into the Gulf of Siam. Each one would continue straight ahead, almost out of sight before it gained enough altitude to gingerly bank left and take up its course to the north.

We, on the other hand, took off in the other direction no matter which way the wind was blowing. There was plenty of runway even with a brisk tailwind. We figured that the two mile taxiway trip from our ramp to takeoff from the north end of Runway 18 would do more damage to aircraft than the few feet of takeoff roll it would save.

In another stark contrast to the B52's, we carried no weapons at all. The only ordnance we handled were the magnesium parachute flares for nighttime illumination of suspect targets. That always made for an interesting diversion. But the flares themselves presented a distinct hazard on board and we were always alert to the danger. They were launched by hand from the sonobuoy chute, and if it hung up in there and ignited, the fire could not be controlled.

The routine for checking targets at night was to make an initial pass while seeking out the contact with the million candlepower searchlight on our starboard wing. That alone could shake up a sleepy fisherman in the dead of night. If something appeared suspicious, we could climb to about 1000 feet, deploy a paraflare to illuminate the area, then spiral down below it for a more careful inspection of the target. Such was how we would while away our "Market Time".

By mid-January we rotated back to Sangley and one relatively easy week before picking up the "Yankee" cycle again. We had time for a few training flights, and finished up Stu's PPC quals. There was a seat opening up soon on the XO's crew due to some personnel transfers, and he was going to move over there as the designated plane commander. (Both the CO and the XO had another fully qualified PPC on their crews to take most of the operational flights while they attended to whatever it is that CO's and XO's do.)

After that short breather, CAC-12 went back into the fast track mode,... five "Yankee" patrols over a ten day period. The on-station period was only seven hours, but with the round trip from the Philippines, these missions normally clocked a total of 12.5 hours or so. Add to that the interminable briefing and debriefing by the base "IO" and it made for a long, long, day.

The old joke about military intelligence being an oxymoron was borne out almost every time we flew a mission. Among other things, the IO would give us all the day's codes and assigned frequencies. But they were almost always the wrong ones. It became routine for the first plane out each night to try once through on each band when approaching station, then just broadcast on fleet common. Someone monitoring the net could give you the right frequency for "AS" and you were in business.

The relief flight at midnight knew they could get the correct frequencies from the first shift. Our squadron call sign then was "Hurdy Gurdy", a vestige of the time when such things were done to defy easy imitation by the oriental tongue. Once when we called in our initial report, identifying ourselves as "Hurdy Gurdy 12", we got back in reply, "Hey guys, how are things back in Brunswick?" So much for security.

Tedium and boredom became the norm after the first few of these patrols, and we were already counting the days until we returned home. Then came news of the Pueblo capture. A carrier and other forces were being moved up toward Korea, and all of Westpac was put on alert. Suddenly, the possibility that we could be extended, or even reassigned, became a serious consideration. But after a few days the prospect for any immediate action on that front died down.

Meanwhile, the Squadron also flew routine ship rigging patrols over the South China Sea. These OSAP (ocean surveillance and patrol) flights were used whenever possible to transfer crews to the Det, originating from Sangley and terminating in U-Tapao. By month's end we were due to rotate back. And now there was an increased awareness that things might be heating up in Vietnam. The siege of Khe Sanh had been underway for ten days with no apparent let-up.

THE LOSS OF CAC-8

Departing from the Philippines on January 31 with a new copilot, while Stu McLellan stayed back to pickup the XO's crew, CAC-12 flew an OSAP mission and landed in U-Tapao with more than 130 hours logged that month.

It was at our debrief that we first heard reports about the communist attacks on cities throughout South Vietnam. What came to be known as the TET offensive had begun. Even the relatively docile "Market Time" forces became unusually active then. (As it turned out, four armed trawlers were intercepted during that month of February, although only one reached as far south as Coastal Zone IV before being destroyed near shore.)

It was somewhat surreal listening to the morning show on AFRS Saigon as we droned along during that first week of TET. Sounding just like the school closing announcements during a snow storm back home, they told different support units not to report in until further notice, and gave commuter traffic reports. "Avoid the Cholon district, as fighting there picked up at dawn and heavy back-ups persist." Only a few days later, on February 6, 1968, the surreal became suddenly all too real for us.

CAC-12 was scheduled to relieve CAC-8 on "Market Time" that morning. Instead, we were awakened abruptly during the wee hours to launch early on an SAR mission -- one of our planes was missing!

There had been no radio contact with CAC-8 for two hours now. We took off sometime around 0400. I recall it was still pitch dark, but we were also still hopeful that this was only an equipment malfunction and would soon be resolved. So we proceeded to their last known position and initiated an expanding square search while calling through the entire spectrum of radio frequencies trying to raise them. --- No joy.

Sun rise revealed only emptiness over that vast expanse of water and we began to think of the worst case -- they may really be gone. Reorienting our search, we flew a ladder pattern along the projected route based on our knowledge of the routine in the patrol area.

By midmorning, an Air Force C-130 from the SAR unit in Saigon had arrived on scene. Being properly equipped and fully crewed for this purpose, they took over command and control of the mission. It was official now, CAC-8 was missing and presumed down.

We were free to leave, but nobody on board wanted to give up yet. Each of us had friends and people we knew well on that crew. Lcdr. Bob Meglio, the PPC, headed the Squadron's Maintenance Department. He was a good pilot and well experienced. Tom Jones, the TACCO, a first tour lieutenant, was also well qualified and seasoned. My best recollections of Tom were from the intramural basketball league back at Brunswick. An unabashed Celtics fan, his idol was John Havlicek, and he could shoot the lights out from long range. Too bad we didn't have the 3-point rule then.

Those thoughts of friends in trouble kept the adrenaline pumping despite the somber circumstances and lack of sleep. We still had plenty of fuel, so I decided to go freelancing up into the area of the small rocky islands near the Cambodia/Vietnam border.

Still nothing. Should we go inland? Why not! Who's to know and maybe we'll find something. Everyone on the crew agreed it was worth a try.

After a brief and wholly unauthorized excursion into Cambodia, we realized it was fruitless. Having exhausted every other possibility, we went back to the area between the coast and Phu Quoc. There we kept looking while the Air Force prosecuted the official, controlled search well to the south.

Then around mid-afternoon one of the crew thought he spotted something. Banking slightly to port and descending in the direction he indicated, it took a few seconds before those of us in the cockpit could discern what he saw -- the distinct orange color of a life raft.

Overflying, we could confirm that's what it was,... but it appeared empty. Some small, indistinguishable debris was also visible. Nothing else.

We called the Navy's small boat base at An Thoi a short distance to the west, and they dispatched some swifts to the location as we orbited overhead. Within 30 minutes they were approaching the position we marked with smoke, and began collecting wreckage.

From their descriptions we could confirm that this was what we were looking for. The life raft was partially deflated and had probably been ejected by the impact when the plane came down. Before we departed station late that afternoon, two bodies that had risen to the surface were recovered, and all reasonable hope that there were any survivors was extinguished.

It would be several weeks later before a Navy salvage vessel recovered enough body parts from the wreckage on the seabed to positively identify all on board. To my knowledge, nothing more was done to retrieve significant components of the aircraft itself, nor am I aware of any comprehensive investigation into the incident. I can firmly state that neither I nor any of my crew was interviewed by an investigative board, so we can assume that none was convened.

I do remember vividly how insignificant that life raft appeared, and how difficult it was to locate even on a calm sea in clear weather. It's still difficult for me to imagine how any downed airmen, far out at sea, could be found without benefit of a beacon or much more sophisticated detection equipment than was available to us then.

KEEPING UP THE PACE

After the loss of an entire aircrew, the flight schedule was compressed while a new crew was assembled from VP-10 personnel in Brunswick for transfer to VP-26. This would bring us back up to full strength when they arrived a few weeks later.

Meanwhile., CAC-12 was among the crews at U-Tapao that had to pick up the slack as we continued flying "Market Time" patrols through the third week in February. And sure enough, we arrived back in Sangley just in time to start a new "Yankee" cycle on February 23rd.

It was a busy time overall. My log book reveals that we flew a total of 265 hours in February and March. Right in the middle of that, on March 1st, VP-26 conducted a Change of Command and the XO, Cdr Alex Wasilewski, relieved Jim Cochran who rotated out on schedule. My former copilot now had the skipper's crew that was redesignated from CAC-7 to CAC-1 in recognition of their newly elevated status.

This whole period remains a kaleidoscope of jumbled memories, but as I recall it, the prevailing attitude within the Squadron was "let's just press on and get the job done". And, I'm proud to say, CAC-12 did its job well,.... unorthodox perhaps, but effective nonetheless. Some incidents still stick in my mind.

Once, while approaching Yankee Station to relieve at midnight, the AT's were firing up the radar and it failed. The only mission-downing gripe was the loss of forward radar, and we always check it out immediately after takeoff, then shut down until going on station. Sure enough, it worked then,... but now it was out!

Here we were, already taking the status report from the crew we were about to relieve, so I asked my guys what they could do to fix it.

"The only thing we can do up here is swap out with the magnetron from the rear radar."

"How long?"

"Well, the maintenance guys allow half a day to replace a magnetron in the hanger. But we could probably do it in an hour."

I had no clue as to the odds on that, and no idea how you go about changing a magnetron. But we were already 10 minutes late accepting the turnover. So, I got on the radio to the other crew, deliberately leaving the speakers on so everyone aboard could hear what I was saying. I asked the other PPC if they could extend another 45 minutes, and he agreed to delay their departure until 0100.

Nothing more was said as the crew turned to, bouncing along at Angels 1 in the pitch dark with only red lens flashlights for illumination. At exactly 0059, they fired up the forward unit and we were in business. These guys weren't too interested in their spit and polish grades, but no way would they let anybody beat the "Dirty Dozen" when it really counted!

On another "Yankee" patrol we were nearing the end as dawn approached, when "Big Eye" called us with a possible surface contact they were showing. (The Gulf of Tonkin was notorious for false radar images, a phenomenon that has since been acknowledged as a probable factor in the Maddox and Turner Joy incidents of August 1964 that got all this madness started.) The Air Force controller directed us to the spot generally north of our location.

As he counted off the closing yardage we were down at about 100 feet over a glassy sea,... eyeballs trained straight ahead trying for a clear visual through the morning mists,... when suddenly Whoooooosh! Sweeping across our nose from right to left was an A4 Skyhawk--- one of our own. It seems another controller back in the tube of that Air Force Super Connie had talked somebody else onto the same false target. Never mind.

There was always a more heightened tension about "Yankee" patrols, not so much because of proximity to the enemy, but due to the real danger posed by the ever-changing gaggle of friendlies, hurtling around in the same airspace, with a Byzantine command and control system that must have been an early experiment in the development of "Chaos Theory".

Another example of how that worked occurred in mid-March when the CVS was due back on-line. CAC-12 was scheduled to take the early shift on that last night of our "Yankee" cycle. The usual briefing at base ops loaded us up with the code books, assigned sector commanders, frequencies, and call signs for the day. Then, properly prepped with all the up-to-date intel, we were sent off to work. As always, we flew the airway to the zone, signed off to go operational, and descended into a dark overcast night while going through the routine check-in procedure.

Suddenly, a nervous voice came up on the net --- "What are you guys doing here ?!"

It seems the CVS was already operational with its Stoofs busy boring holes through the same clouds that we occupied. Needless to say, we firewalled those four big Allison's and climbed out of there ASAP! With that kind of coordination, we didn't need an enemy to justify combat pay.

A few days later we were back on our way to the Det via an OSAP mission on March 19th. All of us looked upon a return to U-Tapao as a chance to recover. The atmosphere was more relaxed on "Market Time", and no brass was around except the "Brass Nut East".

CAC-1 SHOT DOWN

It was the end of the month, with CAC-12 looking forward to its turn at Bangkok liberty. We were near the end of a nighttime patrol and planned to get a ride up to Don Muong shortly after landing around 0800 that morning. Coming out to relieve us was Stu McLellan with CAC-1.

They were well within radio contact so we transmitted the turnover message without delay, and started on course to U-Tapao. Through clever and efficient management of our patrol pattern, coupled with precise navigation, we made sure to be at our closest point of approach as soon as they arrived on-station. No time to waste when liberty calls.

The morning was bright and sunny, so we could see them passing off to starboard while the radio operator received their acknowledgment assuming the duty. Immediately afterward, the teletype started clacking out a "PS" from CAC-1. "Be advised your trip to Bangkok canceled."

A collective moan of disappointment still echoed through our flight deck when, after a brief pause, the teletype continued,.. "PPS- April Fool!"

Yes, it was. We had launched before midnight on March 31, but today was April 1, 1968. That little joke was just our good friend Stu, still one of the "Dirty Dozen" at heart, giving the needle to his old crew.

So we were all in an upbeat mood when we grabbed our civvies and climbed onto the "Trident shuttle" for the short flight to Bangkok. While the training crew went through the preflight checks on the apron at U-Tapao, the radio was tuned to AFRS so we could all listen to a live broadcast from the White House. President Johnson was about to deliver a televised speech to the nation.

It was still prime time that evening of March 31 on the other side of the dateline back in Washington DC. Johnson's announcement of a partial bombing halt in the North caused some ears to perk up a little. But when we heard that deep-pitched drawl go on to say, "I shall not seek, nor shall I accept the nomination of my party..." , everybody was stunned. The light at the end of the tunnel had long gone dark,... a bombing halt made no sense while more than half a million US military still engaged the enemy over here,... and now the Commander-in-Chief decides it's all too much for him to take.

It's hard to describe the feelings that pronouncement evoked --- resentment? ...bitterness?... relief?... maybe just confusion. To Hell with it all anyway. We were going on liberty!

Takeoff. Landing at Don Muong. Deplane. The shuttle crew flies back to U-Tapao, and we catch a military bus to the hotel.

Upon arrival there, a message awaited. "Call your squadron ops office immediately".

Over an unsecured phone line, they couldn't say much. But the gist of it was ominously clear -- CAC-1 was in serious trouble, and we were to get back NOW,... by any means possible.

We spent the next several hours bumping along overland on a rented "baht bus". By the time we got back, it was all over. I've never seen, nor am I aware of, any written account describing the details of this episode, contemporaneous or otherwise. So here is mine, as I heard it then, from those who were involved or monitored the radio traffic.

Soon after starting their patrol, CAC-1 went into the area near the Cambodian coast. There they located a suspicious target and proceeded to investigate. It was a steel gray vessel that appeared to be some kind of landing craft. (As it turned out, it was a W.W.II vintage LCM, built in the US, given to the French, and acquired by Cambodia when France pulled out of Indochina in 1954.)

While making a low pass, the unarmed P-3 was fired on by the LCM with its .50 caliber anti-aircraft gun. Several rounds ripped into the outer portion of their starboard wing, knocking out #4 engine and starting a fire. They pulled the emergency handle and succeeded in feathering the prop, but could not extinguish the flames.

It was unclear whether the fire originated from the engine nacelle or from within the wing itself. They were too low to bail out. And with fire raging on a crippled aircraft, it was impractical to climb high enough for the entire crew to get out successfully. A ditching at sea appeared inevitable, but they hoped to distance themselves somewhat from the hostiles before putting her down.

So CAC-1 flew outbound from the coast, while preparing for a forced landing. Flames were still visible, but the fire didn't appear to be extending. Then, realizing they were headed directly for Phu Quoc, with its small airfield less than 20 miles away, Stu apparently thought they could make it there.

Approaching the island on a southwesterly course, they had a broadside view of the 3,500 feet of steel matting that comprised the runway. The landing could be made by passing over and executing a 270 left-hand turn. That would keep them on top of the good engines on the port side, just the way you want it with an engine out.

Across the runway OK,... banking to the left, they reached the 90 turning onto final. Suddenly,... abruptly,... the wing tore off between #3 and #4 engine, and the aircraft tumbled uncontrolled as it plunged into the sea.

Immediately afterward, second-guessers would harbor an unmentionable question. Why didn't he elect to ditch sooner while they still had control? I myself, carry a piece of the burden for Stu's decision. He trained as second pilot under me,... it was I who qualified him for designation as plane commander. And we had covered all the contingencies he faced that day, except one --- the lure of that island sanctuary so seductively close at hand. On that,... I cannot second guess him. But the shooting down of CAC-1 also compelled some renewed thinking about what had happened two months earlier. Now it was beginning to sink in. The attack by the Cambodians took place in the very same waters where CAC-8 went down.

SHORT TIMER

There is little to distinguish events during the final two months of our deployment. Perhaps emotions were cauterized by what had gone before. We continued the same tedious routines to the end, but that sense of duty was permeated by a persistent overhanging cloud of cynicism.

Those of us accustomed to launching on Soviet nukes in the North Atlantic, thought of these patrols as a serious misapplication of our mission capabilities. Of course there was no sub threat in this conflict, and this was probably the only way the powers that be could get VP a piece of the action. And we certainly did, having expended the lives of two complete crews in the process of fulfilling our assigned

tasks. Still, this job could have been done by any slow moving transport fitted out with a surface search radar and plenty of window seats.

For my part, I had become a short timer in more ways than one with orders to detach from VP-26 on May 30 when the squadron was due to return from deployment. By then, the "Dirty Dozen" had logged 700 flight hours in Westpac and every last man had earned his aircrew wings. Those achievements topped all the other crews in the Squadron and were my main source of satisfaction when I left CAC-12 in the Philippines.

All checked out with orders in hand, I flew out on a military charter carrying the advance party of ground personnel. Trans International brought us back on a DC-8 all the way to Brunswick. There we were met at the ramp by the Wing commander and a small delegation from the base staff. My status for this unexpected reception was somewhat ambiguous since I was officially in-transit on permanent change-of-station orders. But I was senior ranking passenger. So I led the returning Trident sailors down the access stairs, rendered the Commodore a snappy salute, and then simply continued on my way. Next time I came through the gate at NAS Brunswick, it was a generation later.

AFTERTHOUGHTS

Among all that's been written about the Vietnam War, you'll find little mention of VP activity. Other than a passing reference in connection with Market Time operations, there wasn't much to tell. Compared with all the other blood and guts spilled in the field of battle, our losses meant next to nothing in the overall equation, because they accomplished nothing of consequence. We did all we were assigned to do there.

Still,... just think about what we could have done. The raison d'etre for VP aviation may have been to track submarines, but we also possessed another mission capability --- aerial mining. Many historians have come to agree that Vietnam represented a general failure of the political leadership to use its military options wisely.

For instance, they could have stopped the enemy cold by blockading and mining Haiphong harbor. Instead, they permitted regular, unfettered passage of freight into the port. There, heavily laden ships could freely disgorge all the supplies, equipment and munitions needed to carry on the war. Then the U.S. military was sent in to chase it all down --- from bombing railheads and bridges in the North,... to attacks on truck parks and storage depots,... to interdicting the Ho Chi Minh trail,... to search and destroy missions throughout the South,... even to maintaining the Market Time barrier. Conducted at the direction of the leadership in Washington, virtually all those operations constituted an ongoing effort, over all those years, to stanch the flow of materiel, --- the very stuff that those same policy-makers allowed to be poured into the mouth of the funnel in the first place.

What if ? -- How much blood and treasure would have been spared if VP squadrons had been used instead to mine Haiphong harbor early on ? And would it have cost us more than twenty-four KIA to do that job? I don't think so.

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Plandome, New York
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