



ABOARD THE CARRIER BENNINGTON

By Jack Douglas Rich as related to Phyllis Rich Carpenter U.S. Navy

"Why did I join the Navy? It was stupid, I guess. My best friend, Bruce McGehee, and I let two other guys talk us into joining with them. After boot camp, Bruce was stationed on the west coast, I on the east coast.

I was 20 years old, been in the Navy two years when the explosion happened. Dorothy answered the phone when I called home. Earl would know to expect a call from the Red Cross when such a thing happened. Preacher Bradley was also at the house. I was unaware that everybody back home knew. I was just trying to get by with what happened.

I had only been on board the ship for about two weeks when it happened. We were just about 75 miles off the coast of Rhode Island. We docked at Quonset Point, Rhode Island. I didn't know anybody real well, though I had spent the whole two weeks training with a guy named Adams, until I knew how to run the generators. I always stood watch with Adams, until the day before this happened. Now we were split up, and I was to relieve his watch for chow. I had just woke up to relieve him when the explosion happened. Adams was the only machinist to get killed.

Don Jetty was on the bottom bunk. I was on the top bunk. General quarters and fire alarms were sounding, and Don thought it was a drill. But I smelled the smoke and saw it coming through the vents. I was dressed and at my station in three minutes. In the damage control locker, it was normally my job to man the OBA (officer's breathing apparatus), but I was the first one there and had to put on the headset phones. A guy named Young arrived and said I should continue on the phones. He'd handle the OBA which meant he would have to be in direct contact with the fire and the dead. I was glad. The smoke and smell of burning flesh was everywhere.

There had been a hatch on the hangar deck about ten feet square and about 14 inches thick steel. It was twisted like a pretzel from the heat and pressure of the explosion. There were two explosions on board. To prevent others, men were running with rockets and bombs. I saw one dive officer throwing a rocket over the fantail.

The first dead guy I saw was a black man being carried out on a stretcher. His face burned white. One guy told of a great ball of fire coming at him and knocking him down. The explosion had the force of a shotgun blast without shots. The force and fire plastered bodies to the walls.

It was believed to have been caused by a cracked starboard catapult line. This was a hydraulic line used to catapult the airplanes taking off so they would clear the ship and not land in the water. It had been under tremendous pressure due to flight operations that morning. That escaping hydraulic oil seeping from the cracked line was under such pressure that, when it escaped, it ignited.

At last count, I believe there were 196 dead and 201 injured out of the about 3,000 on the ship. Many of these were officers. The dead were put on the front hangar deck and covered with sheets. Helicopters to transport the dead and injured ran all day.

After the worst was over, guys were leaving the ship, even sneaking off the ship. I got permission only from the Officer of the Deck to leave with a guy named Smitty around 10:00 p.m. The whole time we were off the ship, I was worried about being AWOL. We tried to call home at some phones by some hangars, but all the lines were full. I got an operator I was flirting with. She said she was a chief's wife, and she said, "I'll put your call through." When Smitty and I finished our calls, we headed back to the ship and I kept noticing all kinds of lights. It turned out we were on an airstrip. I heard a plane revving up a few yards from us. I pushed Smitty to the side, and that plane took off right over our heads. After all we had been through on the ship, we nearly got hit by that plane. We had to laugh about it!