

USS Oriskany CVA-34 Vietnam War

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By Art Giberson

"In her seven deployments to the Tonkin Gulf Gunline, Oriskany logged more than two years in combat."

Since World War II, American aircraft carriers acting as forward deployed combat-ready units have generally been the first military units to show the flag during a potential hostile situation. The Vietnam War was no exception.

One of those carriers, the California-based USS *Oriskany* CVA-34—affectionately known as "The Mighty O"—was on the Tonkin Gulf Gunline for up to nine months at a time for every year of the war except one. However, *Oriskany's* involvement in Vietnam actually commenced two years before the first American troops went ashore at Da Nang on March 8, 1965.

In August 1963, *Oriskany* was midway through a nine-month deployment in the western sector of the Pacific when she was dispatched to the South China Sea to patrol near the coast of South Vietnam after the overthrow of South Vietnam President Ngo Dinh Diem. Those few weeks off Vietnam were the beginning of a decade of combat deployments for the last of the *Essex Class* Carriers.

Oriskany arrived on Yankee Station on April 27, 1965, with Air Wing 16 CVW-16 aboard. Planes from the air wing attacked roads and bridges in North Vietnam. Her first combat loss of the war was recorded on August 26, when LTJG Douglas flying a A-1H "Spad," was hit by anti-aircraft fire while on a bombing mission. Davis ejected and was captured by the North Vietnamese. Two weeks later, Commander James Stockdale, the CO of CVW-16, became the sixth victim of North Vietnamese gunners. After safely ejecting from his A-4 *Skyhawk*, Stockdale was taken prisoner and held captive for nearly eight years. Upon release Stockdale was awarded the Medal of Honor for his superior leadership as the senior American POW in North Vietnam.

By the time *Oriskany* returned from her first Vietnam combat deployment on December 16, 1965, her air wing had flown more than 12,000 sorties and dropped in excess of 10,000 tons of bombs. But the successes she enjoyed, including being awarded the Navy Unit Commendation, came at great expense. In addition to the loss of her air wing commander, *Oriskany* and CVW-16 lost a total of 12 airman—seven listed as KIA's and five POW's—and 22 aircraft, 15 from combat operations and seven from other causes.

On May 26, 1966, *Oriskany* again sailed westward for her second combat deploy-

ment. Arriving on Yankee Station on June 26, *Oriskany's* air wing took up where it had left off nearly six months earlier, striking roads and bridges in the North and along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Sixteen days after arriving on station, *Mighty O* lost the first of 25 aircraft she would lose during that deployment. Fifteen of the downed aviators were recovered and returned to *Oriskany*, six were killed and four taken prisoner. One of the recovered pilots, Commander Richard M. Bellinger, who was shot down by a Mikoyan-Gurevich MiG-17 on October 9.

After nearly for months of round-the-clock operations, the ship's company and aircrews were exhausted. Under such conditions, it was only a matter of time before a moment of inattention would lead to a disastrous accident. That moment arrived at 0700 hours, October 26, 1966.

Preparing for an early morning launch, two teenage sailors were returning some Mk-24 parachute flares, which had been taken out hours before for a night launch, to their storage locker in hanger bay No. 1 when one of the sailors accidentally pulled the flare ignition lanyard. Startled by the sudden hissing sound, the 18 year-old tossed the flare into the locker and slammed the door, believing that the oxygen inside would extinguish the flare.

Made of magnesium and sodium nitrate, Mk-24 parachute flares provide illumination of 2 million candlepower lasting from three to four minutes when ejected from an airplane or helicopter. When ignited, the magnesium and sodium nitrate reach temperatures of nearly 5,000 degrees Fahrenheit, and the flare is nearly impossible to extinguish. Although the young sailors instantly sounded the fire alarm, it was too late. Within minutes the door of the locker blew off that *Mighty O* was turned into a floating inferno.

For more than four hours, flames and choking fumes, carried by the ship's ventilation system, spread throughout the ship, lapping up precious oxygen. When the fires were finally brought under control, 44 *Oriskany* men, including 24 pilots who only hours before had been flying missions over North Vietnam, were dead. The carrier headed for Subic Bay in the Philippines for temporary repairs.

Returning to San Diego on November 16, the ship's crew enjoyed only a brief reprieve from the rigors of 14-hour-day operations. They then sailed north to San Francisco Navy Shipyard for permanent repairs, in preparation for a return trip to Vietnam.

With her fire-damaged compartments repaired and freshly painted, *Oriskany* sailed under the Golden Gate Bridge on June 16, 1967, and headed west for her third Vietnam deployment. It was also the last cruise *Oriskany* would make with Carrier Air Wing 16 aboard. The air wing suffered extremely heavy losses during its three deployments, between June 1967, and January 1968.

Mighty O's first loss for the 1967 cruise occurred on July 14, only a few hours after arriving on station. During the next seven months, four of which were spent on the gunline, *Oriskany* and CVW-16 lost a total of 39 aircraft. Seventeen airmen were killed; six were captured, including Senator (then LT) John S. McCain III; two were listed as MIA's. The only bright spot of the 1967-1968 deployment occurred on De-

ember 14, 1967, when Lieutenant Richard W. Wyman, an F-8E pilot of VF-162, shot down a MiG-17—the second downed CVW-16 during its three deployments aboard the *Oriskany*.

Oriskany returned to the States on January 31, 1968. A month later she entered the San Francisco Naval Shipyard for a nine-month overhaul. In early 1969, the carrier took on provisions and munitions and put to sea for exercises with her new air wing, CVW-19, in preparation for her fourth combat deployment in Vietnam.

After brief stops in Hawaii and Subic *Oriskany* took up position at Yankee Station on May 16, 1969. Fortunately, during that deployment the air war had subsided somewhat. And although the carrier was on the gunline for 116 days, her losses were relatively light compared to her previous deployment. Nevertheless, 10 aircraft were lost and three men—two CVW-19 pilots and an *Oriskany* enlisted crew member—were killed.

Returning to her home port at the Alameda Naval Air Station near San Francisco shortly before Thanksgiving 1969, *Oriskany's* crew members were able to put the war behind them for a short time. But with the dawning of the new decade, it was back to work preparing for still another combat deployment. Although pre-deployments were normally fairly routine affairs, this one was different because the ship's aircrews were preparing to go to war with new aircraft. *Oriskany's* three combat proved Douglas A-4 *Skyhawk* attack squadrons—VA-23, VA-192, and VA-193—were replaced by two *Corsair II* squadrons—VA-153, and VA-155 flying A-7's.

With her two new squadrons aboard, *Oriskany* left Alameda on May 14, 1970, for her fifth Vietnam combat deployment. Within days of arriving on Yankee Station, *Mighty O* suffered her first casualty when Commander D.D. Aldren's A-7A was lost over Laos.

By the time *Oriskany* returned to Alameda on November 29, 1970, she had been on the gunline for 90 days, lost three aircraft and two pilots, expended nearly 6,000 tons of ordnance, and observed her 20th birthday. Five months later, *Mighty O* again pointed her bow westward and sailed under the Golden Gate Bridge en route to her sixth Vietnam deployment. Although *Oriskany* suffered no direct combat losses during that cruise, she did lose four aircraft to operational mishaps, resulting in the death of two of the pilots. She returned to the States in December after only 75 days of combat.

The queen of the *Essex* Class Carriers left the West Coast on June 5, 1972, for her final and longest combat deployment. She was on duty on Yankee Station for 169 days—the longest gunline period of any of her Vietnam deployments.

Despite the fact that she was growing obsolete after nearly a decade of combat, *Oriskany* was a key factor in the infamous "Christmas Bombings" of 1972, in which American aircraft conducted some of the heaviest bombing raids of the war against Hanoi and other key North Vietnam cities. On January 27, 1973, Commander Dennis R. Wiechman of VA-153 flew *Oriskany's* last and his own 612th combat mission. *Mighty O* returned to Alameda on March 30, 1973.

During her last 10 month deployment, *Oriskany* lost six aircraft. One pilot was captured and two killed. The other three were rescued and returned to the *Mighty O*.

During there seven Vietnam combat deployments 81 of the ship's sailors lost their lives, including 44 killed in the 1966 fire. Eighteen filers were captured, three of whom died in captivity, and five were listed as MIA's. In addition to the human toll, 109 aircraft were lost. Following the war's end, *Oriskany* returned to the Pacific twice before being decommissioned in 1976.

The war will be remembered by historians as a ground war, and the Navy's aerial warriors deserve a great deal of the credit. But much of that air power was made possible by floating airfields like *Oriskany* and the thousands of sailors who operated such ship, as well as launched and recovered aircraft.