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LEGACY OF VALOR: VIETNAM

This is the fifth in a series of Shipmate features commemorating the service and sacrifice of U.S. Naval Academy alumni who served in the Vietnam War. These stories will be featured in print, on a dedicated webpage, on social media and in videos.

More than 40 alumni shared their stories to help further the U.S. Naval Academy Alumni Association & Foundation's Legacy of Valor series. For all who stood watch, we honor your service and will not forget.

AVIATORS ROSE TO THE CHALLENGE

DURING VIETNAM WAR

General James B. “JB” Davis ’58, USAF (Ret.), just wanted to fly.

In June 1958, Davis was confronted with a choice. Ultimately, it was simple math that led him into an Air Force career. The Class of 1958 was the last at the U.S. Naval Academy in which 25% were cross-commissioned into the Air Force.

As he neared graduation, Davis asked how long he could fly in the Navy. He was told he’d likely max out at seven years. The Air Force asked, ‘How long do you want to fly?’

For the Wayne, NE, native, the decision was easy.

“I really wanted to fly for a long time,” Davis said. “That probably wasn’t a good choice, but I flew for 32 of my 35-year career.”

Davis’ service includes flying 100 combat missions over North Vietnam between January and September 1968 while assigned to the 13th Tactical Fighter Squadron, Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base, Thailand.

For Naval Academy alumni during the Vietnam War era, fulfilling their dreams of becoming an aviator often meant flying in treacherous conditions. Achieving that goal sometimes required cross commissioning into the Air Force directly from the Academy. Facing anti-aircraft artillery and surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), the U.S. lost more than 3,700 aircraft in Vietnam.

The majority of American prisoners of war (POWs) in Vietnam were aviators—Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force pilots. During

Operation Homecoming, 591 American POWs were repatriated from Vietnam starting in February 1973.

While the risks were high, duty called. Naval Academy alumni interviewed for this story were committed to completing their missions and serving their nation.

Davis welcomed his Vietnam deployment.

“As far as I was concerned, if you don’t go to Vietnam, you’re not doing your job,” said Davis whose commands included the 474th Tactical Fighter Wing, U.S. Forces, Japan and Pacific Air Forces. “My wife didn’t necessarily agree with me, but she said, ‘if you’ve got to go, you’ve got to go.’”

‘HAVEN’T HAD A CRASH IN A WEEK’

During his tour in Vietnam, Davis flew sorties over the Ho Chi Minh Trail, over Hanoi and

In Vietnam the C-7A Caribou was used to re-supply fighting forces in-country because of its unique ability to fly in and out of camps on short, unimproved airstrips.



Gen James B. “JB” Davis ’58, USAF (Ret.), flew 100 combat missions during the Vietnam War. He retired in 1992 after commanding U.S. Forces, Japan and Pacific Air Forces.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

three missions into Laos. Near the end of his tour, he was serving as an instructor pilot. He was charged with guiding a colonel, who was the director of operations of his area, and two other pilots on their first flights in Vietnam.

Davis said the colonel wanted to earn a Silver Star, which required shooting down an enemy airplane. They intercepted an enemy aircraft but visibility was hampered by smoke from burning rice fields.

"We couldn't see the enemy plane but we knew where he was," Davis said. "We were going up and down, up and down. They're shooting at all of us. They're not very good duck hunters, because they shot at the colonel and it hit my airplane."

A 37 millimeter round pierced Davis' F-4 fuel tank.

"I knew I wasn't getting home that way," Davis said. "I sent them home and I went out 15 miles out of Haiphong and saw this beautiful carrier."

Davis radioed the carrier requesting to land. The response wasn't encouraging. He was asked if he had a tailhook. He answered affirmative.

The carrier's air boss started quizzing him—all the while he's losing precious fuel—about his experience and where he went to school. The air boss said he

didn't expect the captain would let him land. Davis contemplated pulling within 500 feet of the carrier and ejecting along with his radar intercept officer.

While awaiting a decision from the carrier, Davis noticed a KC-135 Stratotanker passing by escorted by four F-105s. He peeled off and got on the KC-135's wing and received 10,000 pounds of fuel.

"They said, 'we'll take you wherever you want to go,'" Davis said. "I called back to the ship and said, 'guys, thanks very much for considering me but I found an airborne gas station and they're going to take me back to South Vietnam.'"

"The guy said, 'shucks sir, we haven't had a crash in a week.'"

Davis made it 148 miles, landed at Da Nang Air Force Base and as he taxied off the runway, his plane quit working.

FLYING CARIBOUS

Colonel Pat Hanavan '58, USAF (Ret.), piloted the C-7A Caribou during his tour of duty in Vietnam in 1968. He was an instructor pilot and chief of safety in the first half of his tour, which was based in Vung Tau. He was moved to Cam Rahn Bay to be chief test pilot and wing quality control officer with the 483rd Tactical Airlift Wing during the second.

Hanavan said he loved flying the Caribou. The twin-engine transport plane could land (600 feet) and take off (500 feet) in short distances and on unprepared fields.

Flying his first Caribou mission in Vietnam, Hanavan supported U.S. troops during the Tet Offensive. In addition to delivering guns, ammunition, vehicles, rations and up to 25 troops, the Caribou also had the sacred duty of transporting Americans killed in action (KIAs).

"One day, I had to take our KIAs from one base to another, and that was the most difficult mission I flew in Vietnam," said Hanavan, who authored *Caribou Airlines: A History of the USAF C-7A Caribou Operations in Vietnam*.

Central to the Caribou's mission was keeping front-line soldiers equipped. During one run, Hanavan landed and went to help the flight mechanic unload cargo.

He was greeted by a heated Special Forces sergeant.

"He was cussing a blue streak," Hanavan said. "He said, 'we've been in a fire fight for 24 hours and this is what they sent (pointing to furniture and office supplies)?"

"I said, 'Sarge, what do you need?' He was still ranting and raving. I said, 'No, no, no, no. Tell me what you need, write a list of what you need.' He did that."

Hanavan called and had a sergeant meet him on the hot cargo ramp. He gave the sergeant the list of ammunition and other items the Special Forces unit needed.

They loaded up the Caribou and headed back to the exasperated Special Forces sergeant.

"In about an hour and a half he delivered several thousand pounds of ammo needed for the firefight," Hanavan said.

Davis and Hanavan were among the Naval Academy classes mandated by the Department of Defense to commission graduates into the fledgling Air Force beginning in 1949. That threshold held until the Air Force's first graduating class in 1959.



PHOTO COURTESY OF COL PAT HANAVAN '58, USAF (RET.)

Col Pat Hanavan '58, USAF (Ret.), spent 20 years in the Air Force after commissioning from the Naval Academy. During the Vietnam War, he flew the twin-engine C-7A Caribou transport plane.

Hanavan's fascination with aviation began in 1942 when he started building models of World War II-era planes. He attended Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, CA, for two years and was in the Air Force ROTC. He was on track to graduate and commission as an Air Force reservist when he noticed on the ROTC bulletin board that appointments to the Naval Academy were available from Congressman Sam Yorty.

Although Hanavan's decision to go to Annapolis cost him 18 months, he was back with his chronological class since he graduated from high school as a 16-year-old. Through his 20-year Air Force career, Hanavan said he had zero regrets.

"I never had an assignment in the Air Force that I didn't like, want or didn't turn out to be great," he said.

COOL UNDER PRESSURE

For Tom Knudson '67, height not age, was a complicating factor for becoming an aviator. He entered flight school at 6-foot-7. He said the ceiling for jet pilots at the time was 6-foot-4.

Fortunately for Knudson, he was selected for an immediate graduate education program out of the Naval Academy. He earned a master's degree in aerospace engineering from the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, CA.

He took his flight physical in Monterey and the corpsman examining him mentioned the 6-foot-4 rule. Knudson requested the measuring bar be set to 6-foot-4 and adjusted his stance to assure he met regulations.

"Fortunately, my flight grades were great," Knudson said. "I was doing beautifully in flight training. By the time someone actually got concerned about my height, I was far enough along that they didn't want to lose the investment they had.

"When I got to my fleet squadron, the parachute rigger measured me and basically said, 'Mr. Knudson, we don't think you should be using the ejection seat because we don't think all of you comes out.' I was 23 and bulletproof."

Knudson credited his squadron leader for mentoring him and ensuring he was ready for combat flights. He said prior to his first mission, the leader spent three hours preparing him for every possible scenario.

That was critical, Knudson said, because flying the A-7 Corsair allowed him to fly a diversified mission portfolio. He flew 130 combat missions in North Vietnam.

"We flew lots of different kinds of missions," Knudson said. "We mined rivers, we bombed targets, we flew (surface to air missile) SAM suppression against SAM sites, flack suppression against antiaircraft sites and road reconnaissance.

"What you learn flying in combat is not everything's an emergency. You learn to prioritize and say, 'well yeah we may be on fire but let's see what we can do.' You learn a fair amount of resilience and patience and coolness under pressure."

BAD DAY

Captain Don Fraser '67, USN (Ret.), flew in the Grumman A-6A Intruder with Attack Squadron 196. He was a bombardier navigator flying with then-Lieutenant Commander Evan "Pee Wee" Reese '60, USN. Fraser and Reese were shot down over



PHOTO COURTESY OF TOM KNUDSON '67

Laos on 6 February 1970 and rescued the next day. Fraser's tour in Vietnam got off to a tumultuous start as he describes in the following submission.

"On my first combat hop, our bomb load was 12 Mark 82 500-pound bombs and two Rockeye cluster bomb pods. The A-6A Intruder's bombing system was an excellent one when it worked, but when a system failure occurred following your catapult shot, old fashioned dive bombing became your delivery method.

Typically, we would fly across South Vietnam and turn north to intersect the Ho Chi Minh Trail near Ban Karai Pass or Mu Gia Pass. Our flight of two would meet an Air Force forward air controller (FAC) who would mark targets in the area for us to strike.

Combat rules suggested only two attacks be made on any one target. On our second dive bombing pass, delivering the remaining Mark 82's, the right engine fire warning light began to flash and our 'bad day' was underway. Following emergency procedures, the right engine was shut down and there was still a long way to go to get back to the ship.

Surprisingly, other systems began to fail, and I began what seemed like a page check of every emergency in the book. Later, we would learn we had suffered a simple part failure—a V-band clamp. When that part failed, a fire warning light would illuminate, but shutting down the

At 6-foot-7, Tom Knudson '67 nearly had his goal of becoming a Naval aviator get derailed. The height limit was 6-foot-4 but Knudson was able to pass the height test and went on to fly the A-7 Corsair during 130 combat missions over North Vietnam.

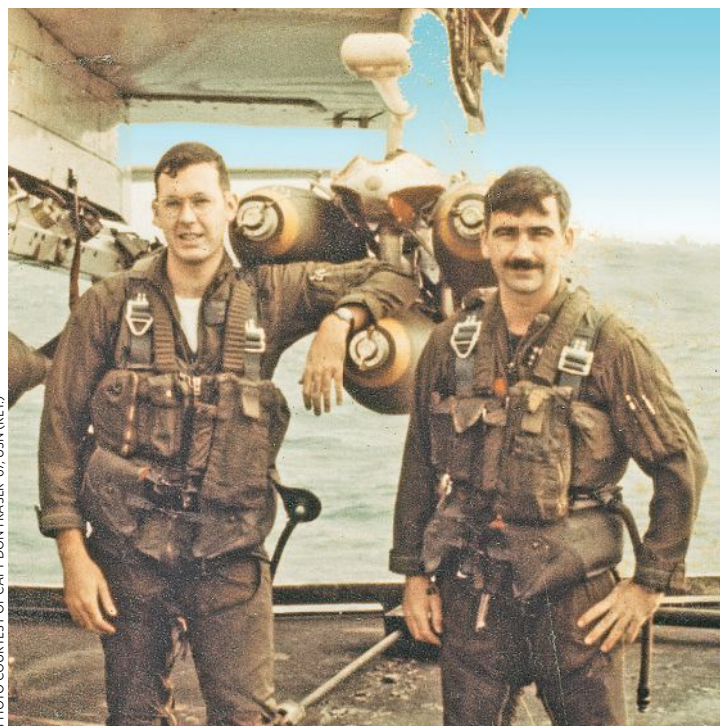


PHOTO COURTESY OF CAPT DON FRASER '67, USN (RET.)

CAPT Don Fraser '67, USN (Ret.), left, was a bombardier navigator during the Vietnam War, flying in the Grumman A-6A Intruder. On his first mission in Vietnam, his aircraft had to land with only a tailhook and nose gear. In 1970, he and pilot then-LCDR Evan "Pee Wee" Reese '60, USN, were shot down over Laos, where they had to elude capture for a day before being rescued.

engine indicator did not prevent very hot 12th stage bleed air from the remaining engine from burning up the aircraft's internals. Of course, shutting down both engines would solve that problem, but create others more hazardous to your health.

With the assistance of our lead, the squadron skipper, the decision was made to proceed to Da Nang and land there, rather than attempt to trap aboard RANGER. Declaring an emergency did get some priority into Da Nang, but you might not be the only returning aircraft with a problem.

Any positive feeling of this emergency finally coming to an end was dashed while trying to complete the landing checklist. Only the nose gear came down and all attempts to drop the main gear failed. Not wanting to scrape the Rockeye ordnance on their runway and have the 247 bomblets in each pod scatter all over the base, we were directed to go out over the Gulf of Tonkin and rid ourselves of that problem.

Accomplishing the dispatching of unwanted ordnance was followed quickly by loss of radios as we turned back toward the beach to try and land with only a tailhook and nose gear. Soon we returned south of Da Nang to land to the north. We were surprised when our skipper, as our lead, kept turning in front of us to try move us to the left.

Apparently, we were lined up on the runway at Marble Mountain, a helicopter base just a few clicks east and a bit south of Da Nang. The helo bubbas would have been very surprised if a crippled and unannounced Intruder jet smashed into their base.

A much better outcome was achieved when we visually sighted the Da Nang runway and a superb single-engine, nose gear-only landing was executed by my pilot. We were met by scores of emergency vehicles and fire-fighting trucks and folks that wanted to chop us out of the cockpit. The canopy was opened manually and we queried our rescuers as to why they were so anxious to get us out of the airplane.

'Didn't you know you were on fire?' was the response. Perhaps we were too busy to notice, but if we had, an ejection would have been dictated by customary emergency procedures.

When asked later, our skipper informed us that the best choice was to be on fire and land rather than eject in the area around Da Nang where our safety was less than guaranteed.

One combat hop and one bad day, could things possibly get worse?" 🚢

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