

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Vietnam Project

Naval Experience

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TOM GROHL

Interviewed

by

Jeffery Collier

on

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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: TOM GROHL

INTERVIEWER: Jeffery Collier

SUBJECT: Naval training, Naval experiences, Gulf of Tonkin

DATE: May 7, 1975

C: This is an interview with Tom Grohl for the Youngstown State University Program, by Jeff Collier, at Tom Grohl's house, on May 7, 1975, at 9:30 p.m. in the evening.

Tom, could you tell me a little bit about yourself, where you were born and also, very briefly, up to this point in time, where you live right now out here on Warner Road?

G: I was born in Youngstown in 1941. I was raised in Niles, Ohio. I went through all of grade school and high school there. When I graduated from high school I attended Youngstown State University. I graduated there in 1963 majoring in business. Immediately after graduation I enrolled in the Naval OCS program which took me to Pensacola, Florida in August of 1963. I went through OCS, four months OCS training. I went into the Naval Flight Training program, from there to the Naval Intelligence Training Center in Alameda, California and joined the staff of a commander of a carrier and a submarine air group in 1964 and served approximately three and a half years of active duty and was discharged from the Navy in the spring of 1967.

C: Where do you work right now?

G: In 1967 when I returned to Youngstown, I was employed by Xerox Corporation as a salesman and I have been with them since that time, approximately eight years. Now I am married and I have one child and live on Warner Road in Liberty Township.

C: After you graduated from college and you went into the Navy, you said that you went through OCS down in Pensacola. Did you go then over to the Vietnam area?

G: After I completed my training and joined the air group, my ultimate duty station or ultimate duty assignment after my schooling in the Navy, I joined a carrier and a submarine air group staff which consisted of approximately eight officers and twelve enlisted men. The function of the staff was to support the commander of the air group which boarded, in this case the carrier Hornet. On board this air group, it was comprised of two fixed wing aircraft squadrons and one helicopter squadron.

When we did go on board the carrier for deployment overseas, we had the detachment of Marine jets, actually four jets which were protection for this antisubmarine warfare carrier. The difference between the two: the attack carriers were the ones that did most of the combat bombing mission; the antisubmarine warfare carriers were mainly sea surveillance, shipping surveillance, and the helicopters were used not only for surveillance of a primary mission but of the secondary mission were backups to search and rescue operations.

This staff controlling the three squadrons, we were mainly, as I say, a support function to the commander of this particular air group who reported directly to the captain of the carrier and the admiral of the task force. When we deployed we had not only our carrier, we had eight destroyers who went along with us for protection and support.

C: When you left, where did you sail out of?

G: We sailed out of. . . Our air group was based in San Diego, the carrier was based on Long Beach, California. We sailed out of Long Beach directly overseas. I was attached to the air group for approximately one year before we deployed overseas.

C: When you say overseas, what do you mean by that?

G: To the western Pacific area, which was ultimately the Gulf of Tonkin.

C: In terms of your job in particular, what type of things did you do when you were in the service, on the carrier for instance or after you got out of school at Pensacola?

G: When I got out of Pensacola and went to the Intelligence Training School and joined the air group, my function was as the staff intelligence officer. What I did was coordinate the intelligence functions between the three officers who were in charge of them for their respective squadrons--that meaning the two fixed wing aircraft squadrons and the one helicopter squadron--coordinate all the activities and report directly to the air group commander as to what we were doing or any training that had to be done.

The biggest function at that time when we did go overseas was,

as far as intelligence was concerned, being able to communicate to every pilot and every crew man that flew off the boat. The biggest thing was training them in identification functions as to enemy ships, different, particular call signs, maybe codes that not only the Navy used but the Air Force used and the Army, Marines, whatever, being that it was really a three service operation that was going on and making sure that in terms of identification signals that one ship may give another, et cetera, that all this information was known. It was not only a job of disseminating this information but also collecting information that they found on their routine missions and report directly to the air group commander who then went to the ship's captain and admiral of task force.

C: When you sailed out of San Diego then, where was your ship bound to?

G: We were ultimately bound to the Gulf of Tonkin.

C: Did you take a roundabout course?

G: Yes, there were intermediate stops. When our carrier left San Diego, the carrier came down from Long Beach, picked up the air group in San Diego and we loaded all of our men aboard and most of our equipment, everything but the airplanes themselves, which, of course, they fly aboard after we are out to sea a ways.

C: Why is that?

G: Instead of having to crane the airplanes aboard the carrier when it's in a dock, you wait till you get out to sea and then you just fly them aboard. The carrier is a pretty big thing, and we were one of the smaller carriers; we were a converted World War II carrier and we went about 900 feet long in difference to 1,100 feet for the larger one such as the Enterprise or the Kitty Hawk, or something of that class.

Our first stop was in Hawaii; we sailed to Hawaii and we were there for two weeks. The reason for the stop in Hawaii was that we went through a readiness inspection by the commander of the Naval Air Forces in the Pacific fleet. I never heard of anyone flunking the inspection. You didn't go over there and flunk, you went over there and you went through this inspection which consisted of various exercises for a two week period to make sure that everybody knew what was going on, knew their job, and were really prepared to go over there and intermix with the other services and be able to do the job that they had to do.

C: When you say over there, do you mean over to Japan or the Philippines?

G: No, to the Gulf of Tonkin.

C: Were there that many people over there at that time?

- G: The time that we spent on station there, there were, in terms of the Navy, two attack carriers and, of course, a number of destroyers, guided missile destroyers, some of the larger classes and newer classes of destroyers. I'm not thinking of the battleship type or anything like that. At that time most of the battleships were inactive I think. Not too long after that they activated one battleship that went to Vietnam, but really I don't think it did much of anything over there but just cruise around the waters.
- C: When you were in the Gulf of Tonkin, what did you do over there?
- G: Our job in the Gulf of Tonkin was strictly shipping surveillance. Our fix wing aircraft mainly was concerned with patrolling all the waters of the gulf within certain limitation. Our aircrafts were only allowed three miles from the coast of North Vietnam, anything within the international border. We spent all of our time. . . Our fix wing aircraft did not fly over land at all. Everything was confined strictly to the gulf itself and the waters of the gulf. They flew no bombing missions or no support missions of any type.
- C: Could you take and fly into. . . You mentioned that you couldn't sail within three miles of North Vietnam. Could you sail within three miles of South Vietnam?
- G: Yes, I'm sure we could have. We never did, there was never a port there big enough to tie a carrier up, to the best of my recollection. In Vietnam there wasn't a port that would handle any of our carriers.
- C: You say that the people aboard the ship, and by that I mean the pilots, they flew no bombing missions or anything like that. Was there any type of reconnaissance?
- G: It was strictly shipping reconnaissance. What we did was we maintained surveillance on all the vessels going in and out of Hanoi. There were a number of Russian freighters, Russian warships, et cetera, that rowed into Hanoi. We kept strict surveillance on every supply line that they had into Hanoi. Our mission was that every ship going in there we photographed, tried to collect every bit of information as to what they may be carrying and how many men aboard it, et cetera, oilers, a number of different things. Many of the ships were Russian, but there were many of other Communist country flags that were taking supplies in there and we really wanted to know. Our job was finding out what type of supplies and what number they were taking into North Vietnam by sea.
- C: What dates approximately were you in the Gulf of Tonkin during that?
- G: We were in the Gulf of Tonkin from October of 1965 till approxi-

mately the middle of February of 1966. We were in and out. There were times that we went into the Philippines to refuel, we went into Hong Kong once for supplies, R & R we called it. It was either between the Philippines or Hong Kong. Excuse me, we did go up to Japan over Christmastime for a period of about a week and a half. The rest of the time was spent doing shipping surveillance.

Also our basic job was. . . Our main function as a fighting unit was that of antisubmarine warfare. We also did set up submarine screening type operations so that we could know whether or not there were any types of submarines that were penetrating that area such as Russian sub boats that would either come up along the coast to see whether or not there were any Russian submarines that were supporting the operation.

C: Were there Russian submarines?

G: The closest that we ever saw Russian submarines to that area was in the Philippines, off in the waters off the Philippines.

C: Were there any other type subs from other countries?

G: No.

C: As far as going back to the ship itself, what was the--because, of course, we weren't into Vietnam to the extent that just a couple of years later we were--morale like of the men on the ship? Was everybody pretty much in a jovial mood? Was there any concern or anything at that time as to us entering war and/or did the people not care? What was the feeling of the ship of the men, both the officers and the enlisted?

G: On our ship, on the carrier you were pretty much your own little city. You have all the comforts of home, it wasn't like fighting a war in a jungle. I know for the officers, we ate on white linen tablecloths every evening, we had clean racks every night, it's just like floating in your own home. No one ever really experienced any hardships of war. In fact we only lost one airplane while we were over there, and to this day I don't think they know why or how the airplane was lost.

It was kind of hard to get into the mood that there was a war going on because at that time things weren't that hectic over there, they were rather quiet. We did know that there was fighting going on over there. But even at that time the attack carriers were the ones that were doing the bombing. They weren't moving that many aircrafts over in North Vietnam at that time. So there really wasn't that much concern. It was just basically like any other exercise that we might have pulled for two weeks off the coast of California. The only difference was the fact that we were not in the United States for a period of seven months.

About the only rumbling that you ever heard was the fact that, "Gees, I would like to get back to the States."

- C: Concerning your pilots, considering the fact that other pilots from attack carriers were being shot down. . . Granted there were not that many people being lost, perhaps, or anything such as that. The attitude of those people, did they say one way or another they would like to take and be involved in it or not be involved in taking in bombings of North Vietnam at that time? Was there any concern at all on part of the pilots?
- G: A few of our platoon pilots, especially the younger pilots, felt that they would like to participate in this thing a little more actively, and when we did get back to the United States there were a few of them that did apply for transfers to jet training. We were equipped basically not for warfare of any type but strictly equipped with submarine listening devices and surveillance devices, photographic devices. I guess most of the younger pilots thought that they were flying a transport plane as compared to the more glamorous life of the jet fighter pilot, and some of the more gung ho types. They were the ones, perhaps, that really had it in their mind they wanted to be naval career officers. They felt that they would rather be in the thick of things a little more so than serving the type of duty that we were under. When they did, there were a few of them that did return to the States that decided to apply for jet fighter training and a few of them did get it, and subsequently did go back as jet attack pilots.
- C: Due to the fact that you flew some yourself and perhaps now these people as fellow officers, did you happen to know or talk to them when they came back?
- G: When I returned from that tour over there, I only served another year and the year that I served our ship went in for repairs. Our air group was back home for another year and it came time for me to get out and it was only about two months later that the Hornet departed in for the western Pacific and the Gulf of Tonkin. The ones that I knew that did get back over there as jet attack pilots were serving their time during the period that I got out and I never really communicated with them after it happened. I knew a few of them did lose their lives after it happened, during their first tours. It's kind of funny to this day, you seemed to be better off where you were but there was something inside of them that they wanted to get back in to fight the war. I did have a good friend that was under that circumstance, he wanted to get into jet fighting with the jet fighters and jet attack fighters. He left our air group and we were back about three or four months and he got accepted for jet training. On his first deployment over there, he was missing in action.
- C: The Hornet itself, when it went back over there, what capacity

did it go back in? Did it go back as an attack carrier?

G: No, no, the same thing.

C: Is that because it was a smaller carrier?

G: Yes, it was only equipped to handle one jet aircraft, which was an 84 Sky Hawk. While we were over there we had six of those aircrafts on board that were flown by Marine pilots and they were there only for a matter of protection, for our protection. During our cruise and during the time that I was there, they flew strictly protection type runs for our carrier. None of them saw any combat at all. The only flying they did was we would shoot them off and they would buzz around the Gulf of Tonkin and come back and land; they never did any fighting inland. They never were involved in any type of sortings and missions in North Vietnam.

The 84 Sky Hawk was a very small jet and it was the only one that our carrier could handle. The catapults on the Hornet were hydrolic catapults, and the catapults on the larger carriers were steam catapults and they could handle much heavier loads, much more armory and much heavier jet Phantoms and that type of aircraft. The Hornet has since been retired. I believe it's last mission was picking up the men from Apollo 12.

C: In terms of the people that were in, you said that there were Marines on board, of course, Navy personnel, and different other people. Considering the fact that you were escorted over there by the destroyers, I guess because there were other attack carriers in the area, at any time did you run into any other ships or anything like that, that caused you any problems, whether it be in the destroyer group or the total group that you were in? I don't know if it would be Communistic or just other groups of carriers for anything from other countries that would be antagonistic to our country? Were there any problems like that?

G: The only incident that we had of that nature was during Christmas when we were in Sasebo, Japan and when we left Sasebo transit through the Sea of Japan, we were heading south, south of the Gulf of Tonkin. As we were a day or two out of Sasebo, we spotted two Russian vessels; one was a Russian oiler and the other was a Russian submarine attendant. They were standing south and we were overtaking them. Of course, you see a Russian oiler and a Russian submarine attendant, there is no doubt that there are Russian submarines in the area.

So we were about at the northern tip of the Philippines, heading into the Gulf of Tonkin when we did catch one of the . . . one of our aircrafts caught a . . . We were kind of playing a cat and mouse game with them and one of our aircrafts did catch a Russian submarine on the surface, taking on storage from the



submarine attendant. So we kind of swung back and started playing a cat and mouse game with them and we spent about three days in the waters off the northern tip of the Philippines, playing games with these two Russian surface vessels and the submarines that they had there. To the best of our knowledge they had three submarines with them and how many others they had, we don't know, but they were out there on exercises, presumably also.

After we played games with them for two or three days we headed back to our normal duty in the Gulf of Tonkin. They were operating that area, presumably just an intelligence gathering type of mission. They went down there to. . . Probably to the best of our knowledge they were just down there to see how many ships that we had, probably counting ships the same way we were to see how much naval support that we had off of Vietnam at that time.

They had one worry. The Russians were very famous for what we called their troller. These were normally converted fishing vessels with an amazement of antennas on them. They had one in the Gulf of Tonkin stationed all the time and they sat there. Very seldom, I can't recall whether. . . I know the frequencies that we were assigned to, the frequencies that we did our communicating line with, none of them ever attempted to jam us. They just sat there with their electronic intelligence gathering equipment and they had one of these trollers on station all of the time, right off the tip of, I believe it was Hainan Island. It just sat there month after month.

C: Counting ships?

G: Just monitoring all types of radio communication that went on in the gulf. I imagine that that ship for as long a period that it would sit and stay there that these submarines. . . Our best story was that these submarines would at times sneak up to that troller and keep him supplied and probably take tapes or data collection or something like that that the troller had gathered and take it back to the high command, whatever that may be. At that time the Russians were very active in the Gulf of Tonkin, snooping and surveillance type basis.

C: Were there a lot of other ships over there besides yourself and the destroyer escort that you had?

G: No. The other ships were just mainly freighter type vessels that were going in and out of either South Vietnam or else into North Vietnam.

C: You mentioned that there were attack carriers. Were there attack carriers over there at that time too?

G: Oh yes. The American fleet on station at that time was normally

two attack carriers and a carrier of our type.

C: And they were flying over North Vietnam at that time and bombing?

G: Yes, they were flying at that time.

C: What about on a ship, like itself, did you hear anything from. . . I'm sure there was communication back and forth on the mainland. Correct me if I'm wrong, were there?

G: Well, most of our communications came from the admirals of each task force. Each carrier, being the two attack carriers and our carrier, each of them had an admiral on board which was the supreme line naval command. They received their information either from the commander of the 7th League Forces that was in Saigon or wherever it may have been and also most of the larger ones came out of Hawaii, commander of all 7th League operations that were based.

C: Did you hear any news of the ground war on your ship? That's what I'm trying to get at. Were there pros or cons of the people on board the ship? Granted you weren't flying at that time or your people weren't involved other than the surveillance.

G: It was really funny. We very seldom. . . On our ship--I don't know how it was on the attack carriers--but on our carriers there was very little ground war. I think the concern at that time being that the war was going. . . It was really an "I don't care" attitude with what was going on in the ground war.

C: How was the war going?

G: In comparison to what happened since then, I think it was very slow. I think it was very, very subdued and there wasn't that much activity going on. You heard of the loss of life, on the ground doing the jungle fighting, et cetera. The only thing that ever shook anybody up was if you heard, "Gee, the Kitty Hawk lost two planes today," or something like that.

C: How would you hear that?

G: That would normally be heard from normal releases that came off the other ships. We kept communications with the other ships.

C: Considering the fact that you were not involved to the point like you said of the jungle fighting or anything like that, do you have any feelings whatsoever on how things ultimately came out in Vietnam? You were there and some of the people that you knew did get killed and the carrier that you were on did go back there, though you weren't on it at the time. In terms of what eventually happened, how do you feel?

G: Really even back in 1965 and 1966 everyone thought it was a pretty good joke and everyone in the service at that time felt that it was a political war. Maybe even some of your gung ho fellows won't admit it but we knew it was a rotten deal--you might want to term it that way--because the amount of sophisticated equipment that we were using wasn't being used to its ultimate extent. There were \$3 million and \$4 million airplanes flying off attack carriers with World War II bombs on them. You take a \$3 million or \$4 million F-4 Phantom that would fly off an attack carrier with a few thousand pounds of World War II bombs that might blow up six gas stations pumped together.

Any of the sophisticated weapons the Navy had at that time, such as the Polaris submarine or the sophisticated radar homing type missiles, air-to-ground missiles, or even some of the more sophisticated weapon systems aboard the more modern destroyers, these systems were not used at all during the conflict. I think the general attitude with the naval people at the time was, "We are just over here in a babysitting type of capacity. They don't really need us here. What are we doing here?" It was just a big waste of time and a big waste of money. They knew it was strictly a political war.

I'm sure that the consensus of the country about it proves it today. It was probably one of the biggest mistakes we ever made. No one wanted to face the fact that, "What the hell are we doing here? This is a big mistake. Why are we even screwing around with this whole rotten mess?"

C: Did you have bombs and things aboard your ship, for instance, that weren't World War II? Bombs, you mentioned, they would find \$4 million aircraft off the carriers with World War II bombs.

G: Right.

C: You had sophisticated weaponry aboard your carrier or aboard the other carriers. Why would they not use up-to-date things? Why would they just take and use something from World War II, because it was just there?

G: Well, no. It was my understanding, although I never physically viewed the devices, but it was my understanding that every carrier or every ship that we had out there that had any type of a nuclear capability we did have nuclear weapons. We carried nuclear weapons that were designed for our system. There were some nuclear anti-submarine warfare type weapons. I was told that there were nuclear devices on all of the attack carriers too, but, of course, they were never used.

The only other thing that the government had, the only other types of weapon system, were things that were left over from World War II and Korea. As a matter of fact, the most effective

aircraft that we used over there off the attack carriers were World War II and Korean War type aircrafts. I'm talking about the A-1 Sky Raider. I know in San Diego, the home that I have lived in which was right down the street from the air station on the base, the whole time that I got back when things started stepping up a little more there, there were just streams of aircrafts: A-1 Sky Raider type aircrafts that we used in the Korean War. Even old T-28 Fighter Trainers that were still being used in the naval training permit, these aircrafts were being shipped over from Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Arizona. These aircrafts have been sitting there in the desert. They brought them all over, everyone that they could get their hands on. They came through our facilities, our overhaul and repair facilities, the naval air station in North Island and San Diego, reactivating them and sending them over there for combat. These were old propeller driven reciprocating engine aircrafts.

C: They would use those for what, reconnaissance?

G: They used them for attack.

C: Propeller driven planes?

G: Yes. They were the most effective. In fact, the first Russian built Mig that was shot down in North Vietnam was shot down by an A-1 Sky Raider, a propeller driven naval aircraft.

C: Why would they use propeller driven planes? Why do you say they are more effective?

G: Under warfare they could fly lower and they could turn quicker. They were much more effective in the type of warfare that they were using. As a matter of fact, they reactivated a couple of what they call jeep carriers. In the Second World War, they were used mainly. . . Strictly helicopter landing platforms were used for beach assaults during the Second World War. They reactivated a couple of these things and made them into complete maintenance and overhaul facilities. It got to the point where they needed those things over there so desperately that an aircraft that came out of the desert or Davis-Monthan was completely covered with a--minus the engine of the airplane--white type of polyethylene material that was a plastic, almost like a heavy saran wrap. They had the aircraft coated with the saran wrap. They would truck them into the naval air station in North Island and load about 100 of these things on a jeep carrier. During the twenty or twenty-five day transit over there, they had these things peeled down. The ship was loaded with maintenance men. They would have these airplanes operational.

END OF INTERVIEW