

# 1972 ORISKANY (CVA-42) DEPLOYMENT COLLISION WITH USS NITRO (AE-23), TONKIN GULF

John Buckley

It was typical warm sultry tropical day in February 1972 at Naval Air Station, Cubi Point, Philippines. The personnel office had called, informing me that my sea duty orders were in. I was assigned as ordnance officer, **USS Oriskany (CVA-42)**, to report not later than May, 1972. In the interim, I would take 30-day's leave and get my wife and infant daughter settled in quarters at Naval Air Station, Alameda, California, **Oriskany's** home port.

The next three-months would pass quickly in moving, getting my family and household goods relocated and familiarizing myself with all my duties. It would be prior to the ship's scheduled deployment to the operating theater of the Tonkin Gulf, Vietnam, with the U. S. Seventh Fleet.

I recognized the assignment would be the most important duty of my career. I had less than a year in my current rank of Lieutenant Commander having been deep selected in June, 1971. The responsibilities of supervising the safe handling, storage, build-up and expeditious delivery of aircraft ordnance to any deployed air-wing have always been a serious task, not without hazards. **Oriskany** would be operating with other ships and aircraft carriers delivering attacks to North Vietnam and insurgent enemy areas of South Vietnam. The potential for explosive hazards had already been underscored in previous disasters aboard the **USS Forrestal (CV-59)** in 1967, and the **Oriskany** in 1966. In the latter, I had been a spectator aboard **USS Constellation (CV-64)** in October 1966, while my squadron and air-wing was operating with Task Force 77 in the Tonkin Gulf. That disaster left me with an indelible impression that lack of proper supervision could cause death to shipmates.

It had been six-years since I witnessed the fires aboard **Oriskany** that killed 44-men, most of them aviators. At that time, the **Oriskany** was completely enveloped in smoke within minutes. Those of us half-a-mile away watched in horror and disbelief as it floundered out of control, the white smoke quickly turning to oily black smoke and flames. Valiant ship-handling and fire-fighting efforts that day brought the fires under control in four-hours. In the interim dead and burned bodies were being shuttled to the **Constellation's** flight deck by medical teams. The final analysis revealed that it was an ordnance handling accident that caused the disaster. With that knowledge in mind, I was determined to enforce scrupulous ordnance safety measures even before I reported for duty.

I reported on board **Oriskany** for duty on 10 May 1972. In the preceding 30-days, I had relocated my wife, Lydia, and our two-year-old daughter, Denise, to the Navy quarters at Naval Air Station, Alameda, the ship's home port. I had just one-month to familiarize myself with the entire operational aspect of coordinating the efforts of the "G" Division. It meant knowing and working with all the division's junior officers and senior supervising petty officers.

On 12 May 1972, **Oriskany** and Air Wing 19 were underway for air operational readiness training in the San Diego area. In that period 12-21 May, we had an underway replenishment (UNREP). The UNREP provided material

stores, parts, food, and the remainder of our mandated explosive ordnance stock we would use for deployed combat air operations. It also included projectiles for our ship's 5"38 open-mount gun batteries. The at-sea exercise was, in fact, a dress-rehearsal for actual operating conditions in the Tonkin Gulf, without the stress of Task Force operational requirements. The underway replenishment went smoothly. I felt some relief in knowing I had an experienced and dedicated crew to work with. I then and there established the policy that in every daily air operation and underway replenishment, there would be a post operational critique among my supervisors to analyze the day's procedures. We would identify any actual or potential safety violations. That policy would have a very positive pay-off in our stressful Task Force 77 operations throughout the six-month deployment in Southeast Asia.

**Oriskany** returned to home port, Alameda, on 23 May, and would remain there until out deployment date on 5 June 1972. I also learned that I would attend a week indoctrination for collateral gunnery officer duties. It meant that I would be a back-up as gunnery officer in the unlikely event our ship's four-5"38 gun batteries were ever brought into action. The most likely scenario in that case would be an "air defense" mode in which the ship would be attacked by enemy aircraft. No contingency was to be overlooked while cruising in the hostile waters of the Tonkin Gulf. I would thus participate as acting gunnery officer during our scheduled operational readiness exercise (ORE) scheduled with the fleet training group at San Diego, California before we deployed. In the course of my whirlwind "on the job" training, I was fortunate that Master Chief Gunner's Mate "Pappy" Malmquist would be my mentor in any facet involving the gunnery department (5<sup>th</sup> Division). The Master Chief then had 34 years of service.

## Deployment

**Oriskany** departed on schedule 5 June 1972, for its thirteenth deployment to the Western Pacific (WESTPAC). **Oriskany** made two refueling stops, one at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii on 9 June, and one at Guam on 18 June, prior to our arrival at Naval Station, Subic Bay, Philippines on 21 June 1972. On 24 June, we departed for "Yankee Station," Tonkin Gulf. **Oriskany** arrived 28 June, to commence our active combat operations. An underway ammunition replenishment was scheduled with **USS Nitro (AE-23)**. I gave our ordnance handlers a pre-operational briefing, reminding all that safety was imperative for the safety of all hands. I told them that I had watched our ship burn in 1966.

On 28 June 1972, our outgoing Weapons Officer, CDR Tom Quillen was talking with me on the hangar deck as **Oriskany** came alongside **USS Nitro** for replenishment. All hands were at their respective stations to receive ammunition and strike it below to the ship's magazines. As I talked with CDR Quillen I looked across the quarterdeck to see the **Nitro** alongside us. I also noticed that the prescribed distance between ships for stores handling seem to be diminishing, or was it my imagination? CDR Quillen also noticed the distance



began to rapidly narrow. At that time, the collision alarm was sounded. I couldn't believe what was happening! This would be my first line period as the ship's Ordnance Officer, and we were in imminent danger of collision! As I pondered this, the ship collided with a grinding, wallowing bump, accompanied by the sound of screeching metal. I requested of CDR Quillen that he maintain his watch on the hangar deck, while I get to the flight deck where we had 240 assembled 500 lb. bombs parked on the outboard side of the ship's island. (It was known on all aircraft carriers as the "bomb farm,") It was exactly where **Oriskany** and **Nitro** were locked together. The **Nitro**'s king-posts were locked and tangled in our main deck and sponson deck rigging. Sparks were showering down on the bomb farm, and on the parked ordnance that was awaiting loading prior to flight operations. It seemed to be my worst dream come true.

I also observed that the guide rails for our #6 upper stage bomb elevator (that moved ordnance from the hangar deck to flight deck) were partially pulled away by the collision. I yelled at the duty ordnance man to take the bomb elevator "T" wrench and manually lock the elevator platform into the flight deck. We had hardly finished that when the elevator rails pulled away and fell into the sea. My adrenalin was pumping as I turned and found the Ordnance Air Wing Officer standing by, LCDR Al McFearin. I said: "Al, round up all the flight deck ordnancemen and standby to move the bombs (on skids) to the bow area jettisoning ramps. Don't do it until I see the Captain on the bridge.

I immediately scampered up the island superstructure to the bridge. Captain Barrows was on the starboard wing of the bridge observing the damage when I approached him. When he saw me I stated: "Captain, I request your permission to move our bombs from the bomb farm to the bow in event we have to jettison them." His reply, as best I can remember was: "John, do what you think is best, I'm fighting the ship for it's control right now." With a brisk aye aye sir," I returned to the flight deck. I then ordered LCDR McFearin and his ordnancemen to move the bombs and bomb skids to the bow. I told him to tie them down and standby for further orders.

At some point a little later, the **Nitro** broke away from **Oriskany**, with further tearing and grinding of metal. However, the chance for an explosive incident was immediately eliminated. I then ordered that the bombs be sent back to their flight deck storage area. Ironically, the original idea of placing bombs on the outboard side of the island was to shield them from flight deck accidents and hazards. No one at that time knew exactly what caused the collision. Captain Barrows had reported to the Task Force Commander that other than minor damage to the upper starboard hull, **Oriskany** was ready to conduct scheduled combat air operations. Therefore flight quarters was sounded and air operations began.

Prior to sounding of flight quarters, it was arranged that "G" Division would temporarily deliver ordnance to the flight deck by use of the aircraft elevators along with the normal movement of aircraft. **Oriskany**, the air wing, ordnance and air department operated in this manner for the entire length of our remaining line period (28 June through 23 July 1972). After the shaky start of our combat line period, the

ship and air-wing operated smoothly on a daily basis. My ordnance supervisors and ordnance crews performed in a highly commendable manner. The daily post-operational ordnance critiques identified and corrected potential safety hazards.

In the early morning of 24 July, I awakened in my stateroom to an eerie sensation. There was no sound aboard ship! My stateroom being at the waterline, I could sense the ship wallowing, no forward motion. I quickly telephoned ordnance control and asked what was going on. I was informed that the captain had stopped the ship and sent divers over the side; It was probable that we had lost one of our four screws (ship's propellers). The divers confirmed that this was so.

Later that morning, our ship was preparing to return to Subic Bay, Philippines. I was informed by our ship's chaplain that my brother, Arthur, had died back in Massachusetts. Arthur was a WWII submarine sailor that had participated in the liberation of the Philippines. The captain approved my emergency leave. Within a few hours I was strapped into one of our A3 aircraft and catapulted off the ship and flown into DaNang, South Vietnam. From DaNang I flew to Subic Bay and from there by an Air Force C-141 back to the U. S. mainland. I returned two weeks later to Japan and met the **Oriskany** in Yokosuka where it was completing dry-dock repairs. A new screw had been installed, and our #6 upper stage bomb elevator restored to use.



**USS ORISKANY (CVA-43) makes a port approach to USS NIAGARA FALLS (AFS-3) at Yankee Station, Summer/Fall 1969.**

On 12 August 1972, **Oriskany** departed Yokosuka, Japan and began its second line period, resuming combat air operations in the Tonkin Gulf. It would continue the average 30-day line periods with scheduled rest and replenishment intervals at Subic Bay, Philippines for a total of six-line periods.

On 18 December 1972, we completed our 5<sup>th</sup> Tonkin Gulf line period and headed for up-keep and R&R (rest and recreation) in Subic Bay, Philippines. The day after Christmas, December 26<sup>th</sup>, we departed Subic Bay and returned for our 6<sup>th</sup> line period in the Tonkin Gulf. On 27 January 1973, President Johnson ordered a bombing halt to North Vietnam. However, **Oriskany** and other aircraft carriers remained on