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## My Love Affair With "Connie"

### USS Constellation CVA-64

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I was assigned to the Connie in 1961, just after the big fire of December 1960. I am what is known as a plank owner. When I arrived, one late evening, I got out of the taxi and when I turned around I looked up and stretching over my head was the largest ship I had ever seen. The flight deck covered the pier and stretched beyond the taxi as far as I could see in the dim light. I was in no way ready for the gigantic size of this vessel.

I later found the flight deck measured over 4.1 acres in size, and it was made of one and a half inch armored steel. When we arrived in San Diego, later the mayor flew over and he said it was like having a new airstrip for the city. To give you some idea of the mammoth size of this ship I will put its structure size next.

Displacement, approximately 75,100 Tons, length overall was 1047' 6" (oa) x 129' 4" x 37', which equals a 80 story building, and if that isn't enough how would you like to have this much horsepower in your car, 250,000 SHP. From the keel to mast was 265' 5" or equals a 25 story building. We also had enough air conditioning to run 11 empire state buildings. Then there was the hanger bay which was just smidgen shorter than the flight deck. While deployed off Vietnam we had 5,500 men on. How would you like to feed all those mouths 23 hours a day? Believe it or not they could feed the whole crew in just over three hours. The mess halls were open 23 hours a day because of our operating schedule.

During our first outing, (shakedown cruise), everything seemed to be going smoothly when we had an oil line rupture that ran alongside a high temperature steam line. When I say high temperature, I mean high. The steam is what is known as superheated and ranged from 2,000 to 3,000 degrees. This steam was used for the catapults' to launch the jets. They go from zero to 160 knots so they can get air borne by the time they reach the end of the flight deck, less than 500 feet away.

I was in our shop when a sudden ball of black smoke came down the ladder and into our electrical shop. Panic struck instantly and I realized that most of the men there had not followed the first instruction they had been given. We were all instructed to learn how to get from where we were to any place else on the ship, even in total darkness. I called for them to quite down and to grab each other's belt loop and I lead them up the ladder and to the nearest exit to the hanger bay.

Once there I asked permission of the electrical officer to take a

couple men and go check the switchboards to make sure the other men still on the boards were ok. I should have recorded who went with me but now, time and age have removed them from my memory. I took the other two and we proceeded to the escape hatches for each generator room and we checked each board and found all our men to be safe.

I later learned that the men in the engine room, where the fire started, had remained on station. Since the station was designed to function under this very type of situation they were in no great danger. The only real problem was the men in the engine room not being able to reach the station for safety. One or two of them died within just a foot or two of the door.

This was a devastating blow to the ones inside the station since if anyone would have just looked out the window they would have seen them and possible saved their lives. Since the station is air conditioned and sound proof to cut down the noise from the turbo engines and other equipment running in the engine there was no way for them to hear the men no matter how loud they might have screamed or even if they had been able to bang something on the deck or bulkheads.

The ship was not deterred as far as operations were concerned, so we continued into port.

Then they started accessing the damage and made I had assumed they would have made adjustments to correct the problem of oil hitting the steam lines again. I have later learned that this same problem persisted throughout the history of the Connie and reoccurred many times. I cannot understand why, after the first incident, precautions were not taken to insure all steam and oil lines were isolated from each other.

In summer 1962, Constellation was transferred to the Pacific Fleet, and we headed for the west coast and once again ran into difficulty leaving the Jacksonville Naval Shipyard. On 25 July as we departed we did an all ahead full departure and off we went, for a while anyway.

I was standing in the electrical shop, yep, same place I was when the fire started, at the work bench and suddenly I saw the bulkhead move up and down very rapidly before my eyes and I thought I was hallucinating. Just a moment later the word came over the sound system that we had hit something and were returning to the Jacksonville Naval Base.

Rumors and weird ideas and all kinds of speculations about what we had hit immediately started to circulate about the ship. Some said there had been an oil slick and it was thought we had hit a Russian submarine and others said we had hit an underwater sandbar, just a few of what was being told. After arriving at the Naval Base they started

checking out the ship.

Divers could not find any damage to the hull other than we did have one tank that had filled with water. They came to the conclusion that no damaged had occurred that would preclude us from continuing on to San Diego.

Upon deployment, we tried to locate the area where we had hit whatever it was we had hit but nothing showed on the ships instruments. The officials soon decided if we had hit a sandbar we had totally annihilated it. Considering the shaft propellers are 21 feet in diameter it isn't any wonder that we would have put a large hole in anything we hit. We then continued on our trip to the west coast.

Later we found that one of the ships shafts had been slightly bent. This caused us to wipe the shaft bearing (cause it to be damaged), every time we did an all back emergency. This was normally a yard replacement job due to the size of the bearing. If you wonder what that bearing cost, would \$10,000 a bearing, rock your pocket book? That was just for the bearing not the actual replacement cost, cranes, labor excreta. The crew became proficient in removing it and replacing it underway and could actually do it in about 24 hours. This also reduced the cost of replacement and allowed us to continue our normal operations. The shaft was finally removed and replaced when we went to Puget Sound Naval Shipyard for our regular shipyard period.

After our yard period we returned to San Diego for a short period of time and to reacquaint ourselves with air operations. We were once again deployed to the Vietnam arena and our old life started over again.

We had a few incidents occur on this particular cruise. One was where one of the parachute packers made a routine trip with one of the pilots. They are required to periodically go up with a parachute that they have packed. I suppose it is to keep them from getting lax in their job. Well this wasn't a good day for this particular packer. The jet had a flame out and they had to bail out. The pilots chute opened as it was suppose to but the packers did not and apparently neither did the secondary as he plummeted into the ocean and was killed.

The next harrowing thing I found out about was on one morning I heard of two men had been playing catch with a flare. Seems they were playing catch with it when it went off and killed one of the men. Things that sailors and for that matter, people do sometimes amaze me. How can two intelligent men do such a stupid thing as to play around with a flare that they know can explode at any moment or time?

On the flight deck we use 400 cycle equipment in the aircraft. The reason for this is that a motor is only about 1/5 the size of a 60 cycle

equivalent motor or other appliance so it saves space and weight. Needless to say in an aircraft that weighs in 29,535 empty and 61,651 loaded, weight is a very important issue.

My shop was called one evening and told we were needed on the flight deck. The Electrical Office and I rushed to the flight deck to see one of the cables shooting, like a roman candle, balls of fire into the night sky. 400 cycle power isn't like 60 cycles as it seems to ignore the fact that there is a breaker in the line that is suppose to kick out when this happens. We finally got it shut down and found someone had just dropped the cable into the well and one leg of the power had landed on a piece of angle iron and had shorted it out. Fun times for all. It did make a nice display in the dark of the night with the backdrop of the moonless sky.. It was just like the 4<sup>th</sup> of July with its fireworks.

One more of our adventures while on a training mission with the Air-ops crew.

Everything was going as usual until one of the jets came in and caught the landing cable, which is one and a half inches in diameter, and it broke. After the flight deck Warrant Officer had ducked the cable he jumped up and immediately started yelling for everyone to get down.

The cable made a full swing and hit him in the back and I still wonder why it did not break his back but apparently he was able to get up and he began tying off the men's legs that severed by the cable. Other corpsmen were dispatched to the flight deck to assist the on deck personal. The ones who were injured were taken to sickbay for treatment and as soon as possible the severely injured men were flown off the ship to the base hospital.

Shortly after all the injured had been evacuated the Captain told the boatswain to set the special sea and anchor detail.

We had an Admiral on board and he confronted the Captain as to why he was setting the special sea and anchor detail. He reminded the Captain that we had one more day of training to do.

The Captain turned to the boatswain and said "Have the men lower the captain's gig."

The Admiral looked at him and said "Why are you lowering the captain's gig?"

The Captain looked him in the eye and said "If you're staying out here you are going to need a boat. As for MY ship and my crew, we are going home."