

The following article appeared in the August, 1968 edition of *Naval Aviation News*.

The article is presented as it was published, with the exception of a few minor edits for clarification.

Above and Beyond

Lieutenant John G. Griffith wrote the following article earlier this year. He served with VA-35 Black Panthers as a highly experienced A-6 Bombardier/Navigator. Trained as an architect, artist and journalist, LT Griffith has had his work appear in Naval Aviation News and other publications.

It often happens that when a serviceman finds he has been assigned to duty in Vietnam or in the Tonkin Gulf the first questions he asks is, "Why me?"

But for 17 combat flyers, nominees for a total of 68 Distinguished Flying Crosses (DFC), there was no such question in their minds when they returned to Southeast Asia for a second combat tour aboard *USS Enterprise (CVA(N)-65*). Rather, there was perplexity regarding the queries directed at them so often during their stateside respite: "Why Vietnam?...Why you again? The questions themselves didn't bother me; it was the fact that people had to ask.

The role of the of the Naval Aviator and the Naval Flight Officer is unusual. Each is undoubtedly envied by others in combat, because a Navy flyer, at his own request, will be relieved of flying duties. Depending on the circumstances, such a decision will not endanger his career or opportunity for promotion. The freedom of choice to remove himself from the dangers of combat makes every flyer a volunteer. Each man is flying and fighting because he feels that he should - not because he is forced to do so. So the questions - "Why Vietnam?" and "Why you?" - take on a different significance for Naval Aviators.

The attitude of Commander Glenn E. Kollman is typical of that of the 17 *Enterprise* aviators. As skipper of the *Black Panthers* squadron, he was shocked by friends who make those queries when they learned he was returning to combat. They looked for their own indirect answers, he said, by inquiring into military pay, retirement and fringe benefits and the opportunities of civilian positions which require similar skills. When this line was ultimately exhausted, CDR Kollman said, his friends were compelled to take the tact they had wanted to take all along: "Well, if that's true, why in the hell do you stay in the Navy - just to start your second 100 missions over North Vietnam?"

"The first few times I was asked that question," CDR Kollman said, "I was rather startled because I considered the friends to be well-informed; I thought they had an appreciation of world affairs and national commitments.

But it was such a frequent question, and apparently almost universal among civilians, that I am no longer shocked by it - just dumfounded and disappointed; dumfounded by their ignorance and disappointed by the failure of the attempts to educate the American public to the worldwide purposes and methods of Communism.

The conversation usually ended in a philosophical discussion of morality because I was unable to provide a better explanation of my willingness to remain in a combat squadron.”

CDR Kollman described himself as a “pacifist by nature” but added that he never sought an excuse to justify his presence in combat. “My reasons are simple” he said. “They are my moral obligation and commitment to our nation. I identify myself with the obligations of the United States to honor its commitments with foreign nations all over the world. To me, my duty here is as natural and normal as accepting my responsibilities for caring for my wife and children. It is my job, and I’m going to do it. I wouldn’t ask someone else to do my job.”

The other second-tour flyers in CDR Kollman’s squadron placed more emphasis on the personal aspects of their presence in the combat zone. “National commitments”, “Communist aggression” and “political considerations” are phrases that have been mostly lost in the routine of daily combat missions. Missile sightings and flak concentrations have now become more common in the flyer’s vocabulary.

To these men, most of whom have flown more than 100 missions, the air war is the immediate consideration. Bombs are dropped, missiles are fired, some aircraft are hit and others are lost. Each day and each flight is a complete event in itself. Few of the men make detailed plans for the distant future. At least one of these men said that he does not expect to return from the war. There are probably more who feel as he does.

A study of combat statistics indicates that three crews will be lost; six of the 40 aviators in the squadron will be captured or killed. They know that the six will not always be “the other fellow” but that is something which is never discussed. These [A-6] *Intruder* flyers feel that Americans are trained and taught to be winners. In this peculiar kind of war, they are winning and morale is good.

To the 17 second-tour men in this squadron, the end of the combat period will be a personal milestone. Unless official policy is changed, they will be exempt from combat; they will not be ordered back to Vietnam. A Navy flyer wins this exemption after two tours in Vietnam, or after he has been wounded twice or has had to eject from his aircraft twice. He also is excused from combat if he becomes an only surviving son because of the death of a brother in Vietnam.

Some have said “I’m a professional” in speaking of their military service, but that outspoken attitude is normally a cover for their deeper feelings and a guard on their privacy of thought. After all the risks and objections have been considered, after each man has answered his own doubts, there is only one answer to why he is in Vietnam again: “This is my job. I believe in what I am doing. I can do it well. I will.”

(Not long after LT Griffith wrote this article, the Commander-in-Chief Pacific Fleet (CINCPAC) presided over an awards presentation aboard Enterprise for VA-35. CINCPAC Admiral Hyland concluded his address by offering his condolences for the loss the preceding day of CDR Glenn E. Kollman and Bombardier/Navigator LT John C. Griffith. One of the main objectives of the admiral’s visit was to have been awarding the Navy Cross, the nation’s second highest combat award, to the two aviators. The awards were given posthumously.)

CDR Kollman and and LT Griffith were killed on 12 March 1968 when their A-6 *Intruder* malfunctioned shortly after catapulting off *Enterprise* (most likely due to a faulty leading-edge slat). The aircraft crashed into the Tonkin Gulf, and their bodies were not recovered.