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SEVENTH FLEET RELEASES

"Highlights of Rescue Efforts During Oriskany Fire"
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USS ORISKANY, AT SEA, Oct. 27--Stories of individual heroism in Oriskany's fire tragedy continue to unfold.

Aviation machinist's mate first class Herman J. Kasch of Escondido, Calif. was on the fantail when the alarm was sounded. A veteran of the USS Boxer fire of 1952, Kasch knew experienced help would be needed. Although working all night the previous night, he unhesitatingly rushed forward to the fire area and volunteered his assistance in varying ways. Eventually relieving a rescuer, he donned an OBA (oxygen breathing apparatus) and went below decks to check the forward compartments. He assisted in removing the bodies of five officers then returned to the dense smoke-filled spaces with two other men to make methodical search of berthing. Kasch, in recalling his experience on Boxer, said in his opinion, "the Oriskany men are well prepared and well trained as evidenced by their outstanding performance in fire-fighting and in search and rescue operations during Wednesday's tragedy."

Other outstanding search and rescue performances were given by engine man second class Earl C. Houston of Hillsboro, Tex.; communications yeoman seaman William W. Black of Marietta, Ga.; corporal Harold J. Ruby of Fresno, Calif. and private first class Peter Nara of Torrance, Calif.; all of Carrier Division Nine staff, embarked in Oriskany, who returned again and again to superheated, smoke-filled compartments searching, leading nearly overcome officers and men to safety and removing victim's bodies. Wearing OBA's these men spent hours probing through the darkened stifling below-decks areas.

Engine second class Houston was in the flag office when fire alarm sounded. When smoke began pouring into the office, he called the Cardiv enlisted men's berthing compartment making certain all hands were out. Then, one of the flag's
officers said "Let's get out of here, there's too much smoke coming in," and all in the flag spaces moved up onto the flight deck. Houston then started checking each one of the flag officers' state rooms until he was unable to continue due to the intense heat. He then proceeded to the port side of the ship to check the rooms from that side. He was joined by an officer and they checked as many rooms as they could before being stopped by bulkheads bulging out into the passageway from the scorching heat.

Other than search and rescue work, Houston assisted wherever he could be of use; helping to get pumps running, checking office spaces, rigging up emergency lighting in the flag office, instructing persons in the use of OBA's, assigning men to special details, squaring away flag officers' state rooms and heads and checking for electrical breaks, working late into the night and starting again early this morning. Houston said "Wherever I went, I kept away from bulkheads because I knew these electrical lines running along the top could be broken anywhere." He said he has been to fire-fighting schools a number of times "but never thought I'd ever really have to use what I learned." He added, "I never saw as good a fire-fighting party as they had up forward there yesterday."

Houston said he went down to sick bay at one point, "figuring I needed some oxygen. But, when I saw them bring in that kid who was rescued from the pump room I changed my mind. I knew he needed oxygen, I didn't."

Corporal Ruby, private first class Kora and seaman Black conducted below decks search and rescue operations, bringing out numerous bodies, directing hoses, checking for hot spots, and helping to keep people from getting lost on their way to safety. Questioned about his reported heroic deeds, Kora said, "There was so much going on and so much that needed doing, I can't remember any -more-.
specific actions I might have done, I just kept moving." He is accredited with having saved many lives, plus at least one instance of applying mouth-to-mouth resuscitation in an attempt to revive a victim. Mora also worked late into the night, helping to search out electrical breaks.

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USS Oriskany at sea, 28 Oct...What do you say to 3400 crew members of an
attack carrier who have just suffered a major fire at sea and lost forty-three
shipmates? Capt. John H. Iarrobino, commanding officer of the Oriskany, chose
these words, when addressing his crew a few hours after the fire:

"The results of this fire are staggering - forty-three personnel dead -
three seriously injured and about 35 with less serious injuries. As for
those that died, you and I lost many friends and shipmates today - It's
awfully hard to realize that they were with us a few hours ago and now they're
gone. I only wish that there was some way to bring them back.

"Horrifying as this tragedy is, it could have been much worse. If it hadn't
been for courageous and daring action by many of you our casualty toll would
have been much higher and damage to the ship and aircraft would have been much
more extensive.

"There are many reports that I have heard, and I know I haven't heard them
all, which describe officers and men risking their lives together to save ship-
mates, to jettison bombs over the side, to remove aircraft from hangar bay one
and to battle the fire in the hangar and the forward part of the ship under the
most adverse conditions.

"To all these men and to all who assisted in any way to bring the fire under
control and to all who helped care for the casualties and to all the repair
parties who did such a magnificent job I want to express my sincere thanks and
admiration. Watching you react to this crisis was very heartwarming and made
me even more proud than I was before to be a shipmate of yours. A very well
done to all of you."

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USS ORISKANY AT SEA, Oct 28--Revelations of heroism in Oriskany disaster continue to mount.

Lt.(j.g.) James W. Nunn of Halls, Tenn., a pilot with VF-162, had 2:00 a.m. to 4:00 a.m. combat air rescue patrol and had retired about 4:45 Wednesday morning. He was asleep when the fire alarm sounded at approximately 7:28 a.m. Awakened by his roommate, Lt.(j.g.) Nunn was dressed in seconds and started up the ladder outside his room. Seeing intense smoke, he decided he could not get out. Hearing two men calling for help, he called out for them to come down and follow him. They went back into his room and telephoned for a rescue party with oxygen breathing apparatus (OBAs) to lead out five men. After a few minutes, Lt.(j.g.) Nunn instructed them to wet sheets or towels and cover their faces. Then he blocked all openings into the room and went out and up the ladder, where he met a man with an OBA. The man waited while Lt.(j.g.) Nunn returned to the room for the other four men and then escorted them to safety.

Checking to see who in their squadron was not accounted for, Lt.(j.g.) Nunn and Lt. Jack Kilpatrick of Bickfield, Tenn., found OBAs and battle lanterns and went in search of their squadron executive officer and other missing officers, up the port side in the fire area. Although heat was intense, they checked all staterooms and found nobody. They then proceeded to the forecastle and approached the squadron executive officer’s stateroom and junior officers’ bunkroom. Both were smoke filled but empty and several fire-fighters were in the area.

On the flight deck, Lt.(j.g.) Nunn met Lt.(j.g.) John Sande of Coolinga, Calif. They discussed squadron mates still unaccounted for, then made their way to one of the larger rooms. The room was smoke-filled and had approximately 24 inches of water inside. Finding men with OBAs, they had the bulkhead sprayed to keep heat down while three men entered the compartment through the hatch scuttle. The men found eight officers dead inside.

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Lt. (j.g.) Nunn helped in removing five bodies from six feet of water in ship's public affairs office then went to hangar bay one where he learned a man was believed still alive but surrounded by flooded compartments in pump room number one, six decks down. Obtaining two sets of scuba gear, Lt. (j.g.) Nunn, Lt. (j.g.) Robert Davis of Richmond, Calif., and machinist's mate first class Jack B. Tupper of Vinal Haven, Maine went in search of the man, fireman Claude M. Harper of Memphis, Tenn.

Entering a compartment with five feet of water, they donned scuba gear, opened the scuttle to drain the compartment, then opening a larger hatch proceeded into the next lower compartment. They continued downward, draining compartments as they proceeded. Reaching the third deck compartment they secured the hatch above them, as water was rushing in and the bulkheads were bulging. Should the bulkheads give way with the hatch open, the lower compartment would have flooded with them in it. Ten feet of water filled the compartment above the pump room and Lt. (j.g.) Davis, a trained diver, went under and opened the hatch, draining the compartment into the pump room and adjoining spaces. Fireman Harper was standing in the pump room clinging to a stanchion in a state of shock, not aware the lights had come back on when Lt. (j.g.) Davis reached him.

Manning the pump room for the purpose of maintaining hydraulic pumps to number one elevator during flight operations, when the fire alarm sounded, Harper had secured the hatches. When the flares exploded he was thrown 15 feet. When smoke began filtering in he stuffed rags in the vents, but they blew out. Obtaining a bucket of water he kept wet rags over his face and took short breaths. He tried the escape truck but black smoke drove him back. Two and one half hours later he went out and up the smoke filled escape truck to the closed hatch, opened it, but found water rushing through. Working his head and shoulders through the hatch he thrust his hand upward trying to find the surface. Unable to do
so and out of breath, he came back down, closed the scuttle and returned to the smoke filled pump room. After a night spent in sick bay, Harper exclaimed, "I'm mighty glad to be here!"

Earlier, the explosive ordnance disposal officer, had arrived at the fire scene within 90 seconds of the alarm sounding. Cutting the life-line on the starboard side, he had cleared the starboard sponson of approximately 100 bombs stored there. He proceeded to the flight deck and began jettisoning bombs from the forward area. Donning OBA, he entered the gun mounts and passed out five-inch ammunition which was jettisoned. Entering the walk-in type flare magazine, he determined there was too much ordnance inside to be removed, so he had the magazine flooded. The bombs posing greatest threat were on the forward starboard sponson on the hangar deck level. Flames were pouring out onto them, so he lead two hoses from the flight deck down and played water on the bombs to keep them cool. He then walked his way forward on the sponson and eventually threw all the ordnance over the side, with the help of people in the area.

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USS ORISKANY, AT SEA, October 28—One of the more harrowing experiences to come out of Oriskany's fire tragedy is that of Lieutenant Commander Marvin D. Reynolds of Ababi, Ga., attached to VA-163.

Hearing the fire call, he arose from his bunk and pulled on his shirt and trousers. He heard people running and opened his door and looked out. A huge fireball was following men running along the passageway. Before he could close the door, the fireball came into his room. Smoke was everywhere and the lights went out.

Climbing on to a sponson, he opened the port and put his head outside for air. When he pulled his head back inside, he saw his shirt was afire and flash fires were "poofing" all around his room. Removing his shirt, he wet a blanket and wrapped it around him, but that too began burning. He wrapped his bathrobe around him and waved out the porthole frantically. A helo overhead spotted him waving and notified the tower, which in turn alerted aviation boatswain's mate first class Noel V. Hartford of Grants Pass, Ore., of his presence there. Hartford swung a hose down to LCDR Reynolds, who played the hose on himself and the fires in his room. He went out into the passageway again, but saw another fireball coming down and ran back into his room. The deck was unbearably hot.

Reynolds then kept his head outside the porthole and continued playing the hose on himself.

Hartford swung an OIA and battle lantern down to him on a line. Reynolds tied a note to Hartford onto the line stating, "I'm trapped in 113, how do I get out?" Hartford told him to stay there, that two men with hoses were coming.

The room flared up again and the hose had little effect on the fires. Some 30 minutes to an hour later Reynolds heard people talking. He put on another shirt-
and pair of trousers, wet then down, donned his OBA and left his room. He
started forward by the officer's barber shop and ran into rescuers.

He had spent from 0728 (when alarm sounded) until 1030 in his burning,
smoke-filled room. "Without that hose and OBA, I probably would never have
made it," LCDR Reynolds said.

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"Statement by Rear Admiral W.L. Curtis, Jr. ConCarDiv Nine
On board USS Oriskany 28 Oct...The fire in Oriskany 26 Oct was indeed a major tragedy. It was a conflagration which had all the potential for an even worse disaster when it is considered that the bombs, fuel and aircraft were exposed to this fire. Only through the efforts of a superbly trained crew who displayed unusual courage and determination were the casualties and damage held to the very minimum. Such a magnificent performance has been recognized and acknowledged by the Secretary of Defense, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Secretary of the Navy, all recent guests of Oriskany and by other high officials, civilian and military, in their personal messages to Capt. John H. Iarrobino. It is particularly saddening to realize that so many of the courageous and skilled pilots who for the past four months, many on a second tour, have flown almost daily over North Vietnam on combat missions, have now been struck down by this tragic accident. Despite these most unfortunate events Oriskany and her air wing have already begun to recover from the shock and are hard at work repairing damages and planning for the time when she will again be in action. Such an indomitable spirit is irrepressible.

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