

# ATKRON 12 NEWSLETTER

## VA-12

PUBLISHED BY THE  
VA-12 REUNION ASSOCIATION

WE INVITE YOU TO VISIT

THE WORLD FAMOUS FLYING UBANGIS

AT OUR WEBSITE [WWW.VA12.COM](http://WWW.VA12.COM)



Volume X, Issue 1 April 2011

F7U-3 Cutlass at NAS Willow Grove PA, 1957

VBF-4 in 1945



VF-12 in 1949



VA-12 in 1955



## UBANGI? UBETCHA!

THE VOTES ARE IN, AND  
IT'S CHARLESTON, S. C.  
IN 2012 !

## NEWSLETTER

Seems like every issue I have something to say about the newsletter. It's hard to believe that we have been doing these for 10 years now. They have changed a bit over that time and many of you have sent me messages and notes indicating your appreciation for it's continued publication. John Larch and I have struggled at times trying to fill 8 pages in our current format but it has usually worked out okay. I hate to always be asking for money because so many of you have been very generous over the years in sending in more than the minimum in dues. We do find ourselves in a minor crisis at present. The average issue has been costing us right around 300 to print and post. If we put out 3 newsletters a year that's \$900. Assuming everyone pays their \$12 annual dues, and if we have 75 paying members then we are in pretty good shape. The crisis part is that all 75 have not paid for 2011 and our treasury is down to 500. So a couple things will probably happen:

1. We will most likely go to a 4 page newsletter, which makes the most since as our submissions really do not fill up 8 pages anyway. With the single exception of a current article from Tom Gerhart.
2. We will have to stop sending newsletters to those Ubangis that have stopped paying dues. Normally we give you a grace period, but from this point we will have to stop your delivery when your dues run out. We would still like to see more articles from our membership. We'll keep it going as long as we can.

## 2012 REUNION

All of your votes for the 2012 Reunion location have been tallied and I suppose no one will be surprised to know that we will be going to Charleston, SC. We have decided to try a fall reunion next year. Most likely the first weekend in October. More information about dates and hotel will be provided in the upcoming newsletters this year. Thanks to all that returned their ballots, the process seems to be working.

## TREASURY REPORT

Previous Balance	220.54
Dues/Donations	305.55
<b>SUB TOTAL</b>	<b>526.09</b>
Stamps	70.40
Envelopes	21.19
Printing *	133.90
<b>CURRENT EXPENSES</b>	<b>225.49</b>
<b>NEW BALANCE</b>	<b>220.60</b>
<b>Memorial Bell Fund</b>	<b>80.00</b>

## NEW MEMBERS

Here are the names of our newest members joining our ranks since the last newsletter.

Robert Kienel	70-74
George Case	74-78
Jeff Banks	78-81

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## TOM GIERHART'S STORY – Part 1

My name is Tom Gierhart, then ADJ1. From where the sun stood then I was known to most aviation seafaring men as "Gearbox". In VA-12, I held the supervisor jobs in Powerplants, flight deck trouble shooter, and quality assurance during both the 1969 MED and 1970 western Pacific WESTPAC cruise.

USS Shangri La (CVA-38) was a great ship and affectionately known as "The Little Giant". Other ships of the line also have my initials carved in the side - Midway, Kitty, Hawk and Hancock. Also other attack squadrons, VA-125, VA-22, VA-127, VA-144, VA-164, VC-5, and shore duty at NAS Pt. Mugu and NAS Lemoore, and Cubi Pt., but some of my fondest memories are with the Flying Ubangies.

The names of shipmates will not be mentioned because this is meant to be read by Ubangi's and their families from all years the squadron was in existence, from its beginning to decommissioning. Each year and each cruise brings it's own cadre of people together for their own adventures and memories.

My first Mediterranean cruise was far different from WESTPAC. Due to operating funds required for the war effort in Vietnam, there were more port O calls at anchor than flying. The rule was that you had more liberty than money. Having been on a combat cruise the year before in the western Pacific, it reminded me of McHales Navy, although still quite a different adventure in itself.

At this writing I am describing the squadron as it existed in 1970, when we were flying old aircraft, the A4C Skyhawk, and going around the world on an old WWII outdated ship. Although in the twilight cruise of her service, she was still like a fine wine and or an old violin. Some things just get better with age. This is the case of the USS Shangri-la and Attack Squadron 12 in that era when we were young and life was an adventure. To some it was never ending tedium, and others the exact opposite. I placed in the latter category.

The Shang was classified by the Navy as a 27 Charlie. She was smaller than the super carriers of later years. Commissioned in 1944, the Shang participated in several campaigns in World War II earning two battle stars.

Like many of her sister ships, she was decommissioned shortly after the end of the war. She was modernized and recommissioned in the early 1950s, and re-designated as an attack carrier (CVA). Operating in both the Pacific and Atlantic/Mediterranean late in her career, she earned three battle stars for service in the Vietnam War. She was decommissioned in 1971 and sold for scrap in 1988.

The route for this around the world adventure started on 5 March 1970 from Mayport Florida and end back home on 17 December. The Shang steamed southeast through the Caribbean and contoured southward along the east coast of south America, crossing the equator and arriving in Rio for a few days liberty. From there she steamed east across the

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South Atlantic past the tip of Africa.

After rounding the Cape and with Madagascar somewhere off the Port side she then turned northeast for the long haul across the Indian Ocean and past Diego Garcia. The next land seen was traversing through the Sunda Straits between Java and Sumatra. The water here was ice blue and shallow and one could see the bottom passing beneath the keel. After passage through the straights, the heading was north through the Java Sea and crossing the equator again once again. This northward course took her past Singapore on the Malay Peninsula to port and Borneo on the starboard. At this point we turned northeast entering the South China Sea. We reached our destination in Subic Bay, Philippines tying up at Cubi Point Air Station carrier pier.

Here preparations were made for combat operations. Pilots and aircrew went through jungle environmental survival training (JEST) and the Shang was made ready for seven months off the coast of Vietnam. She would serve six combat line periods on Yankee Station. These were broken up by trips to foreign ports of call such as Japan, Hong Kong, and Subic Bay.

The trip home would take the Shang southeast from the Philippines past New Guinea to Woolloomooloo Bay in Sydney, Australia for liberty. From there across the Tasman Sea to Cook Strait into Wellington, New Zealand. From there, southeast across the far reaches of the south Pacific and below the southern Antarctic Circle. Finally, all seafaring men worth their salt will have bragged about going around Cape Horn, or simply "Around the Horn" off the tip of South America. Entering the northern end of Drake Passage is one of the most challenging nautical routes on the planet. This violent stretch of wild water between Antarctica and South America is plagued by icebergs, monster waves, and gale-force winds. This passage was crossed by sailors through the centuries with great anxiety. The Darwin mountains could be seen on the horizon signifying the furthestmost point of land on the American continent. Leaving the south Pacific at this point the Shang would set course north northeast past the Falkland Islands entering back into the south Atlantic. Now the heading was once again north to Rio for the second time. Finally on 17 December 1970 she was home again in Mayport.

After nine months and around the world the Shangri-La and the Douglas A4C Skyhawks of Attack Squadron 12 faded away into Naval history. The Flying Ubangies would transition to a newer aircraft, the A-7 Corsair II, and the ship would eventually become scrap metal.

For men that have served on newer carriers the Shang was considered a relic. She had no air conditioning in the berthing compartments or working spaces, no closed circuit television as in newer carriers. There were only two catapults forward for launching aircraft instead of the usual three or four on newer carriers. Much of the time off Vietnam she operated with three of the four screws, earning the title of CASREP (Casualty Report) yet outperforming other ships on line in the sheer number of aircraft she could launch. This was due to the fact that she had only two types of aircraft to catapult skyward. These were the A4 Skyhawk and the F8 Crusader (the most beautiful jet ever made) as opposed to the larger carriers with more diversified flying machines to hurl skyward.

The Shang was habitually short on fresh water so "water hours" was the norm when at sea. Water hours meant that the primary consumers the precious H2O were the ships steam generating boilers to drive the four screws, the catapults to

launch aircraft, the ships galley, and laundry. Fresh water was made by heating salt water into steam and capturing the fresh water as it cooled. The Shang had at least four evaporator plants aboard if my memory serves me correctly and possibly more. The water that was left over seemed to always be mixed with jet fuel in the scuttlebutt's (Navy for drinking fountains). This happened because the ships aviation fuel and fresh water tanks below deck were pumped back and forth to maintain balance and keep the flight deck level. To our dismay, not all of the jet fuel tanks were completely empty when filled with fresh water. The very last priority was personal use in the form of showers.

The ships company worked three shifts of eight hours each (bankers hours). The water was turned on for an hour at the end of each of their shifts. The real test was for the "air group" because they worked a twelve hour shift with many of us working up to 14 hours a day. For many in the squadrons the day began and ended with the sound of "flight quarters". The ship did not turn the water on for us.

Each man (real men did not allow women aboard ships back then) was allotted 3 gallons to use. Get wet, soap down, and rinse off was the routine. At times I dropped a bucket over the side and used salt water to bathe. White King hard water soap was definitely suds free and not the best feeling after a salt sponge bath but better than no bath at all. To go dirty, greasy, and smelly after a long days working in the tropics it was really inconsiderate to your shipmates.

Air wing berthing was always the worst locations on the ship, The choicest always going to the ships company, because they lived aboard year round. Airdales, as the air wing people were known, were only tolerated visitors that made life miserable for the "blackshoes" (ships company) until we left the ship after deployment. Birthing for the air wing was normally between the catapults or under the arresting gear just below the flight deck. It took some getting used to before being able to sleep through these launch and recovery events but after several days fatigue finally prevailed.

Accommodations were primitive although an improvement to the old days of the wooden sailing ships, hanging hammocks, and iron men. Still, this was no place for wimps or whiners - real men only. Berthing compartments were hot, sweaty, noisy and had constant foot traffic and talking going through. Bunks were three high and held in place by chains allowing all three to "trice up" or fold up together against the bulkhead for cleaning the deck or whatever. Bunks were also placed head to toe so you were treated to smell the other persons feet just forward of your head. All bunks were secured with rope laced through canvas grommets and covered with a one inch thick Hollywood luxury mattress.

The middle bunk was by far the best and always my only choice. Whatever it took, by hook or by crook, I had in the center. The lower bunk was for the late arrivals just before deployment. The bottom bunk was about eight inches above the deck. Here three pair of empty flight deck boots and crusty socks were lined up. Some could be used to kill insects quicker than a household spray bomb. In addition, you had puke falling from high altitude splattering on you if the other two shipmates above happened to return from liberty with a belly full of beer and who knows what foreign food concoctions were mixed in the stomach. The top bunk was the second choice, professionally speaking, because you did not have dirty feet stepping on the edge of your white mattress cover (called a fart sack) to climb upward. The only drawback on top

was it was hottest up next to the overhead ceiling and a much further fall if you rolled out, drunk or sober. This coupled with the 1MC (ships communications speaker) blaring away every few minutes made life below deck less than hospitable. Some men slept on the wing of their aircraft, or any cool place of their own finding. I personally preferred the well vented aircraft line shack sleeping on my canvas futon atop a bin of rags used by the plane captains.

Real milk was always in short supply and upon leaving port only lasting a few days for the enlisted men. Officers enjoyed it several days longer. Canned milk was served in the chow hall but was always warm and in my view undrinkable. Using thick scalding hot galley coffee cups, hot enough to blister the bare hand, (no glasses) added to the milks horrible taste and was enough to gag a maggot. The single ice machine in the galley mess hall was overworked and always empty or inoperative.

The least of all evils was a drink called bug juice that resembled warm cool aid. Not good by any means, but better by far than the canned milk. It came mostly in lime flavor, sometimes red. This concoction usually had a high percentage of jet fuel mixed in. What an absolute blessing modern bottled water would have been.

There was no set mealtime for the airdales. We had to eat whenever the opportunity arose. For the flight deck people, we had to relieve each other for chow. The two galleys below deck were serving around the clock during flight operations, with the exception of alternate cleaning. My memory tells me that one of the galleys served fast food for grab and go meals such as burgers, fries, and other speedy items. The Shang was a "good feeder" by all ships standards. The crew had their general mess, the Chiefs had their own mess considered the best aboard because they paid their cooks and mess men, then came the first class that really was not bad. Officers had the worst because of the Phillipino cooks who cooked great Phillipino food but were considered a bit shy on the good ole USA cuisine.

**Tom Gierhart 69-70**

(Part 2 of Tom's story will continue in the next issue!)



VA-12's aircraft BuNo 129642 as it sits today at NAS Joint Reserve Base Willow Grove PA.

## ON THE COVER Vought F7U Cutlass

In June 1945 the Navy developed a specification for an aircraft that could fly 600 nautical miles at 40,000 feet. The Vought entry won the competition.

In 1948/49 a few F7U-1 models were built and flown. The F7U-2 was a flawed attempt at an update and was never built. The F7U-3 did incorporate many improvements over the -1 model, including slightly more powerful engines. This is the model built for and flown by the Navy.

	F2H-2 Banshee	F7U-3 Cutlass
Engine	Two Westinghouse J34-WE-34 Turbojet 3,250 Lb/Ft Thrust Totaling 6,500 Lb/Ft	Two Westinghouse J46-WE-8A 4,600 Lb/Ft Thrust Totaling 9,200 Lb/Ft
Max Weight	25,200 Lbs	31,600 Lbs
Max Speed	580 MPH	680 MPH
Max Altitude	46,600 Ft.	40,000 Ft.
Max Range	1,716 Miles	660 Miles
Rate of Climb	6,000 Ft/Min	13,000 Ft/Min

The Flying Ubangis of VA-12 flew the F7U-3 from December 1955 until April 1957. They never deployed to a carrier with the model.



**THE COVER BIRD:** In May 1957, VA-12 was already transitioning to the Douglas A4D Skyhawk. From the dwindling stockpile, VA-12 bird BuNo. 129642 was flown to NAS Willow Grove Pennsylvania to participate in an air show. After the show it was stricken from active duty and donated to the Navy Reserve as a ground training aircraft. On the cover bird, you can see the VA-12 Kiss of Death skull on the port side tail fin. The photo is not reversed, telling us that there was a time when a reversed version of the Ubangi roundel was used between port and starboard sides of the aircraft.