

A Patriot's Story: The Origin, Experiences, and Aftermath of Mr. Stephen Dyer in Vietnam

Stephen Dyer was born on April 12, 1945, in Omaha, Nebraska, where he was raised and attended school. From a young age, he showed strong mechanical and electrical talent and envisioned a future working in the skilled trades. As the Vietnam War escalated, the United States Navy's opportunities for technical training and education appealed to him, and he enlisted in 1963, beginning active duty when he turned 18 in 1964.

After completing boot camp in San Diego, Mr. Dyer was assigned to the U.S.S. Oriskany CVA-34, an 80,000-ton Essex-class aircraft carrier deployed to the South China Sea. Serving in the engineering division, he operated and maintained the ship's superheated boiler systems, which powered the ship and fueled the steam catapults that launched aircraft. His duties included water treatment, fuel transfer, ship ballast adjustment, and participation in ammunition and supply operations, with nearly 5,000 crew members aboard, including sailors, Marines, pilots, and aircrews. Mr. Dyer described the ship as a tightly bonded, mission-focused family. During his four years aboard the Oriskany, the carrier conducted continuous combat flight operations over North Vietnam. Dyer and the engineering teams were in constant communication with the bridge and pilots, supplying the power, steam, and propulsion necessary for the carriers' around-the-clock missions.

In October 1966, Mr. Dyer experienced the Oriskany fire, one of the deadliest naval disasters of the war. A magnesium flare ignited inside a storage locker, triggering an explosive chain reaction. At the time, Dyer was below deck managing fuel transfer when the emergency struck. He and his fellow engineers were ordered to remain secured in their boiler room stations as the fire raged above, burning aircraft, detonating ammunition, and nearly capsizing the ship as water flooded aboard. Despite the danger, he recalled that the crew remained calm, focused, and disciplined. The fire killed 44 men and injured more than 160. Following burials at sea and emergency stabilization, the carrier sailed to Subic Bay in the Philippines for repairs, then returned to the United States for full restoration. Once repaired, Dyer and the crew returned to war operations for an additional two years.

Communication with home was limited, and it was only after returning to California that Dyer witnessed the anti-war protests firsthand. He described the reaction among returning sailors as shock and a sense of betrayal, though he was fully supported by his family and community when he ultimately came home.

Dyer was discharged on December 31, 1968. Motivated by his technical training and strengthened by the discipline of service, he completed five college degrees over the next two decades and spent 65 years working in engineering and technical fields. Reflecting on the war, he emphasizes the cost of freedom, the need for vigilance, and the enduring importance of service.