

# PORTRAIT OF A WARPLANE

## SKYRAIDER



## BY CAPT. R. M. “ZIP” RAUSA, USNR (RET.)

**S**kyraider number 405, painted gray and resting on its conventional (tailsitter) landing gear, is on display at the National Museum of Naval Aviation in Pensacola, Fla. Despite its antiquity, it evoked this descriptive passage from a flight suit-clad young Naval Aviator who pilots F/A-18 *Hornets*: “What a warplane! What power! What a workhorse! I wish I could have flown it!” This, from someone who jockeys one of the world’s most capable strike fighters through the skies of modern U.S. Naval Aviation.

Though designed for WW II combat, the *Skyraider*—a.k.a. Able Dog, Flying Dump Truck, Big Machine, Old Faithful, Pedigreed Pulverizer, Spad—achieved warrior status in the Korean War. In separate strikes, F4U *Corsairs* and *Skyraiders* led by Attack Squadron (VA) 55’s Lieutenant Commander N. D. Hodson struck Pyongyang and Onjong-Ni airfields from *Valley Forge* (CV 45) on 3 July 1950 at the outset of the fighting. The 16 dark blue AD-4s carried a pair of 500 pounders and six 100-pound bombs each, and rolling in from 7,000 feet destroyed or damaged aircraft, hangars and barracks buildings. A fuel farm took a direct hit, creating a memorable conflagration, and the runway was cratered. Four VA-55 ADs sustained hits that day but survived the assault. The *Skyraiders*’ baptism under fire was a notable success.

During two strikes the next day, Hodson’s fliers knocked out a bridge span and destroyed 12 locomotives. The planes were not immune to enemy fire and again many took hits in what was proving to be a sturdy airframe. This would have pleased Ed Heinemann, R. G. Smith and Harry Gann (all later designated Honorary Naval Aviators), three members of a Douglas Aircraft engineering team, among many others, who designed and produced the Able Dog under Heinemann’s philosophy of “fundamental simplicity.”

There was nothing fancy about the *Skyraider*. Heinemann once said, “You acquire the right engine and build the airplane around it.” The AD-1’s 18-cylinder, R-3350-24W engine was the reliable heart of the *Skyraider*. The airframe was straightforward and uncomplicated. On the ground, the aircraft would win no beauty contests. In the air with its wheels and flaps retracted, its pylons and wing racks loaded with bombs and rockets, its 20mm cannons poking ominously from

the leading edges of the wings, the *Skyraider* conveyed a sense of might and graceful power.

For nearly two years, interdiction and close air support of ground troops were key missions for the *Skyraider* in Korea. Its remarkable range and ability to stay on station for long periods made *Skyraiders* welcome sights to beleaguered forces on the ground. The aircraft were also instrumental in bottling up some of the many railroad tunnels through which trains transported the goods of war. In such attacks, *Skyraider* pilots approached their targets at treetop, or lower, heights and pitched bombs into the narrow mouths of the tunnels, wreaking havoc. Sounds simple, yet such missions called for careful planning, courage, great concentration and exceptional piloting skills.

Other aircraft in the Navy inventory were configured for carrying atomic bombs, but the AD-4 was the first single-engine aircraft to carry a “special,” or atomic, weapon. Interestingly, during the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962, *Skyraiders* on Mediterranean carriers were loaded with nuclear weapons along with their faster, sleeker brothers in preparation for long-range nuclear attacks in the event of war.

At NAS Dallas, Texas, in May 1953 an AD-4 *Skyraider* set a load-carrying record when it was flown with 10,500 pounds of bombs on board, 3,000 pounds more than its basic weight. This was a credit to its design and to the mighty power plant, which now delivered 2,700 horsepower.

The aircraft was involved in numerous successful strikes against enemy targets in Korea, among them the raid on a key bridge connecting two tunnels across a 600-foot wide ravine near Kilchu, North Korea. A strategic passageway for enemy logistics, the bridge had withstood numerous assaults by various aircraft, including napalm which burned wooden beams used to reinforce it. Commander Harold G. “Swede” Carlson, skipper of VA-195 on board *Princeton* (CV 37), led the AD-4s that dropped the major spans of the bridge with 2,000-pound bombs. The ravine then came to be known as “Carlson’s Canyon.”

*Skyraiders* launched torpedoes on a special mission in Korea, and once again it was Swede Carlson and his charges at the apex of the action. Their target was the sluice gates of the Hwachon Reservoir in east central



**Opposite, this AD-4 is loaded with colorful simulated ordnance—a dozen 5” high-velocity air-to-ground rockets, two “Tiny Tim” rockets and a 2,000-pound bomb. Above, an AD-4L sports a searchlight/sonobuoy dispenser under the left wing, a torpedo on the belly rack, and a radar pod under the right wing.**



Above, a *Skyraider* from *Princeton* (CV 35), armed with three 2,000-pound bombs, warms up prior to a strike on “Carlson’s Canyon.” Right, the results of the fourth canyon strike on 15 March 1951 shows recently repaired sections of the bridge destroyed. This bridge was discovered by LCdr. Clement M. Craig, CO of VF-193, on the morning of 2 March while returning from a strike on bridges to the northeast.



Korea (see May–Jun, pp. 22–27). The communists used the waters of the reservoir to flood downstream rivers, impeding movement by United Nations ground forces. With F4U *Corsairs* in company for flak suppression, VA-195 2,000-pounders imposed minimum damage on the dam. The next day, however, with torpedoes on their pylons, Cdr. R. C. Merrick, the air group commander in an AD-4 flying on Carlson’s wing, executed a torpedo attack on the dam in tandem with Carlson. They had to be careful winding their way over the hills surrounding the reservoir to make a short run-in. Flak-suppressing aircraft did their job as the *Skyraiders* roared in, firing eight torpedoes, six of which ran straight



The *Skyraider* “Guppy” version could be distinguished from other variants by the bulbous radome.

and true. One flood gate in the dam’s center was destroyed and a 10 foot-diameter hole disabled another. The water flowed dramatically and the communists had a major repair job on their hands. It’s no surprise that

VA-195 earned the nickname “Dambusters.”

Cdr. Paul Gray believed in the *Skyraider*’s durability. As commanding officer of Fighter Squadron 54 (despite its fighter designation, the squadron performed attack missions), he was shot down or forced to ditch or crash-land three times in *Skyraiders*. He led many successful strikes, but at a cost.

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# Skyraider Survival Stories

The Korean conflict generated many remarkable stories of pilots who survived heavy battle damage or *in extremis* situations in the sturdy *Skyraider*:

Ensign John Rogers landed after being hit on a combat mission from *Bon Homme Richard* (CV 31), but as he caught a wire the engine froze. The mechs discovered a hole where an entire lower cylinder had been shot away—testimony to the *Skyraider's* staying power.

A “Guppy” version of the AD with a radome underneath and Commander William H. Rogers at the controls was on *Valley Forge's* (CV 45) port catapult for a night mission when the hold-back fitting broke prematurely. The *Skyraider* slid along the ice-coated deck. Rogers pulled back on the stick while hitting the brakes, but the AD continued to slide. He alerted his two crewmen for imminent ditching but rammed the throttle forward to gain as much speed as possible. The *Skyraider* lumbered off the end of the flight deck and fell toward the sea. Rogers retracted the gear and eased back on the stick as the engine worked feverishly. The “Guppy” thudded onto the water but bounced back into the air, sending up a pattern of salt spray! Rogers nursed the plane along the wave tops, gathering speed, and ultimately flew away to safety.

Aviation Electronicsman James Nesbit, in an AD-4N, felt a round of ground fire tear up through the bottom of his plane. The shell had penetrated the fuselage, pierced his parachute, setting it on fire, and then careened off his cartridge belt and was deflected out through the side of the aircraft. He survived with a great story to tell.

Lieutenant William L. Harris, Jr., on his first combat mission, made a dive-bombing run on a hydroelectric plant north of Hungnam. He didn't

realize he'd been hit until he returned to the ship. Maintenance personnel found fragments of concrete in the cowling and wings, verifying the accuracy of his bomb drops. Harris earned the nickname “Cement Mixer.”

Lieutenant (jg) Carl B. Austin recovered from a bombing run on a target near Kumson but was struck by a 37mm round. He saw a flash of brilliant light and felt the control stick whip out of his hand. He struggled to control the bird, noticing the fuselage, tail and canopy were riddled by shell fragments. The port aileron was blasted away. Somehow, the *Skyraider* held together until he landed safely on a friendly airstrip ashore. He got out of the airplane and observed shell fragments that had penetrated the canopy, grazed his neck and embedded themselves in his helmet. The next day he flew his repaired aircraft back to *Princeton*.

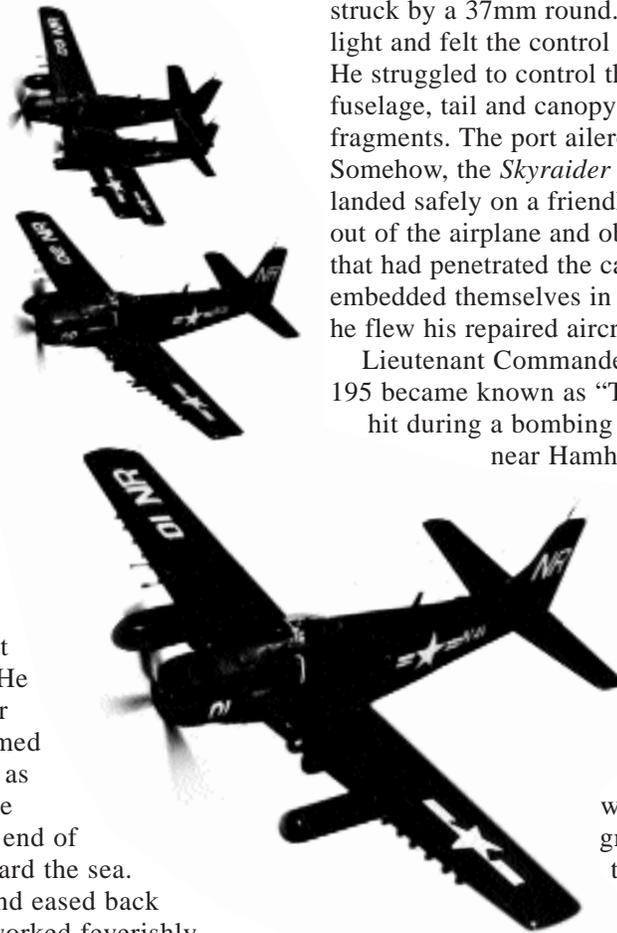
Lieutenant Commander Lynn DuTemple of VA-195 became known as “The Whistler” after he was hit during a bombing run on a railroad bridge near Hamhung in eastern North

Korea. His canopy was hit by small arms fire, creating a pattern of cracked glass. He made it back to *Princeton* but as he banked toward the ship on final, landing signal officer Lt. Roy

Farmer, heard a whistling sound that was of great concern to him. He thought, “I don't know what his problem is, but if he gets to the blunt end, I'm gonna ‘cut’ him, anyway.” He

did and the AD-4 settled into the gear normally. It turned out that a 37mm round, not small arms fire, had gone through one of the four propeller blades, producing a hole bigger than a softball before hitting the canopy. This created the sound.

Ens. William R. Videto completed a rail strike near Wonsan but took a 37-millimeter hit which went through the fuselage and exploded three feet behind his seat. After landing, mechanics counted 117 holes in the machine, ranging in size from miniature to as large as a basketball. Videto explained, “That shell had my name on it, but they had it misspelled.”





The squadron went after bridges, railroad tracks, railroad cars, trucks, troop emplacements and supply depots. But Gray's unit suffered seven pilots killed in action. "We seldom got over 1,000 feet above ground and frequently returned to the ship with holes in the *Skyraider's* skin from small arms fire," Gray said. "But the AD was a marvelous machine and could carry the same tonnage in bombs as the four-engine B-17 of just a few years earlier. It was a perfect aircraft for close air support and the other bombing and strafing duties which characterized the interdiction mission."

When intelligence sources learned that a top-level meeting of North Korean and Chinese officials was to take place at an enemy base at the foot of a mountain slope near the Yalu River, it became a priority target. Gray led the attack, which entailed flying 300 miles from *Essex* (CV 9) without cover from friendly jet fighters.

He decided to go in low and egress in the same fashion to avoid radar as much as possible. Eight *Skyriders* and eight *Corsairs*,

**An AD from *Boxer* (CV 21) makes a run on a North Korean bridge in October 1951.**

loaded with 1,000-pound bombs and napalm, launched from *Essex* as snow descended on the flight deck. After an hour and a half of difficult low-level flying, Gray and the flight spotted a grouping of barracks-type buildings right where careful target planning had indicated they would be. Gray signaled the flight to add power. The resulting sound of the collective *Skyraider* and *Corsair* engines was so awesome that it startled the gathering of Chinese and Korean officials.

"Stand by for pull-up," transmitted Gray. At a preselected geographic point on the ground, the *Skyriders* pulled up in fanlike fashion, climbing steeply and losing airspeed but gathering altitude to 5,000 feet, from which they dove down on the buildings. The pilots released their bombs in quick sequence, producing horrendous explosions. Repeated runs were made with additional bombs and napalm, effectively leveling the

meeting site. A few days later intelligence sources reported that 510 enemy personnel were killed.

Armor plating was eventually added to the *Skyraider* which, along with changing tactics that raised release altitudes for dive-bombing attacks, led to better survival rates for the aircraft. Later redesignated the A-1, the *Skyraider* continued to serve with valor in the Vietnam War, which began more than a decade after the cessation of hostilities in Korea. It achieved legend status in Naval Aviation as well as in the U.S. Air Force, whose flight crews operated the aircraft into the early 1970s after the Navy stopped flying it in the late 1960s.

Paul Gray, who knew the *Skyraider* as well as any flier and experienced many a perilous moment in the aircraft, once said, "I admit, I loved combat." It has been said that if the *Skyraider* could talk, perhaps it would say the same words. ✈

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