

U.S.S. TULARE (AKA-112)  
FPO SAN FRANCISCO 96601

Danang, RVN  
24 February 1968

Dear Tulare Families:

It was never my intention to wait so long before writing a Family-Gram to you. However, here it is two weeks past the mid-point of our deployment. Perhaps there is some merit in my not having written earlier for I am now in receipt of orders to be relieved by Captain Thomas Russell next month and I can therefore take this opportunity to share with you some of my thoughts on what my year and a half duty with your men has meant to me.

First, though, let me sketch for you what our deployment has thus far consisted of and what the indications are for the remainder. (I realize your guys have pretty well kept you up to date in their letters home, but perhaps a summary would be worthwhile.)

As I'm sure you will remember all too clearly, our pre-deployment period is best described as a mess, a real "morale-tester". To have spent the bulk of our last month away from home port, particularly after having been away for overhaul, was rough on all of us and all of you. Naturally, the short period just prior to departing on 18 October was a most busy one and required more attention to ship matters than ordinarily would have been the case. I'm proud to say, though, that the fine efforts of all hands ensured that we were in as good shape on deploying as any ship can be. Our trip across to Pearl Harbor in company with other squadron units provided many much-needed training opportunities and we came through with flying colors. Such also was the case in our long trip from Pearl to Okinawa. After off-loading at Okinawa what little cargo we had carried across the "great pond", TULARE parted company from the rest of the squadron and started travelling as she was meant to -- alone and fast. The typhoons which threatened us on our way to Okinawa considerably turned northeast and we had a clear field for our run down to Subic Bay in the Philippines. There we spent several days in upkeep (having had a fine Thanksgiving dinner at sea a day or so before our arrival) and left in early December for Danang where we relieved the Washtenaw County (an LST) of her responsibilities for support of our amphibious force marines up near the Demilitarized Zone separating North and South Vietnam. During this period we were operating as a unit of Amphibious Ready Group ALFA, which consists of a mixture of specialized amphibious ships having combat-ready marines and their equipment embarked and ready for an amphibious landing anywhere at any time.

Our schedule had us in the Ready Group for the majority of our deployment period, but we quickly learned that in a combat environment the most unstable thing is the employment schedule. So, just before Christmas we were ordered to turn our landing team cargo over to another LST, the Wexford County, and proceed to Danang to commence

operations in support of Commander Naval Support Activity, Danang. This, let me tell you, turned out to be back-breaking work for your men. Essentially, it consisted of loading the ship in Danang with cargo, which comes in daily by merchant ship, and hauling it up the coast to be offloaded, in close proximity to the coast (into our boats or someone else's) for the rather long and somewhat hazardous trip up Vietnamese rivers to landing areas where it is needed by the fighting forces. Our two destinations during that period have been much in the news recently - Dong Ha and Hue. As I said, it was tough work, with every man working seven days a week, six hours on and six hours off, around the clock. My greatest pride and satisfaction was in seeing how hard my crew worked without complaint and with smiles on their faces no matter what was asked of them. (To give you an idea of the tempo, we left port on Christmas Day and we were busy off-loading while everyone else was celebrating New Years Eve.)

We continued those operations until the 27th of January when we earned a resounding WELL DONE for having hauled over 10,000 tons of cargo to our fighting men ashore. Then, back to Subic for what we thought was to be a two-week upkeep. But, another logistics problem had developed in a most vital area. The big Communist TET offensive had begun just as we departed Vietnam and this resulted in, among other things, our big attack aircraft carriers remaining in the Gulf of Tonkin longer than they had been scheduled to and this, in turn, resulted in their running very low on critical supplies. Well, you know the story -- do a job particularly well and everyone who needs a similar job done will ask for you. This pleased us all and we pitched right in and loaded up again with all sorts of gear. We left at 10:00 o'clock on a Saturday night and sped off to the Gulf of Tonkin where we delivered everything to three great big "bird farms". They were most appreciative and, again, the messages went out to our boss concerning what a great job your guys had done. Then, back to Subic to resume our upkeep.

As you may have heard, we were able to schedule some fine tours during our Subic stops and I feel sure that everyone who wanted to go on one had the opportunity. Subic Bay (or Olongapo City) is not the greatest liberty port in the world, but the base is unique in having almost every conceivable recreational activity right at hand, so there are plenty of things to do.

Our re-commenced upkeep was not to go uninterrupted either. Friday, February 16th, found us again speeding up to the Gulf of Tonkin to deliver more parts and supplies to the Yankee Station carriers and we then turned around on Monday and sped back to Subic, arriving on the 21st. After picking up the boats we had left, we were underway again at midnight, headed for Danang, where we are anchored at this moment.

So far as we can determine, we'll be operating up and down the Vietnamese coast for awhile, but we're still in the process of conferring with the officials ashore to firm up plans. Frankly, the uncertainty helps to keep it interesting, and one thing we can all be sure of -- we're doing many important jobs which I'm convinced no other ship could do as well as TULARE. That's true for two very significant reasons: we have a ship whose combined capabilities of speed, cargo capacity and boat complement are unmatched, and we have a crew whose spirit, drive, dedication and "can do" are unequalled as well. You just can't beat that combination!

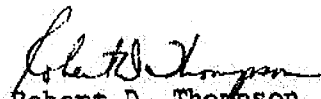
Let's not overlook another extremely important fact, though: if it weren't for the understanding and support we men get from you at home, we'd all be pretty miserable and, being miserable, would be unable properly to perform our tasks. I know you folks have heard over and over how important we all feel you are to our success, and maybe you've heard it so often that it has begun to sound trite. Let me assure you that when you are out here, working very hard day after day with no relief in sight, the knowledge that you wives have uncomplainingly and effectively handled, by yourselves, what are normally our responsibilities when home, gives us that much more individual and collective pride in our homes and families and a renewed will to do out here in a manner such as to give us pride in ourselves. Along these same lines, I want to personally thank you for all the times when you thought you just had to have your man back because everything seemed to go sour, but instead just gritted your teeth and told yourselves you could and would manage it. In just that one regard you've been a great help to the ship, the Navy and the Nation.

Well, I know you'd like to know what still is in prospect for us before we head home. Unfortunately, as I've already indicated, it's most difficult to predict. However, the usual course is that we will have a visit to Hong Kong and also to Japan (probably Yokosuka) before heading home via Pearl Harbor, and there's also a possibility of visiting a port in Taiwan. The big uncertainty involves the "when" and you'll just have to rely on our individual letters home for that information.

As I said earlier, I'll be relieved next month (probably about the 18th of March) and it looks as though I'll be participating in my first at-sea change of command, which suits me just fine. After all, a change of command is, so to speak, a relieving of the watch, which your men do every four hours when we're at sea. Since I have so thoroughly enjoyed my tour of duty with your men, particularly when we've been underway, I can't think of a more fitting way in which to turn over my "watch" to my successor. He's a lucky man. He'll be getting a ship which does its job extremely well and a crew which thrives on hard work well executed. I shall miss this gang very much and even though I will have had six months longer in command than is the average, I shall always feel my tour as CO, TULARE, was all too short.

So, in closing this letter let me say thanks to you whose sons and husbands have made my tour of duty both rewarding professionally and extremely satisfying personally. I wish all of you all happiness.

Sincerely,

  
Robert D. Thompson  
Captain, U.S. Navy