

Coral Sea's SOS

A Talk With an Anti-War

By Elaine Elinson
Pacific News Service

Olongapo, Philippines

The USS Coral Sea had been "on the line" — bombing off the coast of Vietnam — for 37 days without letup.

Most of the sailors looked pale and weary as they passed the main gate of Subic Naval Base onto the "strip" of Olongapo.

David Smith has been with the USS Coral Sea for three years, through three tours of 'Nam duty. In loud voices, to overcome the blare of juke box music, we talked in a bar frequented by U.S. sailors about life on the carrier.

"Have you ever been floating for 40 days? When we're on the line, we're working port and starboard — 12 hours on and 12 hours off. When we get a watch, it's even worse, 14 to 16 hours a day. Then we go back to the compartment to sleep — with 120 other guys. Can't sleep anyway, the engine is so loud and on a ship it never stops.

"And then there's the planes, taking off and landing. They're a constant reminder of what it's all

about, why we're out there in the first place.

"When I first got on the ship in '68-'69, everyone was gung-ho war-crazy. We all wanted to be part of the action. The next time around, there was an anti-war feeling, but we just didn't know what to do.

"This tour, no one wanted to go and so we started the SOS movement — Stop Our Ship. One quarter of the ship signed a petition saying they didn't want the ship to go to 'Nam. Now that we're out, the Brass thinks that by making you work so hard you won't have time to think. Because if you think, you'll start thinking about the bombs and the war."

BOMBS

"Yeah, but some things you can't ignore," said Jeff Dinsmore, also from the Coral Sea. "They assemble the bombs right near where we eat. I see them putting them together — the 500 pounders — and at Christmas they wrote on them 'Merry F--- Christmas, Charlie.' We bombed right through on Christmas Day, 15 miles from Da Nang; that really p---- off a lot of guys."

"They try to keep everything from us — they never let us know how many missions the ship flies, how

many villages have been wiped out. So we started putting out a paper called "We Are Everywhere," with statistics about how much ordnance we carry, how many people had been killed. We print it right on the ship and spread it all around. We've had three issues so far, they can't figure out who's doing it."

We left the bar and walked along Magsaysay boulevard, the heart of the "strip" here. On both sides, bars like "D'World" and "Paradise Alley" beckon.

"We have meetings every night on board. It's hard, because everything is geared to the war effort, and functional. The sailors are just cogs in the bombing machine. We work, eat, sleep and that's all we're supposed to do."

Two Shore Patrol in white uniforms with billy sticks hanging at their sides eyed the two sailors with me and then passed by. Jeff picked up, "We used to have meetings in the mess hall, but the Marines broke those up. Now we meet at night be-

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Sailor

hind the gunsonson. It's right up by the water, and they are afraid what might happen to them if they do come and try to stop us."

"The Brass is really uptight now," David said. "Afraid of the SOS movement. Captain Harris put out an order to get anyone who is involved with SOS and they're trying."

The sailors said over 30 men have been discharged or transferred from the ship for SOS activities to date. There is now a campaign on board to write Congress ask-

ing for an investigation. One sailor alone has written 17 congressmen; another wrote a 237 page letter to his senator, complete with a set of documents.

As we parted, David's glance returned from taking in the Asian capital around us.

"It's hard to imagine that tomorrow we have to go back and bomb Vietnam. When you're out there, you know you're in the most miserable place to the whole world — a U.S. warship in the middle of an ocean. Maybe we didn't stop this one, but the movement is spreading throughout the fleet. And a ship can't run without sailors."