

Captain, You Are Late!

In 1981 I was in command of the U.S.S. *Bigelow* (DD-942) A Forest Sherman class destroyer of the US Atlantic Fleet. April of that year found the ship and its crew of 350 officers, chief petty officers, rated petty officers, and non-rated sailors at the beginning of a six months cruise to the Persian Gulf as part of the Middle East Force, a group of five or six US Navy ships that served US interests in that now all too familiar part of the world. Our time on station was considered of particular importance since the Iraq-Iran war had recently broken out. No one would predict that the war between these two Persian Gulf powers would last for eight years, but its outcome would most certainly have significant consequences for the future of the region and US and allied interests there.

The *Bigelow* sped across the Atlantic in company with another destroyer, crossed the Mediterranean Sea, and transited the Suez Canal into the Red Sea. Once through the Canal, I speculated with our chaplain, Lt. Richard C. "Dick" Fletcher, an ordained Baptist minister, about the most likely spot for Moses to have led the Israelites across, only steps ahead of Pharaoh's army. On the morning of the fourth day of our 1200 mile journey south through the Red Sea, we entered Djibouti, a port at the foot of the Red Sea at the Horn of Africa, for fuel and water before proceeding across the Arabian Sea to the straits of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf. Our stay was brief, only six hours in length, barely time enough to load much needed fuel and water, and to pay a few calls on French military and naval officials still stationed in the former French colony.

The next morning, our first in the Arabian Sea, the chaplain, Dick Fletcher, approached me on the bridge wing and asked if we would be coming back the same way when we returned home in late September. I answered that I thought we would retrace our steps, including the brief stop for fuel in Djibouti. With that, Dick produced a recent edition of the National Geographic magazine that had a photo layout on Djibouti and the surrounding region, including pictures of the many tens of thousands of refugees that resided in camps on the verges of the town. These refugees were the result of civil war in the Sudan, Somalia and Ethiopia, a severe drought, and the resulting famine conditions that were a result of both war and the drought that had turned once arable fields to desert. They arrived in Djibouti having crossed the Ogaden with only what they could carry during their long walk from the now arid lands that had once provided their sustenance, if only at survival levels. Refugee camp living conditions were precarious, shelters often consisting of little more than cardboard, packing boxes, and a piece of tin, if lucky. Sanitation was primitive to non-existent. Disease was rampant in addition to persistent hunger Dick asked if we might be able to do something for these refugees on our return trip, but neither he nor I had any notion of what kind of assistance we might render, especially with a return port layover that would not exceed six or eight hours. This aside, we agreed that we would begin by asking the crew to donate funds toward some sort of as yet to be determined relief assistance to be provided on our return voyage home.

On payday, I noticed that Dick had cut out some of the pictures from the National Geographic magazine article on the region ("Somalia's Hour of Need" May 1981) and pasted them to a piece of poster board asking for donations toward refugee relief. This was placed at the end of the pay line along with an empty number ten tin can. Many of the crew, whose average age was nineteen and a half, took a portion if not all of their bi-

monthly pay in cash. As they reached the end of the pay line, I noticed that many of them dropped a bill or two into the waiting tin can and then quickly moved on.

After almost five months in the Persian Gulf, and a number of paydays, we had collected a lot of money toward the relief effort. But there was still no clear idea of how we would spend the money collected. One option was to simply present a check to those administering the relief effort. Certainly that was an easy thing to do, given the short duration of our return visit to Djibouti, but we didn't know that the money could purchase needed provisions or relief materials from local sources. One asset we had was the ship itself that could be used to transport relief supplies to Djibouti. But here we had no notion of what to procure that would be most needed. We decided to consult our ship chandler and provisioner, Mr. Toorani, on the question of what to procure during our last visit to Bahrain before sailing for the Straits of Hormuz and Djibouti. If we purchased any provisions for delivery to the refugees, Mr. Toorani was the person to obtain them for us and see to their delivery onboard. On arrival in Bahrain, Mr. Toorani came on board and quickly dealt with our shipboard requirements for fuel, water, fresh provisions, and any other needs we might have. The Executive Officer, Cdr. Thomas C.J. McGinlay, the Supply officer, Lt Larry J. Martin, the Disbursing officer, Lt (jg) Loren V. Heckelman, the Chaplain, Dick Fletcher and several other representatives of the crew turned the business at hand to consideration of refugee needs. Mr. Toorani said that he knew what was needed—powdered and condensed milk, rice, corn meal, flour, cereals and other staples that would keep well and go far when distributed. Mr. Toorani asked how much money we had, and, when told, turned to his calculator and began fingering in sets of numbers. In a few minutes, he raised his head and told the assembled group around the wardroom table that he thought he could purchase about seven and a half tons of food for the amount stated. Mr. Toorani then asked me if I read the Koran. I had to confess that I was not well versed in the Koran, to which he replied, “Well, Captain, if you read the Koran, you would know that if this purchase is for charity, which you tell me it is, then I, as a Moslem, cannot take any profit.” With that, he returned to his calculator and in a few more minutes announced that he thought we could purchase about eleven tons of food.

With Mr. Toorani's usual efficiency, a barge came alongside our ship at anchor in Bahrain harbor early the next morning and the crew began to load the eleven tons of flour, rice, powdered and condensed milk, and other staples, taking care to position the foodstuffs so that the ship's buoyancy was least affected. Many crewmembers had to step over bags of rice or flour or on cases of condensed milk to get into their bunks, since even the aisles in berthing compartments were lined with food destined for Djibouti. And so we sailed, a little lower by the stern than normal, but with buoyant hearts at the prospect of heading home.

Five days later and 48 hours from our scheduled arrival in Djibouti, I sent our required logistics request message to the Djibouti port authorities detailing our estimated arrival time, a request for a harbor pilot and tug boat to assist in berthing, the certified state of health of the crew, and my requirements for fuel and water to continue our voyage north to the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean. At the bottom of the message I asked that a representative of the charitable organization or organizations administering refugee relief efforts in Djibouti meet the ship with transportation for the eleven tons of food that we had on board for the relief effort. The next day, I received a reply stating that all of my requested services would be provided and that a representative of Catholic

Relief Services, then the sole agency working with the refugee relief effort, would meet the ship on arrival.

At nine o'clock the next morning, the Bigelow eased alongside the jetty in Djibouti and passed its mooring lines and fueling hoses to the pier where stood three rickety open bed trucks that had seen much service. When the gangway was put in place and the pilot had departed, promising to return in six hours to oversee our departure, an older gentleman of French or Belgian origin in a large hat hustled on board. He looked at me and asked if I were the Captain. When I replied that I was, he said, "Captain, you are late!" When I retorted that I was on time as scheduled, he repeated "You are late!" then continued, "You don't understand. We ran out of food three days ago. We have been praying for some time and had expected this miracle to occur three days ago! Can we hurry?" Dick Fletcher, our chaplain soon had a forty-hand working party organized, led by a signalman petty officer first class who had been a driving force in promoting the relief effort during the preceding five months and who was our only Jewish sailor. The trucks were soon loaded and the sailors perched on top for the trip to the camps and the unloading of the awaited food supplies. They returned hours later with stories and graphic descriptions of the conditions they witnessed and the joy with which their arrival was greeted, all of which was quickly passed to the waiting crew now completing refueling and provisioning.

That evening, as we steamed north in the Red Sea toward the Suez Canal and our homeport of Mayport, Florida, the crew asked chaplain Dick Fletcher if he could hold a service of Thanksgiving, not for what they had done in rendering some small measure of relief to the plight of the refugees in Djibouti, but rather a thanksgiving for what they had received in doing so.

Proceeding north in the Red Sea that night, I was reminded of the words of Psalm 107, which says in part, "They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters: These see the works of the Lord...."

Three weeks later we departed Rota, Spain, in company with the USS Sellers (DDG-11) headed west for home via Bermuda where we would again have to put in for fuel. I was the senior officer so I was in charge of the two ships. I quite prided myself for being designated commander, Second Fleet task unit three point one point two (CTU.3.2.1). It was pretty heady stuff.

Four days out of Rota, Atlantic weather reports informed me that Hurricane Irene and our two ships were now scheduled to arrive in Bermuda together. We clearly were not going to Bermuda. We did not have enough fuel to return to Rota having just passed the half way point in the voyage, and we did not have enough fuel to reach our homeports of Charleston for the Sellers and Mayport for Bigelow. Worst of all was the thought of being in the eastern half of the Atlantic with a hurricane in the neighborhood. I sent the Operations Officer down to radio with instructions to examine all fleet message traffic in hopes of finding a large deck Navy ship or oiler anywhere within our vicinity. In half an hour he was back having identified an amphibious ship steaming east for the Mediterranean about two hours steaming distance from us. The amphibious ship had sailed six days late for deployment due to last minute shipyard repairs and was catching up with the Expeditionary Strike Group to which he was assigned. I sent a most

immediate message to the captain and asked if he could “top off” (refuel) two “small boys” (destroyers). His instant reply was that he had not conducted an at sea refueling for over a year, but he was willing to try. In two hour’s time the two ships were alongside and filling their fuel tanks. On completion of refueling, we were able to increase our speed from 16 to 24 knots allowing us to cross well ahead of the path of the hurricane and then turn south into the “safe semi circle” of the storm and head for home—all in relatively calm seas. Three days later we dropped the Sellers off at Charleston and the next morning we arrived in May port to a joyous homecoming, but with only seven percent fuel remaining in our tanks. We were coming in on fumes!!

Again, I had pause to wonder what miracle had conspired to place that life saving amphibious ship in the ideal position to ensure our safe and happy voyage home after being away for more than six months from families and friends.

Once again, Psalm 107 held the answer in these words:

“So they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he brought them out of their distress.
The storm sank to a murmur,
and the waves of the sea were stilled.
They were all glad then that all was calm,
as He guided them to the harbor they desired.”

There could be no doubt in my mind that we were held in the palm of God’s hand. You will be too.

From all of us in the Class of 1963 we wish you, the Class of 2013, soon to be at sea, ‘fair winds and following seas---and a happy voyage home.’”