

Shoot-Out in the Gulf

By Tom Phillips

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HMAS *Perth* (D 38), CAPT Peter Doyle, RAN, commanding, was one of three *Charles F. Adams* DDGs built for the Royal Australian Navy. It featured two 5-inch guns, and in company with USS *Bordelon* (DD 881) with four 5-inch guns, was shelling a North Vietnamese highway bridge just south of the city of Vinh, as part of Operation Sea Dragon in the Gulf of Tonkin. They came under fire by coastal artillery. A spirited exchange ensued as the ships raced out of range, with 30 rounds falling around the ships, several between them (in formation 2,500 yards apart). The hits were within 150 yards of *Bordelon* and 1,000 yards of *Perth*. Once clear, *Perth* called for air support to subdue the shore batteries.

Help arrived in the form of four VA-153 A-4Es from USS *Coral Sea*. The flight was led by the skipper, CDR Thomas E. Woolcock. As the Scooters were attacking the gun emplacements. A Surface to Air Missile (SAM) was launched by the North Vietnamese and heavily damaged Woolcock's jet. He managed to fly seaward before ejecting, and came down five miles off shore and ten miles from the ships. Both ships immediately turned and closed in toward Woolcock at high speed to support a rescue.

About 37 miles northeast of Vinh, HS-6 LT Vern Von Sydow, with his crew, copilot LTJG Jim Rooney, and crewmen AX2 J.W. Jones and AXAN Ronald V. Cockerham, was forward staged aboard the South Search and Rescue (SAR) picket, USS *Dewey* (DLG 14).

Normally, South SAR was assigned to an HC-7 UH-2B detachment, but *Dewey's* Det 104 had suffered a mishap two days before. While conducting M-60 gunnery training for a new crewman, one round was accidentally discharged. The "golden bee-bee" passed through the main spar of one of the rotor blade. The blade folded due to the damage and the helicopter went out of control. While the crew was rescued by *Dewey*, the bird, not having a boat hull like the SH-3, went to the bottom of the Gulf of Tonkin. This was stark evidence of the vulnerability of the helicopter, and any aircraft, to a small arms hit in the wrong place.

HS-6 hustled Von Sydow's SH-3A forward to cover the SAR station until HC-7 could bring a replacement bird out from Cubi Point, the Philippines. Shut down on the flight deck for the night, but "cocked and ready" in a five-minute alert posture, a nice dinner in the wardroom for Von Sydow and Rooney was left on the plates when Big Mother was scrambled at the word Woolcock was shot down.

Big Mother 73 almost joined the H-2 at the bottom of the Gulf, as *Dewey* shipped significant seas when she heeled severely in her haste to turn to the correct course for launching the helicopter. Men were sent sliding and knocked off their feet by the water sweeping the fantail, and the helo, too, shifted toward the deck edge. Fortunately, the tie-down chains had not yet been broken down, and they held until the ship steadied into the wind. Big Mother 73 launched at 1821 local time.

From the outset, the helo was racing against the darkness to get to the scene. Sunset was 1745 and nautical twilight, the time of absence of any sunlight, was 1835. It's dark after that, with the moon not yet risen. As the Big Mother approached dangerous Hon Mat island, 10 miles off the mouth of the Song Ca river across from Vinh, Von Sydow took a calculated risk. He descended to 100 feet and hurried through the effective range arcs of the AA guns, rather than making a safer, but time-consuming, detour around them. Passing east of the island in the gloaming, the dark grey helicopter took no fire. LTJG Rooney, now piloting from the left seat, pushed the heavy helicopter as fast as it could fly, about 120 knots. The aircraft vibrated and shivered excessively, like a hound passing a peach pit.

Approaching the general area at 1839, Rooney heard a beeper and Von Sydow got an ADF cut on it. The bearing was confirmed by a Sun King E-2A rapidly closing to assist in the SAR. The E-2A crew heard Powerhouse 305, Woolcock's wingman, pull off station streaming fuel from a damaging hit, leaving two A-4s to keep faith with the downed man. Before them in the dusk, *Perth's* and *Bordelon's* muzzle flashes illuminated the columns of water rising around the two destroyers. One erupted

not 100 yards away and right between them. Bright red flashes also dotted the shore line, as multiple 5-inch rounds struck among the shore gun sites. The two A-4s contended with several SAMs fired at them.

Big Mother 73 headed straight in from the north, under the arcing shells and streaking SAMs. Following a final vector from Rick St. Claire flying Powerhouse 315, Rooney sighted the survivor in his one-man raft, and Von Sydow, exercising his prerogative as aircraft commander, took the controls and horsed the big helicopter into a manual hover over the raft despite the growing darkness. The rotor wash, unfortunately, blew the raft out from under the helicopter.

A huge column of water rose 100 yards from the stationary helicopter. Ignoring it, AX3 Jones directed Von Sydow to hover upwind and back down past the survivor, pulling the extended hoist cable and floating horse collar over the skittering raft.

A second shell fell as near as the first. Bracketed! CDR Woolcock grabbed the cable, followed it to the horse collar, and wriggled into it backwards. Before he could get himself correctly turned in the horse collar, Jones hit the raise switch. Woolcock grabbed the sling in a one-handed vice grip and held on. He was not about to let go. Jones brought the man to the door and had to get the help of Ron Cockerham to maneuver him past the M-60 Dutch-door gun mount partially blocking the entrance. Von Sydow and Rooney tensed, waited for the next shell to land, having seen the bracketing of the second round. The next one should fall in their laps. But it did not.

Two enemy batteries had been firing at Big Mother, probably 4-inch mobile field artillery. The batteries had diverted their fire from the destroyers to try to bag the rescue helicopter at its most vulnerable moment. With the A-4s low on ordnance and unable to engage the guns because of the SAMs, *Perth* and *Bordelon* responded immediately. Their naval gunnery rearranged the priorities of the coastal guns. Between *Perth's* two five-inch rifles, she had poured out 31 rounds in five minutes, about five times the normal rate of counter battery fire usually sustained. *Perth* fired four