

Air Raid in the Tonkin Gulf

By Ray Heins

“I hate the mid watch. Relieve at 15 minutes before midnight, off at 03:45. With breakfast at 7:00, ‘Turn to’ at 8:00, there’s not much sleep to be had. Oh well, at least I’m better off than the Sailors – with 40 men in a berthing compartment, they can’t even choose to sleep in till 8:00.”



These musings coursed through my head as I stood the mid-watch, as “Evaluator” in CIC – the Combat Information Center. It was December, 1966. PARKS was assigned to North SAR station in Tonkin Gulf, maybe 20 miles southeast of Haiphong, North Vietnam. Somewhere nearby was our loose companion, USS Richmond K. Turner, DLG 20. TURNER was one of those incredible misfits spawned by the deep thinkers of the Pentagon – a good sized warship, at least twice our size, with missiles fore and aft. Great for air defense, but... “Oh My God, we forgot the guns!!!” So this marvelous warship needed the protection afforded by a 25 year old relic of WW II, and her four five-inch guns. Just in case a goddam sampan decided to sink her.



And the North Vietnamese did have armed sampans, but also torpedo boats, a well-hidden air force, and even, if you could believe it, an adventurous biplane which could attack at very low altitude. So said Naval Intelligence – more great thinkers?

“Mr. Heins!” – it was RD1 Stone, the senior Radarman. A really squared-away sailor. Late 20’s, with maybe ten years in the Navy. Intelligent, industrious, serious. "On the ball".

“Yes, Stone? I tried to shake off the lethargy accumulated over the last hour and a half.

“Jolly Green checking in.” Jolly Green was the call sign of the USAF patrol plane patrolling the Gulf tonight. We had very little contact with these planes. They were Spooks in a way, laden with electronic intercept equipment, I thought. They had the capacity to carry plenty, that’s for sure. If they stayed aloft. A big, prop-driven, triple-tail Super Constellation, like those flown by TWA and Pan Am in the 1940’s and 50’s.

Our purpose in being here – more properly the purpose of North SAR, as we were really there mainly to protect the more capable ship – was Search and Rescue in the event of an over-water bailout following an air strike on Hanoi or Haiphong. CIC was jammed with electronic equipment, including surface search and air search radar consoles, maybe twelve different radio stations, and three big Plexiglas status boards – one for a short range surface plot, one for a longer range air plot, and tabular plots for contacts, call signs, radio freqs, and events such as air strikes expected later in the day.

Two separate spaces contained ASW and ESM equipment – Antisubmarine Warfare and Electronic Signals Monitoring. The Gulf was not deep, but we believed it possible for Russian and Chinese subs to operate. Hard to believe they would bother with us, but we still had to watch. Electronic Support Measures (ESM) intercepts were theoretically the best way to obtain early warning of attacks. You can see a radar emitter, for example, on your ESM long before there is enough of an echo for the transmitting platform to see you. Unfortunately, there was nothing automatic about ESM, and quality of the operator was everything. We had one man, RD1 Delatte, who was really good at it.

CIC, and the supporting spaces, were equipped with a lot of air conditioning. Nowhere near enough when the spaces were jammed with people at Battle Stations, but now, with no sun and a normal watch, it was delightfully cool.

Twenty feet forward of CIC, on the bridge, Lieutenant (Junior Grade) Riley Whitman sniffed the heavy tropical air. There was essentially nothing to see, inboard or out. No contacts,

except for TURNER a mile off to Starboard, and a sprinkling of stars bright enough to penetrate the haze. The Quartermaster maintained the ship's position on the provided chart table, illuminated by the red-filtered desk lamp. The helmsman steered the course ordered by Whitman, and another sailor stood by the Engine Order Telegraph ready to issue orders for the engineering spaces in the unlikely event of a change in speed. Port and Starboard lookouts on the bridge wings gazed ever and only outward – seeing nothing except the TURNER. The ship was going nowhere, just maintaining comfortable steerageway. Our orders were to remain within twelve miles of center of station, so six knots was plenty of speed.

My Evaluator station consisted of a comfortable chair, a small desk area, and a communications bonanza. I had selector switches which could join me to any radio circuit, or any of the sound-powered phone circuits on the ship. Of course, at this time of day, the only one likely to be in use was the 1JV – with talkers on the bridge, in CIC, and in Main (Engine) Control. The lookouts and Radarmen worked closely together on that circuit, to correlate any visible ships with the radar blip seen on radar. Range, bearing, course and speed were plotted on one of the status boards, along with the projected Closest Point of Approach – CPA.

Coffee and cigarettes fueled most of the people on watch. “Butt kits” were strategically mounted everywhere, including on the bridge and in CIC. The bridge was even provided with electric cigarette lighters, mounted on the bulkhead and operated with a little lever. (Using an open flame would ruin night vision for long minutes.)

“Intermittent surface contact, bearing 350 true, range 40 miles.”

“That’s OK – probably a fishing vessel – watch and report” I responded. “Talker, let the bridge know.”

Fishing vessels weren’t really that common, because they never knew if they would be judged hostiles – but usually they were safe if they avoided coming anywhere near the warships.

“Any updates?” I asked after a couple of minutes

“No sir – contact is in a fade.” “Wait – there he is again, range 35 miles”

Based on the change in location, either the contact was flaky, or this fishing vessel was moving out – at more than 100 knots! Well, with just two glimpses, I'll bet on flaky.

At 03:05, the operator reported a solid track; “Contact bearing 340 degrees true, course 170, speed 150; evaluate low flier!”

Nothing was visible on our air search radar, despite the close range. I picked up the radio handset: “TURNER, THIS IS PARKS; CONTACT BEARING 335 YOUR POSITION, RANGE THREE FIVE MILES, EVALUATE LOW FLIER. CAN YOU CONFIRM? OVER”

TURNER had nothing on radar. A figment of imagination? Flight of geese? Or that damned biplane???

“Stone, can you see any IFF?” “Identification, Friend or Foe” was a system which is supposed to help you distinguish between hostile and friendly contacts. The radar platform triggers the tracked target to send this identifying signal, and it is displayed on the radar console at the detecting site.

“Negative IFF, sir.”

This is preposterous! I don't want to wake up the entire ship for a flight of geese!

At 3:09, we still had the contact, which was becoming more clear with every sweep of the radar. Still heading in our general direction, still at 150 knots (plus or minus), still no IFF. “BRIDGE, COMBAT – TELL THE CAPTAIN!”

And seconds later, I made the call: “SOUND GENERAL QUARTERS!”

The terrifying klaxon, unchanged from all those WWII Navy movies, sounded in every space of the ship. After what seemed forever, but was really about 15 seconds, the Boatswain's Mate of the Watch barked into the 1MC: “GENERAL QUARTERS, GENERAL QUARTERS, THIS IS NOT A DRILL. SET CONDITION 1AA” Then back to the klaxon.

Within seconds voices were joining into the sound-powered phone net, reporting spaces manned. One minute thirty seconds after the alarm, the ship was manned and ready for whatever

might come. Fire control was locked on the target. Guns were loaded and synched to the fire control signals. The Captain, in his bathrobe and slippers, was in CIC, gazing intently into one of the radar consoles. Then...

“RANGE TO TARGET 8 MILES – IFF – SIR I HAVE AN IFF RETURN!”

“GUN CONTROL HOLD FIRE – TARGET MAY BE FRIENDLY” This seemed a sensible precaution at this juncture.

“Sir, Jolly Green reports transiting our location – says his IFF may be a little weak”, reported RD1 Stone.

That bastard! Now he tells us. Too low to track on air search, too far out for surface search radar, I had no idea he would be overflying us on his way south.

“SECURE FROM GENERAL QUARTERS”

So now it's nearly 3:30. I'm off watch at 3:45. Everyone's up already...

“Stone: who's my relief? “

“Mr. Jordan, sir – Weapons Officer“

Great – I dial down to his GQ station – “Hey Wes – you're up next – why don't you come on up and relieve me now?”

“Screw you, Heins – I'll see you in 15 minutes!”