

Mighty Anachronism

The Brief But Pyrotechnic Life of IFS Division 93

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The conflict in Vietnam presented many examples of Naval combat and doctrine being tailored as necessary to fit the environment of that conflict. A prime case was the four small, ungainly, ugly — but deadly — ships of Inshore Fire Support Division 93. They were designed to saturate enemy-held beaches with barrage rocket fire in amphibious assaults. Armed mainly with freely rising rockets, not unlike those first developed as instruments of war by the Chinese in the year A.D. 1225, these ships proved once again that even in an age of particle beam weapons, space grenades and anti-satellite missiles, a centuries-old idea may have great utility. Their adaptation to the unique requirements of the fighting in Vietnam constituted perhaps the most significant development of naval gunfire support during the entire course of that war.

The story began in 1965 with the realization that because of recent developments in ship construction and the decommissioning of all World War II vintage battleships and most heavy cruisers, there were not enough naval gun platforms that could be used for the high intensity barrage gunfire support essential to the success of traditional amphibious operations. The "double-ended" frigates could not provide such support, destroyers were limited by their five-inch guns, and the urgency of the situation made the slower and much more expensive reactivation of battleships an unattractive option.

At first quietly, and then in the midst of increasing media interest, work on the reactivation of the four ships began in the Spring of 1965 in two locations. In the Long Beach Naval Shipyard some 256 shipyard workers began reactivating two members of the San Diego group of the Pacific Reserve Fleet, USS CARRONADE (IFS-1), and USS WHITE RIVER (LSMR-536). In San Francisco, similar work began on USS CLARION RIVER (LSMR-409) and St. FRANCIS RIVER (LSMR-525).

The armament and characteristics of the ships stood in striking contrast to the main elements of the fleet. CARRONADE, the only ship ever originally commissioned as an inshore fire support ship and the newest of the four, had been launched in 1953 and, had never seen combat before being decommissioned in 1960. Deriving her name from the short, iron cannon first made by the Carron Iron Works in Scotland, she was only 245-feet long with twin, variable pitch screws and a shallow draft for the specialized task of navigating close inshore for rocket bombardment. Armed with eight rapid-fire Mk 105 rocket launchers, a single 5"/38 caliber gun, two twin 40mm and various mounts for .50- and .30-caliber machine guns, she could fire three types of five-inch spin-stabilized, solid fuel rockets at more than 300 rounds-per-minute depending upon the size of the warhead (approximately equal to 8", 5", or 3" shells) or the range (2,000, 5,000 or 10,000 yards). Thus, for any particular target, the ship could concentrate more firepower for a brief period of time than a battleship, in terms of pounds of TNT or number of rounds.

The three LSMRs (medium landing ship rocket) were built during the closing months of World War II and were used to good effect later in Korea. Only 206-feet long, the LSMRs carried a smaller crew than the 9 officers and 130 men aboard CARRONADE, 8 Mk 102 rocket launchers, a single 5"/38 gun, two twin 40mms and the usual assortment of machine guns. Each of the LSMRs was capable of firing up to 240 rockets per minute. But many observers were highly skeptical of the four rocket ships, for solid fuel rockets fired from tubes with no rifling and with no other means of guidance were presumed to have little accuracy. To make matters worse, only CARRONADE had a fire control computer, and it was beyond repair for lack of spare parts.

That skepticism among those for whose benefit the ships were being reactivated

was both predictable and justified. Even though rockets had been used in Europe as early as 1258 at Cologne, at Metz in 1324 and in England in 1327 in the Scottish War, and despite the fact that the British had used Congreve rockets against Boulogne in 1806 and Baltimore's Fort McHenry in 1814 ("The rockets' red glare"), the weapon had a history of instability and unpredictability. Misfires and rockets exploding off target might be acceptable in a naval gunfire support mission for pre-landing beach bombardment, but there was significant reason to wonder if the four rocket ships could provide accurate support to small numbers of troops engaged in isolated fire-fights with an enemy close at hand.

In the absence of fire control computers, it soon became apparent that it would be necessary to develop an entirely new doctrine for the four ships. Working with the ships' weapons officers and fire control technicians, the staff of the Amphibious School at Coronado, California, constructed a manual, ballistic slide-rule. Using target coordinates, each ship's fire control team soon learned how to determine the deflection, angle-bearing and the elevation for the twin-tubed launchers. The theoretical work of the classroom had not yet been tried, however, in actual firing, and even though all of the ships were equipped with a battery stabilization capability, most planners expected the firing effectiveness of the vessels to be reduced in severe sea conditions.

Throughout the summer and early fall of 1965, reactivation of the ships continued. On 2 September representatives of each ship visited the Naval Ordnance Test Station at China Lake, California for their first observation of the weapons they were soon to use in combat.

On 18 September the ensign, jack and commissioning pennant were hoisted aboard CLARION RIVER and St. FRANCIS RIVER in San Francisco. Fourteen days later, CARRONADE and WHITE RIVER were recommissioned in Long Beach and IFSD

93 was born with the C.O. of CARRONADE in command of the Division. By 23 October, the ships had completed their first ammunition load-out and were together in San Diego for the first time to commence outfitting, sea trials and shakedown training.

During the ensuing weeks the young, inexperienced crews engaged in rigorous underway training. On 12 January 1966, during practice off the coast of California, CARRONADE's gunners sank a 17-foot, 30-knot, remote controlled target boat simulating the evasive tactics of enemy PT and coastal patrol boats. In doing so, CARRONADE became the first amphibious force unit in the Navy to do so.

On 17 January the Division commenced an intensive five-day period of training involving the firing of rockets for the first time. Most of the members of the respective crews had never previously seen a rocket fired and little did they realize that, except for a brief shore bombardment demonstration at Kahoolawe Island, Hawaii, en route to Vietnam, this was to be their only significant experience before entering combat.

The ships sailed from San Diego on 8 February for their new home port of Yokosuka. On a foggy and damp 28 March, some seventeen days after their arrival in Yokosuka, St. FRANCIS RIVER and CARRONADE became the first two elements of the Division to depart for the gun line in Vietnam. As they proceeded south, even the skippers were only vaguely aware of current developments there. The presence of a North Vietnamese division in the mountains and jungles of the Central Highlands in 1965 had presaged an enemy plan to drive to the sea in an attempt to divide the country and then to conquer the northern provinces. By February 1966, intelligence reports indicated that the North Vietnamese were also changing their policy of infiltrating only through Laos and Cambodia and were pushing southward across the DMZ. To meet this threat, two-thirds of the 1st Marine Division had been assigned to operate in Quang Tin and Quang Ngai provinces, while the 3rd Marine Division was already in a tactical war in the relatively unpopulated northern I Corps area. Such events made it highly unlikely that the two rocket ships would be called upon to provide saturation fire for traditional amphibious landings. Nevertheless, given the urgent need for gunfire support, the expectations of the crews were high.

As the elderly, shallow-draft vessels

steamed along at 12 knots, their crews continued the now established daily routine of ships' maintenance and intense "dry run" rocket firing practice by the fire control teams in CIC. The clatter of hammers chipping at rusty bulkheads competed with the noise of small arms practice on the fantails. In closed, hot, rocket magazines, seamen stripped to the waist went about the arduous task of preparing thousands of rockets for immediate call. Topside, lawn sprinklers attached to garden hoses cooled dangerously hot main decks in order to keep magazine temperatures under reasonable control.

Now administratively under Landing Ship Squadron 9 and Landing Ship Flotilla 1 of the Seventh Fleet Amphibious Force, the two ships paused briefly in transit only for a firing demonstration and a visit by COM-SEVENTHFLT in Okinawa, and to top off ammunition in Subic Bay. As the ships entered Vietnamese waters for the first time, they passed to the operational control of the Seventh Fleet Naval Gunfire Support Unit, Task Unit 70.8.9.

Suddenly, without warning, and only one day before the scheduled arrival in Vietnam, all eight rocket launchers on CARRONADE began to vibrate badly. Working throughout the night, the ship's gunners succeeded in making repairs just as the ship entered Danang Bay at 0730, 19 April. Two hours later, the commanding, weapons and operations officers of the two ships met with Seventh Fleet representatives aboard USS CANBERRA (CAG-2) to make final preparations for the deployment of the rocket ships in the developing tactical situation in I Corps. Even at this late conference significant doubts were expressed by staff personnel about the use of a centuries old weapon for precision gunfire support.

On 20 April, off Chu Lai, St. FRANCIS RIVER became the first element of IFS Div 93 to fire a combat mission of rockets. Three days later, in company with St. FRANCIS RIVER and USS THOMASON (DD-740), CARRONADE was called to its first mission. Almost immediately after the shrill pipe of the General Quarters alarm, the air spotter looked on in awe as 158 Mk 10 rockets left CARRONADE in a huge roar amid large flashes of exhaust flame. Arching high into the air the rockets fell with devastating destruction and surprising accuracy on a target area 9,000 yards away. As her 5"/38 joined the intense, crashing chorus, CARRONADE quickly leveled numerous structures used as enemy

storage areas. As the ship turned seaward from its firing track only a few hundred yards offshore, it suddenly received small arms fire from enemy troops behind nearby sand dunes. Given the absence of protective armor around all of the ship's vulnerabilities, such fire had to be taken seriously. It was. Suppressing that fire with their own machine guns, CARRONADE's gunners observed heavy black smoke from the target area, secondary explosions and numerous fires which would soon become a familiar and vivid sight to both friendly and enemy combatants all along the coast of Vietnam.

As these small ships continued their gunfire support operations over the next several weeks, a dramatic change in attitude from the earlier skepticism about the capabilities of the ships began to develop. As the crews gained experience and improved tactics became increasingly successful, observers were surprised to find consistently high performance in indirect rocket fire, including coordinated rocket fire and 5"/38 night illumination, as well as in direct and counter-battery fire. Using high explosive warheads with both point detonating and VT fuses, the two ships were able to collapse enemy underground storage caves which had not been previously susceptible to damage by available gunfire support weapons. Within two weeks of the ships' first on-call mission, the I Corps NGLO Spotter had seen enough to report that "from personal observation, the destroyed structures, damage and KIA registered from IFS/LSMR within their range capabilities far exceeds and surpasses anything delivered by rifle barrels of destroyers as far as area saturation is concerned."

As spring turned into summer, the two ships settled into a pattern of firing and rearmament that would soon become routine. Replenishing fuel and supplies both at sea and in Danang Bay, the ships alternated making the five-to seven-day round trip to Subic Bay for rearming.

By the end of May, the two ships had mastered both the inevitable navigational difficulties associated with gunfire support missions conducted only a few hundred yards offshore and the recurring electrical and mechanical problems caused by their prolonged period of back water inactivity. Ranging up and down the coastal areas of I Corps, they continued their engagement of battalion strength VC units which had been attacking isolated units of the ARVN 2nd Division, answering other emergency calls for gunfire support, conducting interdiction fire on VC infiltration routes and in many

other ways making their now well-known presence felt.

On 25 May, after firing a record 1400 Mk 10 rockets in the morning (including 956 rounds in a ten minute period) in support of Operation Mobile in the Chu Lai area, CARRONADE was relieved on station by WHITE RIVER off Cape Batangan. Simultaneously, St. FRANCIS RIVER was relieved by CLARION RIVER. As the first two units returned to Japan for a brief upkeep period, their replacements quickly picked up the gauntlet and, during the next two months, participated in a wide variety of operations in the I and II Corps areas.

On 27 July, WHITE RIVER and CLARION RIVER completed their first tour of gunline duty and, after being relieved by CARRONADE and St. FRANCIS RIVER, returned to Yokosuka for their own repairs and upkeep. Meanwhile, a new problem had reared its ugly head. On several occasions the four ships had incurred the horrifying experience of watching rockets with ruptured ballistic motors careen around the main deck banging into launchers, gun mounts and even stanchions, all the while spinning in such a way as to arm their point detonating fuses. Given the vulnerability of the rocket magazines to any type of explosion topside, it was essential that this problem be corrected immediately. For-

tunately, it was. After the difficulties had received the direct attention of technical representatives flown in from the U.S., success was soon achieved in separating bad lots of rockets.

By the Fall of 1966, the four rocket ships had become not only a familiar sight, but a highly popular institution. Press attention spawned in articles in *Time*, *U.S. News and World Report* and leading newspapers. The ships and several crew members had received various forms of recognition. Perhaps the most warmly received, however, were messages like that received by CARRONADE on 10 September, a message typical of others received by each of the ships. As he was preparing to leave Vietnam, the Naval Gunfire Liaison Officer for I Corps sent the following:

I would like to add my personal thank you to the message sent by 2nd Army Advisory Group, 4th Regiment, 3rd Battalion. I was the spotter calling your firing and if you had not fired as well as you did, Charley would have run over us. The spots were answered exactly where I called them. In my opinion, rockets are the best for troop support. Off the record, the troops were in the GTL and at times you dropped rounds within 25 meters of us. The troops were kinda shook-up, but the spots were right in there. I have only 6 days left over here and if I ever come back I hope you're out there supporting me.

Over the next two and a half years, the four ships operated both together and in-

dependently all the way from the northern provinces to the Mekong Delta area. In December 1966 rockets were staged in Cam Ranh Bay enabling the ships to rearm in the II Corps area instead of having to return to Subic Bay. In some cases, the ships spent as long as 60 or 70 days on the gunline between ports where cold iron time and upkeep facilities were available. A measure of their efforts may be made by the observation that in the 18-½ month period between 19 April 1966 and 1 November 1967, the four ships fired 189,000 spin-stabilized rockets, in excess of 13,000 rounds of five-inch ammunition, 76,000 rounds of forty-millimeter ammunition and an untold number of machine gun rounds in support of U.S. and allied operations.

The final chapter of the story took place in 1969 and 1970. After unfavorable inspections and surveys, WHITE RIVER, St. FRANCIS RIVER and CLARION RIVER were struck from the Navy list in 1970 and sold for scrapping, the sale price of the latter being a mere \$29,000. A similar fate awaited CARRONADE. Such an inglorious demise, however, could not detract from the spectacular gunfire support record set by the anachronistic "rocket rainmakers" of IFS Div 93.



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