

SUNK – Ray Heins

Dawn had come and gone. I was a US Navy Lieutenant, the “American Advisor”, and the only American on the vessel. I remained asleep in my upper bunk, or half asleep, lulled by the thrumming engines and steady roll of the Vietnamese gunboat, as it plodded northwest at twelve knots just off the coast of Phu Quoc island. It was Sunday morning, and nothing could possibly go wrong with the simple transit to patrol station.

BANG! Followed by more BANGS! The ship’s bell rang with each BANG. The 40mm gun, I was pretty sure. It was almost directly overhead, on the foredeck. “I never knew it made so much noise”, I thought, as I leapt out of bed, heart racing, and dressed. GI green tee-shirt, matching shorts (modified from fatigue pants in Saigon), flip-flops, six gun, and I was out the door.

“What the hell is with that bell?” I shouted. No one paid me the slightest attention. Evidently the bell was being sounded by the shock of the gunfire. But the entire vessel was shuddering with the BANG’s, so that some effort was needed to climb the ladder to the pilot house, overlooking the foredeck. The pilot house was also directly below the 01 level and its smaller gun mounts and the infernal ship’s bell.

Lots of activity. Sailors running in all directions. More BANG’s, more bells. One of the sailors, the mess cook, had climbed to the 01 level and manned the .50 cal machine gun. He was firing bursts at no target, so far as I could see. The 40mm gun remained on centerline, un-manned.

“We have struck a reef!” reported the Captain, Dai-Uy Quynn.

So... no gun, just pounding of hull on rock. And the resultant shock was indeed sounding the bell with every impact. The Captain was trying to work the vessel off the reef, alternately ordering engines full astern, and full ahead.

I returned to my cabin, grabbed the PRC-25 radio, returned to the main deck outside the pilot house, and set up the antenna clear of nearby superstructure.

“SPOTTED MOOSE THIS IS NOVEMBER JULIET”, I called. After two repetitions, I had a response from the Coastal Zone headquarters watch stander. “NOVEMBER JULIET HARD AGROUND, GRID COORDINATES CHARLIE MIKE 075-165. REQUEST FORWARD TO FLEET COMMAND HQ. REQUEST ASSISTANCE.”

“ROGER OUT” was the only response.

By now, reported Petty Officer Nguyen, sea water was beginning to collect in the aft berthing compartment. The Captain ordered Nguyen and a Damage Control Party to immediately begin de-watering.

Now two US Navy Swift Boats were arriving from other nearby patrol sectors. The Lieutenant (Junior Grade) Skipper of the first to arrive offered to take off crewmen, if the gunboat was in danger of sinking.

“No! said Captain Quynn. “We will save the boat.”

I hustled below, gathered clothing, camera, and correspondence into my sea bag, but left the packed gear out of sight insofar as possible. The radio and pistol I kept at hand. Edible stores I left in the cabin.

Suddenly the lights went out; up to this point, I had given no thought to the fact that the engine had remained operational, driving the generator. Now the deafening silence emphasized the wash of sea water on the hull. And there was now a pronounced settling of the stern. Maybe we will need that lift, after all, I thought. At least the goddam bell had stopped ringing, as the vessel bounced less.

The engineer officer reported to the captain, in Vietnamese, that the water had risen to a level that continued operation of the generator was dangerous.

The damage control team had rigged portable (gasoline powered) fire pumps on the deck, near the entrance to the crew’s quarters. Large intake hoses were taking suction from the berthing compartment, each pumping 150 gallons per minute from the vessel, over the side.

“The pumps are holding steady”, reported the captain for my information. “When tide increases, we hope to be free of reef.”

And then what, I wondered, as I stared at the navigation chart. Do we settle on the bottom in 20 feet of water, rather than on a reef three feet below the surface? The reef upon which the ship had impaled itself was not uncharted, exactly. It showed up as having a minimum of six feet of water above it, but obviously that was outdated.

The mess cook had ceased his firing of the .50 caliber gun after the arrival of the Swift Boats. With Viet Cong-controlled jungle less than two thousand yards away, we might need those bullets yet.

Back in the berthing compartment, the pumps kept clogging up, on floating pillows, mattresses, clothing, towels – that berthing compartment had not been exactly “ship shape”. Soon it was obvious, the ship was not going to be re-floated anytime soon. After two hours of attempted de-watering, the damage control party had to admit defeat. The pumps were shut down, and the compartment evacuated.

“SWIFT 71, REQUEST YOU COME ALONGSIDE”, I radioed. All but certain the ship would be completely lost within hours, I off-loaded my gear, but remained aboard to await the outcome.

One or more Swifts could remain in the vicinity indefinitely, and if the gunboat decided to break in two and sink, I was confident I and the crew could be picked up. Every man knew where his life jacket was, and some wore one continuously.

EPILOG: The ship sat firmly on the reef for seven long days and nights, until the arrival of a US Navy salvage ship. Divers patched the holes, pumps dewatered the compartments, and, after two days of work, the salvage ship towed the gunboat back to Saigon – a journey of almost 1,500 miles. The highlight of the trip, for me, was the rainfall as we were towed up the Saigon river; it was my first shower in fifteen days. Upon arrival at Fleet Command headquarters, I was reunited with my seabag, permitting me to change clothes for the first time in fourteen days. Arriving at headquarters with a two-week beard, another advisor commented: “You look like Charlton Heston returning from an Indian raid!”