

CHASING THE ELUSIVE GHOST

By Don Kovacs

I served on board *USS DeHaven DD-727* from 1966 through 1968 as a radar operator and performed many different duties like we all were expected to do; kind of like a jack of all trades, master of none! I was incredibly fortunate to have been assigned to the "ELINT" team (electronics intelligence) very early in the game. We had no active jamming capabilities but functioned entirely as a passive element in the overall picture. "CIC" (combat information center) seemed like the place to be. If you wanted electronic action this was it because it was an adrenalin rush to the "nth" degree!

I know in 1966 the navy started to take a real close look at the benefits of "ECM" (electronic counter measures) intelligence and decided to devote a full team to the squadron to aggressively pursue this aspect of both threat evaluation and warfare. There had been almost a zero threat consensus to the fleet except for the occasional swift boat attack or just sheer luck in hitting a ship with a few rounds. There had also been a few sporadic electronic confrontations that proved to be nothing more than "ghosting anomalies" that no one really knew what to think about.

DeHaven had been assigned the traditional destroyer squadron assignments including radar picket duties, carrier operations, search and rescue duties, shore bombardment and all those other things as deemed necessary by seventh fleet command. These were the expectations of "DESRON 9". Unfortunately, the *DeHaven* managed to luck out with some additional hair raising assignments which will be mentioned later in this article.

"Sea Dragon" operations were assigned to those ships that had already proven themselves as strong gun fire support elements. Little did we know that *DeHaven* would be offered up as "cannon fodder" more than once. The run between the beach and Hon Mat Island was enough to enlighten anyone. To go in as a pack of three more than once and be the counter battery element each run was totally unthinkable! I believe John Maraviglia ([link to article by John Maraviglia](#)) has already written a very descriptive narrative on our long day with the *USS Boston* and the *USS Damato*. The consequences of this event could have been disastrous if it weren't for the effort of the entire crew that day!

Being part of the "ELINT" team had major benefits; basically no one could screw with you! My station was the "vault" as we liked to call it. The only people who could stick their head in and intervene were the Captain, XO and God. The best part of being on this team was our trips to Fuchu, Japan for debriefing after each deployment. The air force had a great base up there and they treated us like kings! The food was far superior to what we were accustomed to and the accommodations were equal to those found at any Ritz Carlton!

We continued to submit data that was of great interest to everyone and were told to go back out and "play it again Sam." The major emphasis had now shifted from the routine and quite often mundane task of listening to that of also plotting the fire control radar systems. The dynamic interest was now in the surface to surface threat capabilities north of the DMZ. We were told to keep our eyes and ears open for the more advanced acquisition systems with true surface to surface attack seeking footprints.

The degree of concern for these advanced systems had somewhat heightened in a relatively short period of time. The Navy initially believed that the fleet and its squadron elements should have no concern at all. They felt we could steam anywhere we wanted to without any threat of reprisal. That was about to change in a very big way. What the Navy lacked was verification that the North Vietnamese had the electronic capability to acquire, track and lock on to a moving surface target and deliver the required punch to render that target useless. A few rounds of high explosive lobbed by the enemy every now and then was a sustainable threat and we could continue running with the limited risks they believed to exist.

It was bad enough that every now and then the North Vietnamese would get lucky and drop a shell or two right down the throat of a ship. How could this happen? They were using World War II systems that didn't even work in 1943 let alone in 1967! I think the "brass" in Washington finally had a concern of "what if" they gained the capability of using these older systems to achieve results that initially were unimaginable. What if they brought in the more sophisticated fire control systems? What would be the result of that maneuver? Could this truly pose a surface to surface threat to the fleet? The answer was a resounding YES!

The thought of a surface ship being "whacked" a couple hundred miles from the beach by a missile had a lot of people concerned. How many times did we make the "Sea Dragon" run parallel to the beach just a few thousand yards off shore let alone a hundred plus miles! I swear at times you could smell the smoke from the secondary explosions! All of a sudden the easy "ELINT" duty became more like work. Port and starboard duty just about killed all of us. The entire ship had to pay attention when we steamed north of the DMZ or suffer the consequences of the unknown.

The "ELINT" team consisted of three players: George Hofius, Van Isaacs and me. When we were at "GQ" (general quarters) it was the "three musketeers" who managed the equipment. We searched and plotted every intercepted signal known to man in the Gulf of Tonkin! A vigilant watch was maintained for any and all fire control systems. We had already basically memorized the majority of information required for immediate identification of these systems. It was our team who advised the bridge that the enemy was making a defined electronic effort to "lock on" and gain target acquisition. This meant they were just seconds away from lobbing or launching their best weapon of choice!

The majority of times the North Vietnamese simply lobbed some junk at us. They had gained a high degree of efficiency that was to be admired. The thought of a higher degree of sophistication concerned all of us. Lobbing and launching are two different modes of transportation. I use the word concerned because we had never intercepted an actual "Sheet Bend" or "Fan Song" radar system during any combat operations. Confirmation of either would pose a serious threat to the fleet. Our day would come when "concerned" turned to "scared" as we would soon have our day in court.

The team continued its watch for this surface threat from the fire control radar systems. We hoped that we would never intercept this elusive apparition. A successful encounter would mean a different player in the game, one with far reaching capabilities; a player who could more than "even" the odds for the North Vietnamese. The thought of going from a five minute warning and dealing with counter battery artillery fire to less than a handful of seconds to a missile launch was scary. Seriously, who would have ever dreamed of a surface missile attack? A missile hit would

be dramatically more devastating than a few rounds of high explosive. The thought of us sitting "DIW" (dead in the water) scared the hell out of me! It would be nothing more than a cleanup operation for the enemy after that initial strike. We all know a stationary target is much easier to hit and finish off than a moving target. This would not take the North Vietnamese very long to do if in fact they were successful.

It was a dream I had dreamed a hundred times over. I had everything memorized from frequency, antenna rotation, timing intervals; everything you always wanted to know but were afraid to ask about those missile platforms and the fire control systems married to them. The team had thought on more than one occasion that we were successful in the interception of that ghostly electronic footprint. However, every time we submitted the data to Fuchu for review by both the military and civilians it came up negative. It was like the boy who cried "wolf" and we were getting more paranoid as the tour continued to deepen its reach north of the DMZ. Just how far north would we have to steam before running into this phantom?

We took a lot of pride in our achievements. We were successful hundreds of times with the identification of hundreds of systems. It was our tenacity that got us through each day knowing that every time we had developed and plotted a good intercept it probably saved lives which included our own. We finally got the attention of the top brass at Fuchu and were recognized as the best "ELINT" team in the fleet! We had more letters of commendation and citations dropped on us than you could beat with a stick! No one had developed such accurate pin point locations as we did! I truly believe it was this degree of discipline that provided the platform of strength that would soon be required on our part to face what none of us ever really wanted to face. It was simply a matter of time.

I believe it all came together on or about September 13, 1967. It was the run on Hon Mat Island with the cruiser *USS Boston CAG-1* and the destroyer *USS Damato DD-871*. The *USS DeHaven DD-727* was to be the third ship in line functioning as the "counter battery" element only. What were we, chopped liver? We had proven ourselves time and time again and we get this assignment from hell! It's bad enough when a ship is spearheading the lead and not much fun when you're running second! Our assignment was to be last ship in with three separate runs down the beach. Additionally, this run put us in between the beach and Hon Mat Island itself! We were so close you could spit and hit the island. I really don't know how we pulled that stunt off but somehow we did.

That's where it happened, where we were tested. We had finally intercepted a bona fide signal and the North Vietnamese had actually locked on the *DeHaven*. Holy smoke! It had actually come to this? Please, tell me this is a bad dream. Tell me this isn't happening to us! It was a very bad feeling knowing we were in such a confined position while in this run receiving continuous fire from the North Vietnamese shore batteries. I also remember I could hear just how close those shells were hitting the water around us. We later discovered they were only a few feet from the *DeHaven*! And we were going to make this run how many times?

For the North Vietnamese the "Fan Song" radar system was their platform of choice. This was the radar typically used in concert with the "Silkworm" missile launch. The Red Chinese had these threats scattered about but they moved them ever so quickly. To find one in the same spot was almost sheer luck! This is what we had so diligently looked for and this was what we had finally

found. The early design of the Chinese systems had its benefits with the electronics used to control, acquire and launch being of a very rudimentary nature. The enemy could deploy these platforms at a relatively low cost.

However, the systems' drawbacks were many when they tried to tie into more sophisticated radar platforms. As these problems increased they began to give their positions away. The question was how many were there? They moved them around so many times it was difficult to ascertain the actual number. We knew they only needed one to deliver a devastating blow! Our job was to find just this one "ghost."

If there is one thing and one thing only that I learned in the Navy it was about team work. No one individual deserved any more credit than the next. Those individuals whose responsibility was keeping our equipment up and running were to be commended. Without our equipment functioning top notch the ship would be like a blind or deaf person meandering around in the dark. From the engine room came the power to drive us through each run. I don't know how those guys did it. Being down in the bowels of the ship was truly a hostile environment! Each and every sailor was a vital element reflecting our success. There has never been the letter "I" in the word team and there never will be. Our ship functioned as one and the credit should be shared by all.

The run on Hon Mat Island was when I finally recognized that each day is a gift. It would prove for me to be a life changing event that I wouldn't easily forget. The North Vietnamese had made target acquisition of the *DeHaven* with not just one but with two different systems. We were so close to the source they could have thrown that missile as though it was a spear! The launch now seemed to be imminent. How could they possibly miss? We were only seconds away from intercepting the carrier signal of a "silkworm missile" meaning the beast was en route and we had zero maneuvering room. The *DeHaven* now shifted into high gear. I can honestly testify that I had never seen such an astonishing group of people (the crew) function in such an incredible focused way. This is what we had trained for and this was our defining moment in time. It was a beautiful thing to be part of and one which I personally will never forget.

The "ELINT" team shifted from normal operating speed to light speed! We knew this was no anomaly. This "footprint" was for real. We also knew that this system was nothing to mess around with and response time was measured in seconds not minutes. *DeHaven* advised both *Boston* and *Damato* of our validated intercept and within a minute of authentication by *Boston* the maneuver to abort was adopted. We executed the escape sequence to get out of Dodge! We were very close to losing one of the ships; the question was which one? From my perspective it was the U.S.S. *DeHaven* DD-727!

So many things happened within the next few moments. I can honestly say it seems to have simply been an "electronic blur." "Tail In Charlie" wasn't good. The fact that this was run number two or three wasn't good. What I do remember is that for the next two minutes this group of three ships functioned flawlessly! I know damn well we impressed the North Vietnamese because they surely must have thought they had us dead to rights. They obviously didn't know who they were dealing with that day. If *DeHaven* was ever to come together as a team it was at that very moment in time. We pitched, rolled and yawed but we never faltered!

It's difficult to describe the feelings and emotions that go through your body and mind when each is placed under extreme stress. It has been known for a very long time that during these episodes

of stress the body's senses are dramatically heightened and more acutely aware of danger and its options of escape. How many options we had were unknown. I wondered for a brief moment who else on our ship knew the *DeHaven* was close to becoming very much a part of history. Hopefully, our fifteen seconds of fame wouldn't be celebrated posthumously! Was *DeHaven* going to be taken as "first prize" by the North Vietnamese? If they did hit us with a missile would there be any of us left to tell our story?

The crew of the *DeHaven* was a mixed bag of individuals. At times each and every one of us dealt with our own "ego" problems. We often joked with each other and the different divisions quite often seemed to be at odds with each other; each believing that they were so much better than the next. We all knew this was the furthest thing from the truth and that at some point in time we would need each other to survive. It was that moment in time, on or about September 13, 1967, that this bond was tested to its extreme. We should be proud knowing that each and every one of us defied the odds that day. It was Randy Pausch author of "The Last Lecture" that wrote "luck is indeed where preparation meets opportunity." All that training, the blood, the sweat and tears each crew member gave to be the "best of the best" was a reflective reminder that we were all part of the *DeHaven* and the *DeHaven* was in fact us.

Needless to say *DeHaven*, *Boston* and the *Damato* managed to get in and out alive. Once we knew the North Vietnamese had successfully locked on *DeHaven* we elected not to make another pass down that same beach. Luck and skill was on our side that day. A great deal was learned from that adventure and there was a new strategy developed shortly thereafter. The consensus of opinion by the combat strategists was to stay further away from such a viable threat and so it was for the entire fleet. That signal was never intercepted again.

The three of us were eventually awarded the Navy Achievement Medal with the Combat "V" distinguishing device. Someone said the "V" was supposed to represent valor during combat. I believe it represented "virgins" under fire! I also know in my heart the entire crew of *DeHaven* should have been authorized to wear that medal with that distinguishing device. We did not do this alone. I am delighted to hear that for all of us that served on board *DeHaven* during that period of time finally received the recognition we deserved. The *DeHaven* and its crew of 1967 and 1968 was awarded the "Navy Unit Commendation Ribbon", the "Combat Action Ribbon" and for some the "Republic of Vietnam Meritorious Unit Citation" with the "Gallantry Cross." I believe that about says it all.

I often look back at that two year period of time and know that we had truly become a part of history. Very few will ever understand the devotion and dedication that all gave during that specific time frame. This "rag tag" team of sailors did exactly what they were trained to do. The sailors of the *DeHaven* before us knew as we now know and for those who will "man their battle stations" in the future, we were there and we served with honor. I have learned to treasure that past experience understanding that its worth can only be measured in the friendship with those who gave so much wanting so little in return. It will serve me well with the stories I'll spin for my grandkids and anyone else who will listen.