

The Gray Lady and the Sea Dragon

By John Maraviglia

Now you may say, there's no such thing as a sea dragon, no kind of animal or fish like that are around anymore. A mythical creature at best, a figment of some poor sailors overworked mind perhaps. And to tell you the truth, I'd probably feel likewise if I hadn't been there. However, I was there and three hundred of my trusted shipmates were with me. To this day I don't think any one talks about it, but there was a metal munching monster up there and it was awesome. It did breathe fire and smoke at everybody, lurking at every turn for three mind-numbing months. The men of the *USS DeHaven (DD-727)* just didn't talk about it after it was over. To talk about it would have been like saying, "look at us, look at what we endured day after day, night after night, month after month." To talk about it would have been like trying to benefit materially on what happened and what we went through was just between us. The civilians couldn't come up with enough money to pay the crew of the DeHaven for operation Sea Dragon (circa 1967). Now I don't know from shinola when it comes to good journalism, so I'm just going to tell you what I saw.

We had been pulling OPS (operations) down in III or IV corp South Vietnam, mainly Naval Gun Fire Support and occasionally we'd spill further south down into Cambodia. But we weren't supposed to be there - so I'll save that story and a few more for the future. What I'm getting around to saying is this, the operation that came up was no longer in the minor leagues with the Black Pajama Gang down south, but north of II corps, leading into Red China, fighting the North Vietnamese Army (NVA).

What's the difference, you might say? Black Pajama Gang? NVA? The difference was like going to a turkey shoot and finding out that you're the turkey. The Ho-Chi-Minh trail started at the top of I core and worked its way down into Cambodia. Operation "Sea Dragon" was meant to cut supply lines up at the top, to stop supply (military supplies) in Red China from getting into the hands of the Viet Cong. Our Air Force, the boys in the Blue Yonder, were starting to realize the magnitude of their problems with operation "Rolling Thunder." Not only did Charley know his country better than we did, but he kept his guns, ammo, fuel and troop concentration hidden in caves during the day and moved them under the cover of night. This made it virtually impossible for our B-52 strikes to be effective and that's when they called in the Navy. Looking back on it now, it was a bold move on the Navy's part. We didn't know or realize the luxury of 'owning the boardwalk' in II corps, like we did in III and IV corp.

The NVA controlled the line of scrimmage, they owned the real estate. We on the other hand had no ground support and more importantly, we had no spotters on the ground to call fire for us. Now between you and me, our gun crew was so hot, they could light your cigarette at seven miles out with a star shell. However, without a ground spotter calling for fire and bringing you in for effect, you effectively had jack, nothing. This brought us back to the Air Force spotting targets during the day, plotting said targets and then going back at night and destroying targets as spotted earlier. This was the mission and like all things in Vietnam, our most current technology proved useless against the jungle. Our A-4's and F-4's flew too fast to spot targets of opportunity on the ground, so we ended up using piper-cubs and vintage sky raiders from the Korean War.

To spot the targets on "Sea Dragon" meant two things; our spotter had to be accurate on his plot coordination and we had to be extra accurate with our gun target line as our targets weren't "live" but Memorex from six hours earlier, maybe eight. Why am I bringing all this up about spotted targets and gun target lines? Because when the shooting starts we won't be using line of sight but we'll be firing in the dark and ultimately, accurate or not, will depend on our last navigational fix, before we hit Alpha station and begin our firing run. In those days we had no positioning satellites. We needed three land points to cut a fix, to run a gun target line.

Now to accomplish all this on "Sea Dragon", we went to port and starboard duty. When we weren't on watch, we were suppose to sleep, but then there was fuel to take on, and when there wasn't fuel, there was ammo to take on, and just when you thought you were going to get a chance to fall out and get some winks, you had another mission to fire and now you're playing 'hit and run' with Charlie two and three times a night and working all day and it's been over two months of this and you're exhausted. One thing

you've got the drill down, you could do it in your sleep. Lay out your plotted targets, cut your last navigational fix coming in. Hit Alpha station, begin your firing run, the bridge kicks in the engine order telegraph putting on high-speed turns. Forward a rapid succession of bearings and ranges to plot (fire control), lock on the primary with mounts 51 & 52, keeping mount 53 open for suppression of counter battery. It's on! Look for a secondary target, once accomplished, get the hell out of there. You're in hostile country! Yeah - it's that simple, it's been that simple almost three times a night for better than two months. The men are tired. Down deep I think the NVA must be tired of rolling their cannons in and out of all those caves. I know our deck crews have got to be tired of sweeping up all the cinders on our decks. It's a little joke, counter battery (artillery shrapnel) looks like burned puffed rocks. When the incoming explodes close to our ship, it's some nasty looking stuff. You could only imagine what it would feel like if you had some go through you.

The first time I saw it was up on "Sea Dragon." I took one look at it after the shooting was over and I made it my friend. It was just too damn ugly to be my enemy. I picked some up in my hand and it reminded me of the cinders in back of the Zoar Lutheran church parking lot where I grew up. I laughed. They are shooting rocks at us! That's how we got by, day by day. We looked the worst possible scenarios in the face and then laughed and made light of it. I'd be up in combat (Combat Information Center or CIC) and we'd have a "shot gun", call sign "two six Charlie", in the air spotting targets and he'd locate a "jack-pot" (ammo, troops, fuel etc.) We'd plot it on our shore bombardment charts and when you walked away you knew the clock was running.

That night would see a high speed run and with five inchers bristling, there'd be hell to pay. Smoke them fast with a six-gun broadside and get the hell out of there. I'd come out of CIC, my eyes would hit the light and I'd try to forget what we were going to do that night, because now I had hours to think about it. Your brain starts running the 'what if' scenarios. You wear yourself out trying to come up with a solution to hypothetical problems. God knows there will be plenty of problems when the shooting starts. Don't need to tire yourself hours in advance. Anyway - damn it, worrying is like paying interest on something that hasn't happened yet. I'd meet up with the other guys on the ship and we'd start talking "scuttlebutt" and the next thing I knew, I was okay with what was going to happen that night. Once it was off my mind, I'd be okay till the General Quarters (GQ) bells went down, and of course, the rest was automatic then. It's true what they say, you know. When the green light goes on, the doubts and fears go away. When we'd hit Alpha station the DeHaven would go into a hard turn and as she came out of the turn on her firing run, the bridge would really kick up the turns. The deck below your feet would go into her high-speed shakes, the vibrations running up your legs into your spine and back, a flood of information going to the guns and bridge and then it was on! Cannon fire.

Battery. Secondaries, secondaries, secondaries. Every man on his station relentless in their dedication. We are lurching hard to starboard as the counter barrage comes down on the port side. It's time to exit stage right. Roger, concur that. A combat junky, I've become - What a rush and it was all natural. I didn't realize it at the time; I guess it came with the territory. I was young, dumb and full of what ever - and I had nothing to gage it by. But being in CIC, I had an overview of the entire combat operation. That much input in such heightened reality was an adrenalin rush. I lived more in those three-minute firing runs than I ever would again. My brain was on speed and didn't know it, thank God.

Now, what I've imparted to you so far is meant to give you a feel of what it was about, but this next part is what I really think about when "Sea Dragon" comes to my mind. This is what I really came here for. When it got back to the big brass in Washington they decorated us with the Navy Unit Commendation medal. But it wasn't really enough. They owed the entire ship at least the "Silver Star" for this one. So this vignette is dedicated to every man that was aboard the ship that night. You guys played way above your heads, like Johnny U. and Broadway Joe and Joe Montana all rolled into one.

They high-lined some brass off of the *USS Boston (CA-69)* to the DeHaven and the next thing I know, the shore bomb team is being called to CIC. There was Harry Kerrigan (northern liaison gunnery operator), big Mike Snyder out of Seattle (shore bombardment team coordinator), Brian Flagstad (radar operator, bearings and ranges) and me (Southern gunnery liaison operator). We gathered around an automatic dead reckoning tracker.

Barry Gavin came into CIC and barked, "Harry, pull the chart for Cap Lay to Mui Ron."

I believe I muttered to Gavin, "What's up?"

Gavin straightened up, "We've got a wartime commodore coming in."

"Really?"

"Oh, yes, really. Damn Straight."

As Harry laid the chart on the dead reckoning tracker I heard him say under his breath, "Oh, this is a real chestnut."

But before any of us could rubberneck the chart, in strode a real live wartime commodore. He wasn't real tall but what he lacked in height, he made up in steel. Pot helmet, flak jacket, twin chrome forty-fives with leather holsters, white bone grips, combat boots and canvas leggings, and oh yes, a swagger stick. As I remember it, I think I kind of stood back when I first saw him. I was trying to take it all in but I wasn't used to seeing officers dressed like that. I think what went through my mind was, "where did you leave the horse?" Don't get me wrong, I liked the look myself, but I think it would have worked better if we were going to charge up San Juan Hill. He was dressed like a rough rider and that should have given me a clue. Now in reporting this fairly, I soon realized that our war-time commodore was actually a full commander, but this commodore's field promotion gave him rank over our captain. This did not sit well with me considering what the commodore was about to propose.

He started with something like "Gentlemen - confidence is high! Our intelligence positively confirms a cluster of oil and ammo depots at these coordinates. And with that the commodore hands a list of coordinates to Kerrigan who immediately goes to work plotting on the shore bomb charts.

When Harry is done, we all step up and look at the shore bombardment chart and the latest proposition is staring us in the face. It's a radar navigation nightmare. It's twenty-five miles of beach line and it's as smooth and round as a babies butt, from Cap Lay to Mui Ron. In a long slow inverted dogleg, there isn't a three-point fix to be found. On top of that, the "Jackpot" happens to be in line with a small rock-like island about a mile and a half off the coast, called Hon Mat Island.

The commodore went onto say that he feels the most effective way of taking these island targets out would be by bringing in the *Boston* and a Gearing class destroyer, the *USS Damato*. It's going to be a three-ship assault. About this time I'm looking at Snyder, Snyder is looking at Kerrigan; we are all looking at each other.

Finally, Harry our spokesman, speaks. "Sir, with all due respect, what you propose puts our firing run between the shore and Hon Mat Island. Now we can get around this other rock Hon Gio which is a 'skosh' of a 'click' south? To lay in an effective gun line we'd have to put our firing run between the coast and Hon Mat Island and Sir that isn't a good idea considering the NVA probably have artillery hidden on that rock. We could get caught in crossfire."

The commodore belched out something about having done a fly-by on Hon Mat Island and reconnaissance gave him 'all clear' and that was that.

His mind was set; the wartime commodore had made up his mind long before this briefing. As far as he was concerned this was a done deal. He was calling the shots.

I didn't like it, the rest of the guys didn't like it, you could tell by the expressions on their faces. We had been here for almost two months and although it was an ugly little operation game of 'Hit and Run' with the NVA, it was our operation. The fact that we had lasted two months hitting the NVA two and three times a night sort of said that. 'We were the pros from Dover.' We were fighting the NVA his way and the fact that we were still there meant we were winning. It was our ability to hit fast and accurate in the dark and get out quick that gave us the element of surprise. It had been our only real defense, this element of surprise. The NVA had us badly out-gunned. The idea of this three-ship caravan going in between a rock and a hard place (the coast), just didn't sit well. This turbo charged commodore was playing fast and loose with our old mans (Captain Franz) ship.

The last thing the commodore says before he strides out of CIC is "And, Oh, by the way, you're not firing on the primary targets tonight, that's the *Damato* and the *Boston's* job. You'll be taking counter battery suppression. You'll be the third ship in." With that he exits and leaves us all standing there trying to digest what seemed to be going down. Somebody said, we get to get 'Sluggo' [Mr. Smuda] up here, now.

Harry said, "Brian, see if you can page Mr. Smuda to CIC now. You know he'll be on the bridge tonight with the old man." Harry continued as he held up the shore bombardment chart, "Okay Mike, if you're the NVA, where do you put your guns?"

Snyder, "See the top of the dogleg, that's 105 country. As soon as we hit Alpha station and start our firing run from that position he's looking right down our throat and it gets worse because we have to run at him and get past the island before we can break starboard."

I chimed in, "You know they have 80 millimeters on that rock Hon Mat, Harry."

Harry said "How do you know?"

I continued, "Because we know him. It's too good for him not to use it. Snyder's right, he's got 105's up at the top and he's ringing us in side from side, with a slew of 80 millimeters. He can't miss - if we go for the cheese it's triangulated gun fire! This Ho-Chi-Minh is a sly dog, that's why his oil and ammo dumps line up with Hon Mat Island."

Kerrigan, laying the chart in front of him, "Okay Mr. Wartime Commodore, we are third rookie in and we're firing suppression. Flagstad, give me a working definition of counter battery suppression."

Flagstad, "Easy, wait till you see a flash from counter battery, lock in with line of sight and commence to suppress."

Kerrigan, "That's correct but how about we alter that a bit. Let's run an estimated gun target line to Mikes 105's up at the top with mount 51, and then give me an estimate of target line to the general area of the primary targets at 270 degrees with mount 52 and bring mount 53 around to approximately 085 degrees and point it at Hon Mat Island, John's suspect 80 millimeters. Now let's lay out the planned intended movement down the firing line in estimated bearings and ranges to all three points of the triangulated gun line. If the NVA even winks at us, we take their picture with a 5"/38 or at the very least will have our batteries facing in the right direction. We better run this past the OPS Boss - get Mr. Auer up here."

Big Mike Snyder - "You know Harry, if this is going to work, you're going to have to cut the square on Alpha station."

"Yeah - I know Mike" - Harry responded, continuing, "I've got to be dead on, right on!"

The thing of it was there wasn't really squat to take a fix on. But Harry Kerrigan was a man of his word and that night he proved it by ringing a tight three pointed triangular fix out of that coastline. He cut it dead on. He hit Alpha station on the square and brought the DeHaven down the firing line on perfect beam. That sounds like the mission went off correctly, doesn't it? The *Damato*, the *Boston* and the DeHaven. What are these other guys, 6th Fleet, on a six-month tour?

Well it was the best laid plans of "mice and men" and before it was over it would turn into a real old fashion back home, country - Hail Bab, except it wouldn't be raining hail and sleet - (we could have used that to put out the fires). It was raining like a cow pissing on a flat rock and we were the rock. So if ever CIC had the right to tell the big brass 'I told you so', it would have to be this time.

It was our job in combat to assimilate information and make recommendations and we did that and for the most part it was ignored. The commodore had his own agenda and before it was over I'd feel like it had been scripted on the back of some Hollywood lot, to entertain some higher up mucky muks in the chain of command. Maybe Black Beard himself. Who knows? But ours wasn't to reason why. Our bridge got their orders from the top and we meant to carry them out. Every one of us.

I got off the afternoon watch and got in the chow line. Some second class who had already eaten passed by me. I questioned the menu with a gourmet's anticipation and he answers - Wop-slop. I am Italian but

I wasn't offended, not until I actually ate some. Not even Tabasco could help this. I stood up on the mess deck and announced – "Don't call this spaghetti."

Then it was Zabukovec who told me to shut up and sit down.

I did.

Sometimes it takes a wise man to know when you're heavily out-gunned. I went below to the operations berthing compartment. I tried to hit my rack. I figured I could get four, maybe five hours of sleep. Some of the guys were playing cards on the foot lockers right below my tree. In twenty minutes I must have rolled over twenty times. I couldn't fall asleep and I wanted to blame the guys for making too much noise playing cards three hammocks down, but I knew it wasn't them. It was that freaking little mark on the shore-bomb chart. That little speck of fly s*#@# a mile and a half off the coast. Hon Gios little friend Hon Mat Island. I just couldn't let go of it, and the clock was running. I reached out and grabbed the fresh air intake pipe and let myself down into the middle of the compartment from three racks up. I made my way back to the mess deck, up the ladder from the compartment.

Once on mess deck, it took my eyes a moment to focus in the dark. They were showing the ships nightly movie on the mess deck. The crew was packed in there like sardines. It was "Mary Poppins." Now I like Dick Van Dyke as well as any man and Julie Andrews is alive with the sound of music, but on that particular evening it just wasn't working for me. Not even the ride on those little boats at Disneyland; the 'It's a small world after all' ride would have done it for me. So I just stood there like a mort looking at two hundred and some odd "Yankee Pirates" as they ingested, drooled, and snickered over the flick.

I believe it was Zabukovec who told me to sit down as I made a better door than a window and with that I murmured, "Awe s*#@#!" Under my breath and went back to my compartment in search of my douche kit and towel. Perhaps if I got a hot shower, I could fall off for a while or at least I'd be clean and feel a little bit more like a normal human being before the mission. With my douche kit, shower shoes, and towel in hand, I made my way up the compartment ladder into the forward head. Doing so I again passed the inner passage hatch to the mess deck. I could hear the crew inside, they were rooting for the projectionist as the film had busted for the second time. They had a strange idea of what the projectionist should do with one end of the film. I laughed as I pondered their solution to the technical difficulties of the cinema as I entered the shower in the forward head. I lost the image the crew had proposed for the projectionist and wondered if they'd be that kicked back if they knew what was on for tonight. It was just as well that they really don't know. They are laughing, they are hooting over a stupid Mary Poppins flick. They are getting some cheap but well deserved R and R. They don't know Hon Mat Island or what it means from an ice berg and that's good for them. I on the other hand am going to get a hot shower and that's what I got, a hot blast of water, a good soap down and another good blast of water (Navy shower). I was going to the compartment when the GQ bells went down.

I got back to the compartment grabbed my dungarees and shirt. I didn't realize I was still in my shower shoes till I hit the door at combat. There was a rush of guys in front of me and a rush of guys in back of me, and to the casual observer it may have appeared like a Chinese fire drill with some forty personnel yelling things at each other and over each other. This was the right place to be, this was combat information center, the nerve center of the ship and theater of combat. I made my way around Brian Flagstad who stood poised on the surface search radar. I was headed for the automatic dead reckoning tracker. Soon it would be covered with shore bombardment charts. Harry Kerrigan and Mike Snyder were straight across from me just to my left. Soon we'd operate from here. The 1MC continued to blare, man your stations (battle stations). Chief 'Bubba' Morse circulated among his men and although he had a coffee cup in one hand and a half smile on his face, your s*#@# better be right on or Bubba was going to chew up one side of your ass and down the other. You'd be better off biting into a running chain saw than arguing with Bubba Morse. In his defense he was a remarkable combat strategist and specialist, excellent in all phases of combat operations and he expected the same from his men. If you didn't deliver you were the one who would be sorely dismayed before it was over. It wasn't long before Bubba noticed my feet. He asked if I had lost my shoes.

"No, I just got out of the shower when GQ sounded and I'm still wearing my shower shoes."

Harry, rolling out the shore bomb chart on the glass table top of the reckoning tracker says, "John, make sure your speed scale is set quarter inch to mile."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah!" I continued, "You know that wasn't my fault last time. It was the circuit breaker that kicked out the speed scale. When it came back up, it came on at half an inch."

Harry, "This chart says one quarter inch to a mile."

John, "Got it, Harry." I looked around CIC packed with peons like me, and lots of brass. We had the OPS boss, we had the CIC watch officer, and we had the X.O. We had some mustang Lt. from Hell's Half Acre (main control), I wonder what he's doing up here? We got some boot ensign with his hat riding down over his ears. We had three professional first class petty officers, three second-class petty officers, and a total of four third-class petty officers like me. I shouldn't fail to mention we had Sluggo on the bridge with of course, our beloved "Old Man, Captain Franz."

I motioned to Flagstad to switch his surface search over to Earl, so Flagstad could assume shore bomb navigation. Flagstad shined it on with "You think you know everything!" I switch over now - Earls going to have to call bearing and ranges to station. Lt. Smuda's calling for a course to station. He wants us to fall in one thousand yards, astern of the *Boston*.

Harry, "Mike, can you maneuver us to station? I've got to get this laid out."

Mike grabbed up a maneuvering board. "Okay Harry, I got it. For what?"

Harry, "Our course and speed to the *Boston*."

The well oiled parts – we're coming together. The charts were laid out, we're plotting, the compass rose was aimed in and, most important, I had three sharpened number two pencils under the top of my headset. I rubber necked a diagonal look across CIC. A good old partner of mine, Wild Bill Knopf, sat between two twin thirty three air repeaters.

"Hey Wild Bill," I exclaimed "You locked in?"

He retorted, "Hey Johnny" he continued, "I sure am. I'm locked, cocked, and loaded."

"Concur that Bill. Keep an eye out for Silk Worm missiles. Pooper and the Jew have got themselves buried in E.C.M. and they are concerned or convinced that a Fan Song radar has tried to lock on."

Wild Bill, "It's just an excuse for them to be alone in the dark."

I replied, "Yeah! Poppers got them sugar lips!"

Flagstad continued marking bearings and ranges to the cruiser. The battle station crew finished up manning their battle stations.

Mike Femia from the bridge, "John you friggin boot."

Flagstad cutting in on his sound powered phone, "Tell him Mike, he is a friggin boot."

I came back, "Flagstad why are you on this line? Who is Earl talking to?"

Flagstad, (probably to himself) "John, switch over to navigation," "Earl – are you there?"

Mike Femia, "You know, talking to you guys in combat is like talking to a bunch of friggin boots."

Earl, "I'm here."

John, "Is that you?"

Earl, "Yeah! It's me."

John continuing, "Why didn't you come up Earl?"

Earl said, "I had nothing to say."

John said, "Earl listen to me, did Flagstad give you the surface picture?" Pause, John again, "Well?"

Earl, "Nobody gave me nothing."

"Look Earl," John said, "pretend we've got seven minutes to live. When you get on the master repeater you come up on the phone and Flagstad will transfer his surface search when he knows you're on the line. Now you got the picture.

Earl, "There's nothing on the screen but the coastline and I'm not dumb and I'm not talking to myself like you boys from the north."

Now that I had Earl's goat, "Fine Earl," I continued, "keep your eyes peeled for WBLC's (water borne logistic craft) running guns and ammo.

Femia, "CIC this is the bridge, we've got a contact closing from the southwest, believe it to be the *Damato*. Do you concur?"

I keyed my sound powered phone and said, "Flagstad, where is the *Damato*?"

Flagstad gazed down into his repeater. He wasn't hearing the question, damn it. He's already switching over to an internal navigation circuit. I moved my head set off of my left ear. I reached over and nudged Flagstad.

Startled, Flagstad's response was, "What?"

I came back, "Where's the *Damato*?"

Flagstad said, "I don't know, I lost her when I cut the range for navigation."

I continued, "Where did you have her last?"

"I don't know John. She broke to the south while we were falling in behind the cruiser." said Flagstad.

"That's her - it's got to be her." said John.

Femia, "Hey boot, the bridge is going to want an answer."

"Yeah! Bridge combat, it's her," said John.

"Earl, do you concur?"

Earl said, "Yeah! It's her."

John, "Are you sure?"

"Yes. When I got on the scope she was breaking away. Now she's coming back."

John says, "Earl if you knew that why didn't you say that?"

Earl said, "I thought you knew it. You seem to know everything tonight."

Femia cutting back in, "I'm glad you're really sure - really sure because I just told the captain that's who it is."

"It's her bridge" said the port lookout aft. It's the *Damato*. I can make out her ASROC deck. ASROC deck?"

I thought, "She's a sub - killer?" If she's got a six-pack on her torpedo deck, she's carrying a lot of bang for the buck. Why mix a can like that in with us? The last thing we need out here in the middle of this s*#@# is nuclear capabilities."

I called forward to the bridge, "Hey, Michael me boy, is the commodore out there?"

Femia, "You know you really are the friggin boot, you know that. Where have you been? The commodore hasn't been aboard since five o'clock this afternoon. They high-lined him to the *Damato*."

"Aboard the *Damato*? I thought for sure he'd go back to the *Boston*, if he went anywhere."

No, that wasn't it with our boy commodore. He wasn't interested in putting the schmooze on some senator or who ever was aboard the *Boston*. He wanted to lead the charge on a fighting destroyer, which was his aim. That's what he came here for. This was his San Juan Hill. Then I knew he was coming back to take the lead. Once he got the lead, we were going to Alpha Station.

Curly, a bald headed, consummate, first class petty officer, leaned over Earl and peered into his radar scope. He called Bill Lambert and Clifford Beat, both RD2, to a second area serving for surface search coordination.

Curly, "Lambert and Beat. Get in there with Earl and give me a course and speed on the *Damato*. She appears to be going to station. She's going to assume the lead."

Chief Morse arched his head above the crowd aiming in our direction. He informed, "Stand by PRI-TAC, stand by PRI-CI."

Sure enough he didn't have the words out of his mouth and *Damato* came up on PRI-TAC and informed the *Boston* and the smaller but mighty DeHaven. She (The commodore) was taking the charge to Alpha station and we were to follow her in single file! We aye-ayed the command and the arena of mortal combat was set. The show was on.

"Combat bridge," Femia spoke, "listen up boots. This is from Mr. Smuda; he wants his CIC team to sharpen up. He wants no credibility gaps to the bridge. Stay aware, you got that?"

I keyed the 21MC over my head, "Bridge - CIC, aye, Mr. Smuda, got that."

I keyed my sound powered phone back to the bridge. "Mike", I said, "It's time I've got to come up. Navigation to plot. If you need something, give me a squawk over the 21MC, otherwise you're on with Earl. I've got to see a man about a dog and a place called Hon Mat Island."

With that I switched my sound powered phone circuit to navigational and fire control. Plot - I looked across at Harry. The NC2 war machine lit up like a Christmas tree. The circular compass rose projecting up through the shore-bomb chart. The center of the projected light circle was us. It moved along under the chart. Along the coast by Hon Mat Island laid a soft black lead point. Next to it was printed Alpha station. From that point running parallel between the coast and Hon Mat Island was a black penciled line. It was the firing run. Soon the light projecting up from the center of the compass rose would turn on that point and hopefully run right down the middle of that black penciled line. Soon perhaps, we would be out of here when our course down that line was finished. I couldn't help but feel I was on a fast ship, DeHaven, that surely went into harms way. Years later in a prayer to God, I would thank him for His Grace and the fast ship DeHaven for that night she really went into harms way.

We were constant bearing decreasing range (CBDR) to Alpha station two thousand yards when the *Damato* turned hard starboard and started banging away with her 5"/38's. Now it's hard to remember what the *Boston* chimed in with but the difference was significant. The fat lady started to sing and she had throat. Those eight inch guns had a noise all their own. We hit Alpha station, third on a match. Our guns were bristling. The *Damato* and *Boston* had extracted blood. Primary targets were exploding in secondary explosions. The main course was served. It was soup to nuts. You could see that six and seven miles into the jungle and surrounding countryside was burning. Our lookouts were flooding the bridge with information on the awesome upheaval that was going down. I waited with bated breath in anticipation of counter battery. I'd soon put my babies to work and give the targets a taste of my 5"/38's. It was just a matter of time and I'd blow hot hell down their gullets and call it brunch.

We proceeded down the firing line. The *Damato* finished her run and pulled out starboard to sea. The *Boston* finished her run and did likewise staging up on the fantail of the *Damato* and we came out of the

run and staged on the cruiser. Without even as much as firing one round. The shore batteries, the island batteries and the batteries up at the top of the dogleg didn't fire one! Huh! How could this be? Could our shore bomb team be that wrong? Up until now, we had prided ourselves on our savvy of the NVA and their tactics and yet it was an airball nothing. What was worse was that the sawed off little s*#@# commodore was right? He certainly seemed to have pulled this operation off without a hitch. The 21MC blared over my head and brought me back out of my own thoughts. It was Sluggo, Mr. Smuda. "CIC, Go out over PRI-CI and find out what the *Damato* intends to do?"

I hope she intends to go home. I looked up. The chief was walking towards me. He nodded yes and I keyed the 21MC to acknowledge Mr. Smuda's' command. Bill Lambert stepped in and pushed me aside. I didn't hesitate to move out of the way.

"Fine, you want to go out over PRI-CI, you put the message together", I thought.

The *Damato's* CIC got our inquiry and was back at us in a flash. Lambert fingering the addendums, finding the coded message we had just received. He read out loud its hidden meaning. It was pretty cut and dried, "Fall into Station, for tactical assault." The commodore was calling us back to form up like before. We were going to do it again.

"Geez! Louise!" I thought, "This guy means business." The lookouts spotted a hell of a lot of secondaries but this guy wants more! Okay commodore, ours is not to reason why, ours is to get it on, and get it done. Anyway, who am I to argue with success, maybe Femia was right. Maybe I am a boot. This hit and run routine for these last two months must be wearing on my nerves. I'm starting to think like some old woman, somebody's grandma. These guys on the *Damato* and *Boston* are fresh and rested, that's what it is. Once the *Damato* settled on a course back to Alpha station, Big Mike Snyder put us a thousand yards astern of the cruiser and Harry Kerrigan pulled another tight fix out of a very loose coast line. It seems like two shakes of a lamb's tail and we were hooking hard to starboard on Alpha station. Those familiar vibrations started running through my legs, lower spine, and back. The boiler room was cranking out the turns. I could feel the tremors moving through the dead reckoning tracker.

I thought, "Whoa big fellow - We will get our turn." It was heads up, all ready. Harry looked at me across the NC2.

I finally said, "What?"

Harry said, "You know with those pencils sticking out from under your head phones and your Clearasil war paint you look like an Indian."

"Yeah", I thought, "I'm barefoot too, since my thong just broke." I kicked off the remaining good shower shoe. I replied, "Just call me Scout!"

The *Damato* was at it again, she had opened fire and was banging like a s*#@# house door. After that the *Boston* joins the opera with its rendition of Verdi's Anvil Chorus, Oh yeah! The fat lady was singing and they had a whole battery of "Big Maria's." Our shore bomb team stood huddled around the NC2. The DeHaven was on her firing line. I could feel the high speed knots under my bare feet, my toes gripping the warm rubber deck thread of the rubber matting. The action was all around us and yet we were motionless, our crew did nothing. Because there wasn't anything for us to do. It was like the NVA had packed up their artillery and gone back to Red China. Huh! This is amazing, not a single cannon flash, nary a one. It's not like them. They couldn't have slept through the first barrage. The commodore's decision to take a second pass at them gave the NVA gun crews plenty enough times to be ready for us, s*#@# it had been a bonus to them. Who makes two passes in a row at Russian artillery on the Sea Dragon? Frig them; knock their s*#@# loose, if they can't manage to roll their guns out of those well hidden caves, they deserve the commodores pounding.

That, by the way was what he had given them. Secondary explosions hadn't been as numerous as on the first run, but there was enough secondary pyrotechnics on the primary targets to let us know that the commodore and his east coast taskforce had left no change on the table. His sugar candy report would be highly respectable. As we completed the run, the ship came around starboard to the open sea. Every crank of our huge brass propellers pushed us further away from the top of the dogleg and, quite frankly,

that was fine with me. Surface search reported that the *Boston* was no longer taking station on the *Damato* but was bearing away to the north east. All in all, I thought it hadn't been that bad. The commodore had gotten what he wanted and I was thinking that what happened here tonight will probably earn him a top slot in the Navy and perhaps in Washington. Some day!

Harry looked at his wrist watch and spoke, "If they wrap this up in the next five minutes we can get at least two full hours to fall out before we relieve the watch."

I nodded in agreement and was just ready to pull the chart bag, when PRI-CI called us back to attention. It was the *Damato*. It was a directive from the commodore. He was directing us to take station five hundred yards astern of the *Damato* and to carry out initial directive. Our initial directive was to fire suppression on counter battery (enemy-incoming!) Something we had been prepared to do twice tonight already. There was a dead pause in combat when Lambert broke the signal and the news. To tell the truth, and I'm not proud about this, what went through my mind was – "Son-of-a-bitch commodore, if you want to blow up the whole jungle why don't you call in the Air Force and a friggin "Daisy Cutter"(25,000 LVS aerial bomb willy fudd (control aircraft) and five attack fighter jets in a five abreast fly by. You can serve them some of that No! No! Napalm Korean barbeque." But this is something different; "Sea Dragon" is all about timing, the element of surprise. It's like, do unto others, and then split! The NVA doesn't give us a big window of opportunity to sit off their coast double parked. What the f@!* is going on in your mind? You're not through, you are friggin stupid and in the wrong neighborhood. You better show more respect to these little yellow gook bastards or they'll zero a round right between your friggin horns. Harry brought me back to reality and the NC2.

Harry, "John, what color is the sky in your world?"

John, "Yeah, Yeah."

Harry, "Sharpen up, check the speed indicator, one quarter inch to a nautical mile."

I checked the entire panel below. Everything was go as Big Mike took us to station on the *Damato*. The Jew stuck his head out of the E.C.M. room curtain, Isaacs said, "Chief, you better get in here. I think we've got that radar you were talking about."

"Oh!" The chief was stoked - Bubba loved it when a plan came together.

While big Mike Snyder and I were predicting where the shore batteries would be, Bubba had been predicting where the more sophisticated "Silk Worm" missiles were laying in wait. The signature of this particular missile was a fire control radar called a "Fan Song." Evidently the chief was right, there were Silk Worm missiles there, some where. Because Isaacs had gotten a positive lock from a Fan Song fire control radar, it was scanning the area and had momentarily locked on to us. This is not considered good because when the Fan Song radar is locked onto you, it is aiming a missile at you! The good news was it didn't stay locked on. The bad news was we were going to "Alpha station" and soon it would be comparable to going to hell in a hand basket.

Up until now, I've used a lot of colorful metaphors to describe the action and I must admit it's easier to revisit this place that way. I didn't realize it would be that difficult, that it must be bothering me more than I've known up to now. I hadn't been back here in thirty-five years but I'm here now with you and I'll try to account the details as clearly and simple as possible, even if that bit of discipline makes it more difficult for me. Remember, no matter how well you understand this, it will never be more than a story to you. It was our life for the crew of the DeHaven that night. It was real for us. I can smell the smoke.

We hit Alpha station a lot quicker this time as there was only us and the *Damato* five hundred yards out front. The *Damato* had opened fire on the primary targets that had already been hit twice previously that night. The DeHaven was along strictly for the suppression of counter battery and probably since it was our third run and we haven't fired a shot all night, I didn't think that any of us thought this run would be any different than the previous two. Although the shore-bomb team and a few others had reservations about the way the operation had been set up and the advantage it gave the NVA. By the time we mounted their charge we felt that maybe our fears had been unfounded. That all changed in a matter of seconds when all the look outs on the open decks started yelling "counter-battery." This is for the guys in the

ships office that manned those look out battle stations. It took stones to stand there facing those flashes from an estimated twenty gun batteries firing at you for effect. We thought we knew all along where the gun batteries were hidden, but I don't think any of us realized how many they had and that they would all open fire at once. The noise counter in sonar documented over one hundred blasts of artillery per minute almost right from the very start. Good job Whitley, good job Strong.

Harry Kerrigan had correctly identified the estimated 80 millimeters around the primaries. The NVA even went one better and stretched a line of 80 millimeter batteries as far as six miles up the coast from the primary targets, going towards the top of the dogleg. Mike Snyder got the estimated 105 right at the top of the dogleg. It was those same 105's up at the top that knocked the *Damato* dead in the water (DIW) and set her ASROC deck on fire. As I recall, those 105's were up at the top of the coastline looking right down the *Damato's* throat when they knocked her DIW. We came up in back of her and bottle necked quickly. Our mount 51 and mount 52 were firing counter battery suppression from the primary targets almost to the dogleg. Mount 51 couldn't fire directly into the top of the dogleg to get those 105's. The *Damato* was blocking our gun target line. It wasn't stopping those 105's that were ranging us, punching so many holes in the water around us that the hull almost appeared to be dancing from side to side. I believe it was then that our hull cracked open.

Damage control had their work cut out for them that night. They crawled out on the nose of the bow under fire, dragging two portables handy billy P250 pumps. Once they got them running they were pumping out fifty gallons of water per minute. Our mount 53 was the only mount we had pointing starboard at Hon Mat Island. Unfortunately I had correctly estimated shore batteries on Hon Mat Island. It was a testimony to our gun crew in mount 53 for keeping the artillery of Hon Mat Island off of us for as long as they did until they got the fire in the Mt 53 hold.

Janes fighting ships tell some hellish stories about what our Navy gun crews did during World War II. What the DeHaven's gun crew did that night I think would have made an addendum if any body understood the gravity of being triangulated. They responded with rapid succession fire, the likes of which I'd never seen before. Our mounts were bristling; our mounts were cracking with fire. Each gun mount was using their hood spotters and line of sight for targeting. They ran a fire hose up and into the barrel of the gun. The projectile sat damaged in a white-hot breach. Mount 53 was out of commission until they could extricate the damaged round. An estimated four 80 millimeter cannons on Hon Mat Island started rolling barrage, working to get our range, without mount 53 to keep them suppressed. It would be just a matter of time.

The concussions were coming from all sides now and the door that led into C.I.C from the captain's sea cabin started to bow and buckle in. I looked up, over Harry's shoulder. I'd never seen a metal door do that. But I knew there was enough torque behind it that if it blew off the hinges someone would die. I unlatched my headset. This station wasn't needed any more anyway with the gun crews using line of sight. I dropped the headset to the ground and made my way to the buckled sea cabin door. As I hit it with my shoulder to open it, there was a huge concussion and I continued through the captain's sea cabin door and to the deck. The captain was coming through the sea cabin's door from the bridge when he was also blown down. Our eyes met for a part of a split second. I thought to myself - stay down captain but he wasn't going to and neither was I. I scrambled to my bare feet breaking out of the old mans cabin when I heard Earl and Flagstad exclaiming that they had lost their phone talkers out on the bridge. I looked around me, all hands were frantically busy on their battle stations.

Harry had switched over from navigation and was coming up on the surface picture. The way I saw it, that left me to find out what had happened to the bridge talkers. I made my way to the door that led into to the bridge.

Earl yelled at me, "Be careful, that door is ready to spring."

My eyes focused in the dark passage. Damn, he was right. The door was bowed in sitting there in the bulkhead like a booby trap. I got a running start at it and used my shoulder to dislodge it. It blew open and I got out to the wheel house. I was crawling on my hand and knees. It was pitch black out there, except for the light from incoming artillery. Splinters of white light appeared in the blown out windows of the bridge. That's when I realized there were men down all around me. A lone seaman stood at the

wheel. He couldn't have been nineteen. He was the only thing standing from where I could see. He was cranking the wheel starboard as a group of rounds came down to the port. As the last water spout blew over our port side, I could see him start cranking the wheel to port. He was steering evasive maneuvers with out anyone's help. "That is from the Grace of God."

I yelled "Femia, where are you? Mike where are you?"

"Boot!" I heard, it was music to my ears. I thought I lost the little s*#@#. Then I heard Sluggo, as he struggled back to his feet and started screaming orders.

Mr. Smuda, "That wasn't a direct hit. That was mount 52 slinging a round to starboard." She went off as she hit the starboard stops on her mount. (The projectiles actually slung past the bridge as they departed for Hon Mat Island). That's teamwork. Mt 52 was filling the void that Mt 53 left when she got the fire in her hold.

The concussion was great. It buckled all the doors, blew out all the windows on the bridge and knocked the crew off their feet. Thank God. At first glance I thought everybody was dead, except the lone seaman. The captain made it to the starboard bridge wing. He was telling Mr. Smuda the *Damato* can't get out of our way and she can't get underway, we'll go in along side of her and pull her out with chains. As soon as I heard the captain's ultimatum, I figured CIC's going to want to know about this and started making my way back out the wheel house.

I was giving Curly (RD1) the heads up on going along side the *Damato* when I saw the X.O. coming through the door from sonar. He was bobbing and weaving through the crush of combat personnel when Flagstad stopped him.

Flagstad said, "Sir, the bridge is looking for you. Damage control reports three ships compartments burning and the aft ammo hold is on fire under Mt 53."

The X.O. replied, "Tell the bridge I just came from below. The compartment fires are just some electrical wires down in the mattresses, it's more smoke than fire, the ammo hold is on fire but we don't know yet to what extent. All the ammo handlers are out of there except one. Damage Control mounted a fire party and they are in there now. Tell the bridge," the X.O. stopped in the middle of his sentence, "never mind, I'll tell the bridge" and was gone again. The counter battery barrage continued and they had our number. We had been sitting behind the *Damato* for too long. The steel decks under mount 53 were buckling from mount 53 shooting aft. They had manually cranked open the breach on mount 53 and were extracting the damaged round. While they worked feverishly on top, the fire party was one deck below them feverishly trying to put out the fire in the ammo hold. We were down to four 5" /38 guns. Mount 53 was still touch and go, so was the ammo hold under mount 53, not to mention the ASROC deck on the *Damato*. The 21MC crackled, it was Mr. Smuda. We were to inform the *Damato* that we were coming along side. Shot line portside with chains to tow.

Chief Morse stuck his head out of ECM and said, "Tell the bridge we've got a constant bearing lock with a Fan Song radar. A Silk Worm missile attack is possible. I thought to myself, this is starting to get heavy. I wonder if we were going to make it out of here. It went through my mind but I kept it to myself. The thought must have been catchy because it wasn't too long after that that the boot ensign with the hat that rode down over his ears mentioned something about abandoning ship. Three petty officers jumped his s*#@# all at once and told him to sit down and shut up. Where the hell were you going to abandon ship? The water between the coast and the ship, and the ship and the island, was under constant barrage. It was like a bucket of steam. With a side dish of puffed shrapnel. If you could swim through that barrage, water snakes would probably get you. If you were near lucky and made it to the coast, the hard core NVA would have gotten you. Thanks but no thanks. I'll go down with my ship first. To clear at the rate we were going, this mission didn't have much running time left. If we were to go in along side the *Damato* and sling chains across her bow and pull her out we would need more suppression of counter battery then we could generate. We had to stop those guns on the coast. We had to silence Hon Mat Island.

Now for the life of me, I can't remember who gave the order to call the *Boston* back to the frey, but who ever did went out on the PRI-TAC circuit rather than PRI-CI meaning every bridge officer in the Tonkin gulf whether down in III corp or Piraz was privy to this message on the bridge. *Boston* this is DeHaven

(no call sign's used) The *Damato* is DIW between Hon Mat Island and the shore line. We are bottled in behind her. You better get those big friggin guns of yours back here. The *Boston* came back on the dime, except they used PRI-CI and call signs. They wanted a gun target line. Someone told them to use our stacks and sweep north then south with a rolling barrage. They did and things started changing for the better. I will say this, if you think an eight inch is loud when it's fired at the coast, you should hear it when it comes in over your head. It kind of sounds like the steel wheels screeching on the Bronx express. (That was for you Mike). As I recall, Mr. Smuda brought us in on the port side of the *Damato* while the fire party extinguishes the fire in the aft ammo hold. Our boatswain mates played way over their heads that night crawling around, under fire, slinging chains across the *Damato's* bow, manning the look outs with the ships office personnel, manning the wheel house, and working in the ammo holds.

Seaman Bryant was decorated with the combat V for standing in a burning ammo hold throwing fifty pound projectiles up the ladder and out on the deck out of the fire. It wasn't long after that, that the captain and Mr. Smuda had the *Damato* safely out to sea where the *Damato* got her main control back on the line. It should also be mentioned that if it wasn't for our main control below decks and our snipe divisions, we wouldn't have been able to save anyone's bacon. The DeHaven put on some powerful turns towing the *Damato* out to sea and beyond enemy artillery. I believe that was the night main control was re-named Hell's half acre.

Harry and I and the rest of the mid watch crew never did get a chance to go below and hit our racks. Instead, at 2 AM that morning, we joined up with the *Damato* and went in and hit them again. Same channel, same station (Alpha). The idea was that the commodore didn't want the NVA to get any positive public relations (PR) over the events that went on earlier that night. We hit them again to let them know they hadn't hurt us.