

## A Couple of My Best Experiences

By Captain Ace Trask, USN, (Ret)

### Code Word

In the mid 60's I was the Chief Staff Officer of DESRON 22 homeported in Norfolk, VA. The orders came to take a squadron of DD's to Vietnam with the mission to run a "gun-line" protecting the coast of South Vietnam, and COMDESRON 22 was in charge of assigning various DD's to sections along the coast. A DESRON staff consisted of the Commodore (Captain), Chief Staff Officer (Lt. Commander, me), three lieutenants and several enlisted personnel. The gun-line commander was usually assigned to I-Corps at the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) between North and South Vietnam. I-Corps was manned by the U.S. Marines and the other three Corps was manned by the U.S. Army and several other countries. The Vietnamese had compromised the entire communication system and the U.S. Marines were not getting any "kills" from the shore fire bombardment coming in from the DD's. The Commodore and the Marines decided someone would have to plan the bombardment operations and relay them by word of mouth to the Commodore, who would then put the plan into action. Much to my surprise, I was selected to be that person!

Getting ashore and returning to the ship would take several days as my means of transportation were via swift boat, Boston Whaler, jeep, landing craft, barge, helo, or whatever else was available to get me from point A to point B. The Marines controlled what was "inside the wire" but outside of the base (or wire) was controlled by the Viet Cong (V.C.). It usually took me 3 to 5 days to get from the destroyer to the Marine base, plan the operations, get back to the destroyer, and get the DD's in position for the bombardment. The first operation was a great success with over 100 kills. So that's what I did for the next five months.

The Commodore and I figured out a code system to use while I was in-country whereby he could send me a message via numbers. One of the code words was "eighty eight". If it appeared in a message I was to return to the ship as soon as possible.

I had just arrived in Da Nang and a message from the Commodore had "eighty eight" in the first sentence. It took me about a day and a half to get back to the ship which was operating adjacent to the DMZ. After getting back onboard the DD, the Commodore informed me that a typhoon was heading for the Gulf of Tonkin and all ships were to steam south for about three days until the typhoon had passed, and then return as soon as possible to their pre-assigned stations. (At the time I had a sub-specialty in meteorology from the U.S.N. Post Graduate School in Monterey, CA). I looked at the charts and reasoned that due to the typhoon's circulation and contour of the North Vietnam coast (i.e. Cap Lay and Tigre Island), our three DD's at the DMZ could stay 8 to 10 miles off the coast and we would be o.k. The fetch would be of short distance and the waves would not be able to develop. Yes, the wind would be strong, but not that bad. The Commodore took my advice and we were the only 3 U.S.N. ships in the Gulf of Tonkin providing gunfire support for the U.S. Marines. After things settled down, the Commodore sent a message to Commander 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet saying: My Chief of Staff is never wrong in his forecasts but he doesn't guarantee them!

**Editor's Note:** During the Vietnam War, South Vietnam was divided into four Corps Tactical Zones, also called Military Regions, and the Special Capital Zone (Saigon area) for purposes of military operations. The four Zones consisted of **I-Corps** (pronounced "EYE-CORE"), **II-Corps**, **III-Corps** and **IV-Corps**. I-Corps was located in the region nearest North Vietnam, adjacent to the DMZ. The DMZ in Vietnam lay at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel north. In reality it extended about a mile on either side of the Ben Hai River and west to east from the Laos border to the South China Sea.

### A Coup That Didn't Happen

In the mid 60's, I was the XO onboard the USS O'Hare (DD-889) out of Norfolk, VA. We were part of DESRON 32 (Motto: "ANYWHERE ANYTIME"). The squadron was part of TASK GROUP ALPHA to hunt Russian subs along the east coast of the U.S. The task group consisted of 6 destroyers, an aircraft carrier, an oiler and a submarine. TASK GROUP BRAVO was similar with one of us at sea along the east coast

of the U.S. at all times.

We were operating about 100 miles west of Cape Hatteras when a signal was sent to all DD's to lite off "super heat" and reform into a circular screen around the carrier. Destroyers can do 27 knots on two boilers but it takes four boilers with super heat to get to 31 knots. After joining up with the carrier, the next signal was a southerly course, speed 31 knots. We maintained this formation for about two and a half days, but on the third night while steaming "darkened ship", we transited the Mona Passage and anchored in the bay of Santa Domingo, Dominican Republic, before daylight. It seemed there was going to be a Communist coup on the morning of our arrival, similar to what had recently transpired in Cuba. But when the locals looked out over the bay and saw an aircraft carrier and six destroyers all flying the red, white, and blue of the U.S., it sort of took the wind out of their sails. The coup did not occur and the Dominican Republic stayed democratic. The destroyers patrolled the Dominican Republic coastline for the next few weeks to make sure everybody got the message.