

Linebacker Strike

By Commander Robert C. Powers, U.S. Navy

Not everybody can play the linebacker position in football and not every Seventh Fleet warship could be part of the Linebacker Surface Strike Group. DEs and DEGs could not be assigned to Linebacker, but DDs, and DDGs like the Lawrence, had the speed, stamina, and strength to conduct strikes in North Vietnam and to interdict enemy logistics and lines of communication.

The ship plunged and vibrated at 25 knots as she dashed through the Gulf of Tonkin. Holding on in the Wardroom, I thumbed through a three month old Time Magazine while waiting for my grilled cheese sandwich, my fourth meal of the day.

This cool day in December, 1972 had been a tough one for all hands. The previous night had been spent at General Quarters, as would tonight. Three strikes had been made with snatches of sleep in between. Our two automatic five inch 54 caliber rapid fire guns worked beautifully and enemy fire throughout the night had been sporadic and inaccurate. At 0600 we met with a replenishment task force to refuel and rearm. Reveille at 0500 after a night at General Quarters was nothing new to who were Linebacker veterans. They plodded to their stations, all 320 men aboard, and we refueled and took on some 500 rounds and powder cartridges. Then it was time to clean up the ship, grab some chow and some sleep, check out all of the complex equipment of a guided missile destroyer, and get ready for tonight.

An air of apprehension was apparent to all. It was that way when we went into Brandon Bay. This would be no milk run. Brandon Bay was dotted with several small islands. The largest of these, Hon Me and Hon Mat, had large coastal defense guns protected by caves. In order to reach our targets we had to close the North Vietnam mainland inside these islands. In addition to the island guns, the entire coast was dotted with heavy gun emplacements, for it was this point along the coast that Highway One was most vulnerable to naval gunfire. A continuous flow of war material was being pushed southward along Highway One to the NVA troops that had penetrated to Quang Tri below the DMZ.

The task of the Linebacker Task Force was to shut off the flow of material. My ship was one of a three ship unit going into Brandon bay for that purpose. My sandwich arrived and I stirred some sugar into my iced tea. The ship heeled to port as she turned. Knowing our track, I knew I had about 15 minutes to eat.

The Easter Offensive of 1972 had started quickly as North Vietnamese troops overran areas of Quang Tri Province, crossed the Cua Viet River and took the South Vietnamese Naval Base at the mouth of the Cua Viet River. This was familiar territory to me, as I had been in these during a previous tour with US Naval Forces, Viet Nam. It was no surprise that the Army of the Republic of Viet Nam (ARVN) needed gunfire support and that cruisers and destroyers off the coast of the DMZ were the first to respond.

More than half of the area being contested was within range of naval gunfire. This was a war where the might of U.S. Naval power could be brought to bear. Operating schedules were accelerated and the Cruiser-Destroyer Force, Seventh Fleet was augmented, reaching over 35

ships at times. Ships of the Atlantic Fleet were sent westward through the Panama Canal. Such a ship was mine. For the first time in her 11 year history, my ship would operate in the Pacific and would fire a shot in anger.

As we began to get ready for deployment to combat, events were taking place that would lead us to Brandon Bay. The Surface Strike Group was activated in early April to conduct strikes in North Vietnam to interdict enemy logistics lines and lines of communications. The group was composed of a northern and a southern Task Unit, each consisting of three or four destroyers, occasionally augmented by a cruiser. As we were to discover, a ship would normally rotate between gunfire support at the "Gun Line" near the besieged Quang Tri area and surface strike duty in one of the Linebacker units.

Not everyone was assigned to Linebacker, as some demanding requirements were set forth. First, you had to have a ship with two guns and two screws. This eliminated the newer ships of the Fleet, the DE's and DEG's and left the task to the older better armed DDG's and DD's. Second, your ship could not have a mission degrading casualty; in other words, everything had to be working. This made it tough, and the ship that could stay on Linebacker was a good ship.

The schedule of night strikes and day replenishments was a back breaker, and the crew that could stay on Linebacker was a good crew. We had a good crew. As executive officer, I knew the bad ones and the good ones well and when the chips were down, they all performed magnificently. The tougher the job, the higher the morale. Since we were a ship that could stay on Linebacker, we got the tough jobs. Of the 85 days we spent in combat, 53 of them were on Linebacker. The 1MC announced "Reveille, Reveille. The ship will go to General Quarters in ten minutes."

On July 7, 1972 we sailed from Norfolk, Virginia to begin an adventure that would remain vivid in the minds of our crew. Following a long transit with intense training, we joined the Seventh Fleet on 7 August. After a brief stop at Subic Bay for voyage repairs, we joined the Gun Line near the DMZ early on the morning of 20 August. Steaming in through the mist with all hands at General Quarters, we were greeted by an awesome sight. Strung out along the coast were two heavy cruisers and ten destroyers periodically belching fire and smoke as their guns rained destruction on the enemy.

Eager to get into the fray, we were frustrated at being assigned a holding station outside the string of ships. Long hours passed and, finally at about 1000, we were assigned at station on the Gun Line and received a firing mission. A cheer rose from the crew as the roar from Mount 51 signaled the first of 9,500 rounds we were to fire in combat. In seven days on the Gun line we fired more than 900 rounds in some 40 missions.

On 27 August, we got the word: "Proceed to Dong Hoi Gulf and join the southern Linebacker unit." We had passed our first test and were being promoted to Linebacker. With a mixture of joy, fear, and anticipation, we turned our bow northward.

Dong Hoi Gulf was an unusual place. The coast was mountainous, and Highway One went through a pass near the Gulf of Tonkin. This was the point south of Brandon Bay where the highway was again vulnerable to naval forces. It was here on 19 April North Vietnamese MIG aircraft had attacked U.S. Navy destroyers in what was now known as the Battle of Dong Hoi

Gulf. In that battle, one destroyer, the USS Higbee, suffered damage from a bomb hit and the USS Sterrett shot down a MIG with her Terrier missiles. Later on that day, the destroyers were attacked by high speed patrol craft and were successful in repelling the attack with enemy losses. The battle resulted in action to provide special armament and sensors for destroyers in combating low flying aircraft and anti-ship missiles. My ship had been a leader in evaluating such equipment and, in addition to her normal armament, mounted the infrared seeking Sea Chaparral and Red Eye missile systems. We also had additional radars, a special electronic warfare suit, and a chaff mortar capability. Additionally, we had .50 caliber machine guns installed for close in protection.

Dong Hoi Gulf had been chosen by the North Vietnamese and Chinese Communists as an anchorage and off loading point for Chinese Communists merchant ships re-supplying the North Vietnamese. Our job was conduct surveillance of a Chinese ship, shoot up the supplies once ashore, and conduct strikes against targets of opportunity in the area. The next 22 days were to be interesting, tiring, and frustrating. Strikes were conducted day and night, but not once were we fired upon by the enemy. On several occasions other ships took light fire, but not us. The crew became somewhat complacent. They were very annoyed because there was no opposition.

Routine surveillance day after day can get very tedious, and it did. Finally edgy sailors were heard to say that they wished that the enemy would shoot back just to break the monotony. They were to have their wish fulfilled many fold, but not at Dong Hoi Gulf.

Even Subic Bay is a welcome sight after a week on the Gun Line and three weeks watching a Chinese Communist merchant ship. After some repairs to our ship and morale at Subic we again went to sea. Following a stint on the Gun Line, we found ourselves with Linebacker again, but this time with the northern unit. We had made the first team.

The northern Linebacker unit consisted of three destroyers, at least one of which was a 5 inch 54 caliber gunned ship. The older 5 inch 38 caliber guns didn't have the range for many targets, but were extremely reliable and efficient against medium range targets and coastal defense guns. The 5 inch 54 caliber guns were fully automatic, more complex, and though longer ranged, were less reliable. Through the herculean efforts our gunner's mates and a special Seventh Fleet gun repair team, we would complete our combat tour never having missed a commitment because of a gun casualty.

We were also a two screw ship and stayed that way. Our engineers kept the plant going under all conditions, never missing a commitment. I remember one main feed pump casualty that was repaired just in time to bring four boilers on the line and go up to speed for the dash in on the Coast of North Vietnam. And that's what the northern Linebacker force did, three or four times a night-high speed, twisting, zig-zagging runs close in to the enemy coast. And it was there that my ship drew her first enemy fire. Frightening as it was, it was nothing compared to what was to come, but the crew strutted. Now, finally, they were really combat veterans. After years of training and maintaining complex machinery and weapons, they were part of a warship doing what she was designed to do, and doing it well. Strange, that such a proud moment would result from being shot at.

The incoming enemy fire during those days in October and November was characterized by its inaccuracy and use of point detonating ammunition, resulting in surface bursts. The enemy would sweep the coastal waters with surface search radar and when the ships came into range, saturate the area. It appeared that they were firing at predetermined grid points. Very few ships were hit, though in the spring of 1972, the USS Buchanan took a hit.

Beginning in December, enemy fire became very accurate and very heavy, probably because of the introduction of radar controlled coastal defense guns. Also, more use of time fused air burst ammunition was apparent. I looked around the wardroom at several other officers there who were silently preparing themselves for a long night of operations. Young men, part of an effective team, they had the heady flow of adrenalin that comes in combat. The worst period was now, when there was time to contemplate pitting a thin hulled destroyer against fortified coastal guns, to think about mine fields, the rocks, the shoals, the high speed maneuvers at close quarters in the darkness with other destroyers. The 1MC gave its final warning. "The ship will go to General Quarters in five minutes." I pushed back and started for the bridge.

In November we made it to Hong Kong and, Kaohsiung for brief liberty ports. In Kaohsiung, the ship was alongside a destroyer tender for some much needed repairs. We re-gunned our mounts there, having used up the barrel life of both guns. Then, in late November it was back to the Gun Line. Many, many rounds were expended during this period in support of ARVN forces.

It was the monsoon season and the sea was an adversary. The winds howled and each day was a life of mist and spray. The Gulf was choppy on top of great rolling swells that came up in the shallow waters where our firing positions were located. Muscles were strained, bruised from holding on amid the endless rolling. Great seamanship was required to keep the ship in position for the guns to bear.

Between the shock gunfire and the working of the shop in the seas, cracks began to develop in the superstructure [sic. Aluminum]. Typhoons came and the ships would steam sea ward and dart north or south trying to outrun the movements of nature's monster winds. Despite this, in 12 days, the ship fired 2,300 rounds in support of troops ashore. The most memorable mission occurred in early December when, at about 2330, steaming south of Danang to a new station, an urgent call for help was received on the spotter circuit. Plotting the coordinates, we found that we were close to the spot and steamed into firing position. Firing over 140 rounds, our ship was credited with saving an ARVN outpost from attack by a company sized unit of Viet Cong. [sic: Mount 52 was down with a "hot gun" barrel. Mount 51 was out of Point Detonating ammo. So we used Anti-aircraft Proximity shells and set the altitude at 10 feet. The VC were caught out in the open and decimated.]

A repair period in Subic Bay was cut short in mid December when we received orders to proceed to northern Linebacker and relieve the USS Goldsborough which had taken a hit and suffered several killed and wounded. We steamed into the fray just before Christmas. It was at this time that we had several unique visitors. The Secretary of the Navy, while touring ships in the area, came aboard and spent the night, making a strike with us. We were proud to be the only ship to be SecNav's flagship for a Linebacker Strike. And, the Commander of our Task Force came aboard for a strike.

Christmas was a hurried affair of singing carols, thinking of home and family, and laughing at our shipmate Santa Claus. And then the fighting got rough. Someone had taught the enemy how to shoot. As I finished the climb to the bridge, the thrill of danger brought a hollow feeling to my stomach.

The bridge was very, very dark. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I stepped out on the wing of the bridge and saw that the sky was overcast with no moon. Black rain squalls moved along the horizon and lightening crackled and flashed in the distance. When it did, I could see our two companion destroyers dashing along through the choppy seas at intervals to starboard. Men began to come to the bridge to man up for General Quarters, and the subdued talk added to the ghostly atmosphere of the soft red lights in the Pilothouse. Silently, I walked among the men, checking the various indicators and stations. Course 335. Speed 27,

As Exec., my assignment was to take the conn. The maneuvering of the ship was mine. The Captain took station in the Combat Information Center (CIC) where he could obtain the most information to fight the ship, supervise control of weapons, and supervise the maneuvering of the ship.

“General Quarters. General Quarters. All hands man your battle stations. BONG! BONG! BONG! BONG! BONG!” The General Quarters gong sounded loud and there was a final scurry as each man put on phones, adjusted binoculars, and arranged charts and plots into place. I relieved the conning officer and knew that 4,500 tons of warship would respond to my commands. A quiet efficiency settled over the bridge. I reported to the Captain via the squawk box that all stations were manned and ready.

The radio crackled with a tactical signal that altered course 60 degrees to port and slowed the formation to 22 knots. I gave the commands and the ship leaned, then steadied and slowed. We were on a course for the mouth of Brandon Bay, right between the islands of Hon Mat and Hon Me. The approach was a controlled zig zag at varying speeds, designed to confuse enemy gunners. I stepped out on the wing of the bridge to check my position on the guide. I could just see her outline in the gloom a mile away, but distinct and clear was the great white wave leaping at her bow. We had a “bone in our teeth” and were charging into battle.

On the horizon I could see darting, fiery tracer bullets leaping into the air after some unseen aircraft. Then more tracers. And then, the spectacular fireworks of a Surface to Air (SAM) missile launch. A great spitting ball of flame rose quickly into the air and turned in our direction. Instinctively I ducked and reached for the squawk box to warn the Captain that we had an incoming missile. It detonated before I could send the alert. A bright white flash, and seconds later, a distant KERWHUMP.

Another course and speed change. Now up to 25 knots and the wind whistled ferociously in the darkness. There was a blast of rain as we passed through a squall. We would dart like this into the firing point and turn on a course parallel to the coast to unmask all guns. After firing, we would disperse on divergent courses eastward at high speed. Normally, the coastal defense guns would not fire at us until we commenced our bombardment. That was good because it meant that most of their shells would fall behind us as we departed. Tonight would be different.

The target we were to hit was a railway storage yard. It was seven miles inland, which meant that even with the range of our guns, we had to go uncomfortably close to the beach. The Captain and the CIC team were busy pinpointing the target and inserting the track into the gunfire control equipment. They were also preparing to set up several known gun sites that were sure to fire on us.

Alter course 30 degrees to starboard. Speed 27. As the ship throbbed in response, I walked to the radar and looked into the eerie green scope. Blobs of rain squalls surrounded us, but CIC was reporting many small contacts ahead. It had to be the North Vietnamese fishing fleet. Our orders were not to molest them unless fired upon, yet the maze of junks presented a considerable hazard to three destroyers trying to weave their way through them.

I saw them popping up on the scope now. Straining my eyes, I raised my binoculars and peered through the gloom and flying spray. A lookout sang out sighting a sail close on the port bow. Then I saw them in the darkness. A forest of ridged sails bobbing up and down.

Directly ahead, a series of small bright flashes stuttered. Ducking, I listened for the whine of machine gun bullets, but there were none. Raising my binoculars again, I could make out a small junk dead ahead and what appeared to be a lantern being waved frantically. I began to imagine what it must be like to be in a small boat on a dark sea and find a destroyer headed straight for you at high speed. Scary!

Several hundred yards short of the junk, I did a Right standard rudder-Shift your rudder-Rudder amidships maneuver that took him about 10 yards down the port side. As the junk bobbed by, I looked down at the men in it and shouted at them. I don't remember what I said but it relieved my tension a bit.

Alter course 45 degrees to port. Speed 24. This was the last approach leg. The next turn would be to firing course. We had passed through the fishing fleet without incident and were in shallow water now.

"Surface search radar bearing 320." The detection report confirmed that the enemy was plotting our movements. Another search radar was detected to the southeast.

"Fire control radar bearing 330." That was the clincher.

"Fire control radar is tracking." That meant that they were on us, and I didn't have long to wait for their reaction.

Across a sector of about 45 degrees, the horizon west of us lit up with the muzzle flashes of multiple heavy guns. It was spectacular!

The next 25-30 seconds are always interesting . You know that somewhere up there, tons of lead are headed in your direction. Statistically, it's best to keep right on your course until you can see a pattern to the fall of the shot. But the urge to do something, anything, in those few seconds is overpowering.

The first salvo was a pattern of three air bursts that detonated directly ahead of the ship at a range of less than 100 yards. Everyone on the bridge ducked at the unmistakable "KERACK" of the high explosives close aboard followed by the hiss of shrapnel striking water.

The next five minutes were a blur of vivid events. Automatically, I took bearings on the muzzle flashes and passed them to the Weapons Officer. Reports flowed in to the bridge of muzzle flashes and rounds detonating close aboard. Sonar reported many close underwater detonations. Amidst this, the signal came to turn to port to the firing course and slow. With full rudder the ship swung to the new course., and as she did the two long range five inch guns swung out on the beam, tracking their target.

"KERBOOM! KERBOOM!"

The guns spoke and our bombardment went whistling on its way. Unfortunately whistles with a distinct whooshing up doppler continued, and the KERACK of incoming mingled with the KERBOOM of our outgoing. Powder fumes and cork were flying everywhere and enemy shells were exploding ahead aft port and starboard. Stations aft were reporting hearing shrapnel hit the superstructure.

Strangely, though you can hear it all, it's difficult to actually see an incoming detonation. You have to be looking right at it at the right split second. Tonight, though, anywhere you happen to be looking, there was a bright white and yellow flash. I was standing on the starboard bridge wing and saw one detonate abeam so close that I was looking down at it and heard the whine of shrapnel.

"KERBOOM! KERBOOM!"

Our guns kept firing. I thought to myself, will you please hurry up guns. It's time to haul out of this place. Then another spectacular sight. Deeply inland, we saw the glare of our rounds striking their target and the flare up of many secondary explosions. WE GOT 'EM!

The squawk box came alive and a voice from CIC asked "How many rounds are we taking out there? They sound awfully close."

"Too fast, too close, too many to count", was the reply.

The guns stopped firing and the radio crackled with the dispersal signal. I put the ship into a hard port turn and cranked on 27 knots. As soon as the water got deeper , I wanted more speed and told the engineers to stand by for 29 knots.

"I can give you 32 knots and wish you'd take it" came the answer from main control.

The engineers beneath the waterline, had been getting the full effect of the numerous close aboard underwater detonations. We hauled out of there with enemy rounds chasing us all the way.

Mount 52 set up on the coastal defense firing at us and returned the fire. As we sped by Hon Mat, their guns opened up on us. We were ready for that, and Mount 51 answered viciously, silencing the enemy gun. We pulled out of their gun range and escaped unscathed.

All was strangely silent as we steamed eastward, each man winding down from the tension of those few moments. It took quite a while to muster the usual wise cracks. The next morning the crew found chunks of jagged shrapnel topside, one piece as big as a fist. We knew we had been living right that night.

On 30 December, we left Linebacker and began our transit back to the east coast of the United States. We had conducted 154 gunfire support missions and 116 Linebacker strikes. It was estimated that more than 600 enemy rounds fell close aboard during those missions. We were credited with destroying many enemy targets and killing numerous enemy troops.

The question of whether or not these destroyer strikes were worth the risking of the ships is often asked. I would have to answer with the following observations. First, something was blowing up and burning as a result of our strikes. We saw it. Second, our effectiveness could be measured by the enemy steps taken to counter us. The increased volume and accuracy of their fire indicated that they went all out with what they had. Third, despite enemy efforts, few ships were seriously damaged. Had control of the air or the seas been seriously contested, it would have been a bigger and longer fight.

On our way home, we heard news of the cease fire[sic: we were actually in Japan for R&R, scheduled to go back on the Gun Line, when the cease fire was announced] and were proud to know our ship had helped force the enemy to that position.

For her action in combat, the USS Lawrence (DDG 4) was awarded the Meritorious Unit Commendation [sic: unit version of the Bronze Star]. She and many brave ships that shared the dangers of those times will remember that unique destroyer operation-Linebacker Strike!

The Secretary of the Navy takes pleasure in presenting the Meritorious Unit Commendation to USS LAWRENCE (DDG-4)

CITATION:

For meritorious service during operations against enemy forces in Southeast Asia from 7 August 1972 to 10 January 1973. Upon assignment to the US SEVENTH Fleet in support of United States objectives in Southeast Asia, USS LAWRENCE consistently displayed a high degree of professionalism and resourcefulness while carrying out arduous combat support missions along the coast of the Republic of Vietnam and 116 high speed strike missions against North Vietnam. During this period, USS LAWRENCE damaged or destroyed significant enemy fortifications and logistic support facilities. The sustained high level of personnel and material readiness achieved by LAWRENCE enabled her to respond instantly to every commitment ranging from pilot rescue to emergency naval gunfire support. By the exemplary performance of duty throughout this period, the officers and men of the USS LAWRENCE reflected great credit upon themselves and the United States Naval Service.

***John W. Warner
Secretary of the Navy***

