

## Things That Go Bump In The Night

I liked to “conn”, or drive ships. You have a sense of power. Control of a ship at sea. That is really why they call in conning, or controlling a ship instead of driving. Some ships are small and slow, like a minesweeper. The all around view from the bridge on one of these small ships helps make up for some of the lack of power. Coming to a stop is done easily.

A destroyer knifes through the water like a shark. You have all that horsepower that provides a lot of speed. That plus all the guns or missiles makes it exciting. The view from a destroyer’ bridge is also excellent.

A fleet oiler plows through the water. It is a floating gas station. More speed than a minesweeper but a lot less than a destroyer. There is a lot of momentum in the 37,000 tons in the ship I was on. You are not going to come to a quick stop. In fact it takes about two miles to come to a stop from “all ahead full.” That is why the ship’s standing orders say that you, the Officer of the Deck (OOD), who has the conn has very explicit directions to follow. The ship is to come no closer than five miles to another ship while steaming at sea. A very wise order when you are standing on about seven million gallons of volatile fuel.

The view from the bridge, at least in *Kawishiwi* was a problem. Directly in front of the bridge were two gun mounts on either side. From either wing of the bridge, directly over the side of the ship, you could see to either side, aft, and forward, but not to the opposite side. There were two sailors, with sound powered phones, acting as lookouts on the 04 level above the bridge on the port and starboard side. This had to be reassuring to the Officer of the Deck below them..... or maybe not.

As Officer of the Deck, you have to watch where you are going, just like the driver of an automobile. The difference is that you also have other things going on that occupy your attention. There is the chart and your plot to check, radio calls to make and answer, and the radar scope to check. The deck log has to be maintained, and there are many other things that take the OOD’s eyes away from the path of the ship.

Of course the OOD’s eyes are not the only ones watching where we were going. Most of the time I had a lieutenant, junior grade as Junior Officer of the Deck (JOOD) to help. In fact, when I was the Officer of the Deck, I always had the JOOD take the conn and drive the ship. As OOD, I was responsible for the ship at the time, but I could designate the JOOD to take the conn. If there were a course or speed change to be made, I would give the order to the JOOD. He would, in turn, tell the helmsman to come to the new course or tell the engine order telegraph operator to change speed.

Except in an emergency, only the ship’s captain can order course and speed changes. The key is to let the captain know in advance when there is a need to change course or speed. Any Officer of the Deck who waits until it is too late to correct a problem is courting trouble.

The ship also had radar to help the OOD keep track of any ships or land that might pose a problem. Of course that depended on the size of the ship and how low the land was. You could say that there were plenty of eyes to watch out for the ship. On the other hand, it did not pay to be overconfident. There were always situations that were unforeseen.

In back of the bridge was Combat Information Center (CIC). It was a blacked out room, lit only by the glow from a radar set. The watch in CIC had their eyes on that radar all the time, not just occasionally, like on the bridge. They were a help as long as the objects in the water were large enough to show up on the radar.

During the day, there was little chance of something in the water going unnoticed. The lookouts would even let the OOD know when there were sea snakes on the surface of the water.

They were supposed to report anything they saw. At night, it was a different matter. You didn't always know what was happening around you at night.

On one occasion, the ship sailed around the southern tip of Vietnam. We took station some twenty miles off the west coast. We were to wait there until a destroyer came out to take on fuel from us. The destroyer was doing close inshore fire support to our troops there.

The ship arrived on station sometime after dark. The ship's captain gave the order to put the ship in a "racetrack station" for the night. We would sail ten miles north at five knots, turn around, and sail ten miles south. Then we would repeat the operation. Two hours north, followed by two hours south, repeated all night long.

I came on watch at 4:00 AM. As I said we were only twenty some miles from the Vietnam coast. The land was so low lying over there to the east that we could not pick up any land on the radar. There were no other ships or boats in sight. Nothing on the radar and no lights reported by the lookouts.

Shortly after the sun came up, we came to the southern most leg of our track. I ordered a standard left rudder to turn around and head back north. Half way through the turn, the lookout on the stern called to the bridge saying there was something strange in the water.

Using my binoculars, I looked aft to where we had just made our turn. I saw a large boiling area of mud. It was half the size of a football field. Puzzled, I went to the chart table in the pilothouse and checked the chart. Somehow, when I came on watch, I didn't notice that the water was very shallow there. I don't remember the exact depth, but we weren't in any danger of running aground.

When we put that huge rudder over to make our turn, the wash of the port screw against the rudder set up an eddy that caused the mud on the bottom to be kicked up. It was of interest because, if, for some reason the ship were to sink to the bottom, I would not even get my feet wet. I was high enough up in the ship to prevent that. This was a case where me, my JOOD, or the lookouts, could not have expected the bottom to be affected by the ship's presence. The water usually wasn't that shallow, that far out. Of course shallow water in the proximity to a coastal area means fishing boats and nets. More on that.

One night we were steaming south from way up north, near the North Vietnam coast. We were unusually close inshore. Not close enough to see any lights on shore, but close enough to see land on the bridge radar. The big difference was that there wasn't much water under the keel.

Sometime during the middle of the night a blip showed up on the radar. Walking out to the starboard wing of the bridge I took a look through the "big eyes." That was the 20 power binoculars mounted there on a swivel. Sure enough, about seven miles away and about 15 degrees off the bow, there was a fishing boat. It was lit up like a Christmas tree..... white lights only.

After plotting for a few minutes I came to a decision just as CIC confirmed it. Combat informed me that the contact was "DIW," or Dead in the Water. Either the boat was anchored or drifting. In either case, since it was off the starboard bow, it would not be a hazard to us. Or so I thought.

We were steaming along in a leisurely manner, about ten knots. That we would pass the fishing boat in about 45 minutes. Then I looked at the chart. Oh, oh, the water shoaled ahead. The track laid out by the navigator had us making a slight turn to starboard to follow deeper water, slightly inshore.

About ten minutes later we made a course adjustment to starboard. That I did not like because that fishing boat was then on our port bow. Somehow I felt like a heat seeking missile tracking a heat or light source..... like that fishing boat.

I looked at the chart again. No way. We had another course change coming up. Sure enough we were to make a turn to port. From where we were, and in the time available, I couldn't tell for sure how it would affect the fishing boat out there, but it was going to be interesting.

Sure enough, the time came to make that turn to port. When we steadied up that boat, then only about two miles away was not quite dead ahead. I rang the captain up on the phone and advised him that our new course would take us within about half a mile from an anchored fishing boat. Big ship, small boat (DIW) no action was necessary. As we passed the fishing boat I looked in the big eyes again. With those big binoculars I could have counted the fishermen's fillings in their teeth had it been daylight.

I mention this incident because it routine and required no action and went just like all contacts should go. Unfortunately, this was the only routine contact we had on that deployment.

Most of the time that we were operating off the eastern coast of Vietnam, we were less than thirty miles from the coast. One night as we were sailing along the coast, nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

For some reason there were two of us lieutenants on watch that night. If there had been a lieutenant and a lieutenant-junior grade as JOOD we probably would not have gotten into the mess that we did.

Sailing along, on a northerly course, for once the lookouts reported lights. There were a lot of lights out there ahead of us, way out to starboard (to the right). I remember that it was just after 8:00 PM. The movie had just started in the officer's wardroom aft (lounge and eating area). The captain had gone there to watch the evening movie with the rest of the ship's officers.

I stepped to the starboard compass and took a bearing on the mass of dim lights up ahead. I made a mental note of the bearing. I then leaned on the forward windbreak and looked out ahead of the ship while I talked to the other lieutenant. About 10 minutes later I stepped over to the compass again and took another sighting on the fishing boats.

I fully expected the boats to have a change in bearing to the right to indicate that we were pulling away from them. To my utter surprise, the bearing was the same. We were also closer to them. An OOD's worse nightmare is the phrase "constant bearing, decreasing range." Anything that applies to that phrase is going to collide with your ship if nothing changes.

I had heard that Vietnamese fishing boats like to cross the bow of a large ship. It has something to do with passing their bad luck onto the ship they run ahead of. I was fully alarmed. Surely these small fishing boats ..... all of them, couldn't be trying that "crossing the bow" routine on us. There had to be forty fishing boats out there.

If we were going to call the captain, that was the time to do it. If either one of had been senior, we would have called him out of the movie. As it was, we talked each other out of it. Surely we were mistaken. The boats were so small they didn't show up on radar. We didn't know exactly how far away they were.

For a while it looked like we were gaining on them. Our relief was short lived. On checking again, the bearing was drawing to the left. Oh, oh. That meant they would cross our bows. By that time it was too late to call the captain without getting our butts chewed out for waiting so long.

It was a race. We said our prayers and hoped to beat the fishing boats and prevent them from crossing our bows. What we really dreaded was having one or more of them going under our bow and being driven under by our massive size. We were also looking aft towards the after deckhouse. "Please Lord, don't let the captain step outside for a smoke."

I don't know what happened. Perhaps they were concerned about using up too much fuel or they weren't sure about their ability to get to us in time. Either way, they stopped trying to reach us and cross our bow. It was also fortunate that the captain stayed inside during the whole episode.

On another night, I was on the port (left) wing of the bridge and suddenly, I saw a light. I am not supposed to see any lights before the lookout reports it. It was a very weak light, only a few hundred yards to the left of the ship, just forward of us. I could not make out anything in the water with my binoculars except that faint light. As we passed abeam of the light, it disappeared. Now what could that be, I thought. I picked up a sound powered phone and had a talk with the lookouts about being more attentive to their duties. Apparently I was talking to deaf ears.

An hour or so later I saw another light off to the side, a few hundred yards away. This time I ran to the other side of the bridge and checked the area out there with my binoculars. Sure enough there was another faint light. Again as I watched as the light disappeared. Then it dawned on me. The lights were on floats that marked the ends of fishing nets. We were cruising along plowing up fishing nets. Those darned lookouts. There was worse to come.

Another night, in the same area, not another ship on the radar. Only Con Son Island was on the radar to starboard. Not a light showing anywhere. My confidence in the lookouts was questionable. What happened next did not reassure me.

I walked out on the starboard wing of the bridge. The starboard lookout was on the deck above me. I just happened to look down. What I saw startled me. There, just below the bridge, about 15 feet out from the side of the ship was a fishing boat, a small one, too small for our radar to pick up. It was anchored. We had missed it by only a dozen feet. A fisherman in the stern was looking up at me. There was a light on the boat. It was so dim that a lit cigarette would have seemed like a spotlight in comparison. I was shaken, to say the least.

I started to think of all the nights we had been cruising up and down the coast in the past few months. Our lookouts only seemed to see large objects or those well lighted. How could they have missed the lights on the fishing nets? How could they have missed the light on the boat we just passed? Then I started wondering how many fishing boats we might have run over at night. With our size and mass, we wouldn't even notice running over one of these small boats. It would be just a bump in the night.

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