



THE BRIGHT PENNY

March 1996

A NEWSLETTER FOR MEMBERS OF THE USS BERKELEY (DDG-15) ASSOCIATION

SPECIAL ANNIVERSARY EDITION

For most aboard the Long Beach based destroyer USS Berkeley (DDG-15), Monday March 14, 1966 was turning into another ho-hum day on patrol in the Tonkin Gulf. 1600 had come and gone. Paint pots and wire brushes were working their way back to their lockers. The last day's swabdown was in progress as the ship lazed along at minimum steerageway. The only event out of the ordinary to the anticipated was the scheduled helo flight which was to deliver mail sometime before dark. The Tonkin was being her mild, overcast, inscrutable self.

For the remainder of the crew, the third manning battle stations, the task of maximum readiness in the face of maximum boredom was the usual order of the minute for a hundred and twenty men. Guns, missiles, radars, electronic sniffers, sonar, throttles, fire hoses, contingency plans, radio circuits, small arms...all on instant notice were in much the same state as they had been on fifty some - odd previous days. But their hour was coming.

MAYDAY! MAYDAY!

At 1620, some fifty miles to the southwest, events were shaping up which would permanently alter the lives of everyone aboard Berkeley. Streaking in the NVN skies just south of Thanh Hoa, an Air Force F4C Phantom II fighter-bomber was hit by enemy fire. "Mayday! Mayday!" the pilot called over the air distress frequency (guard), broadcasting his emergency to all friendly forces within a hundred miles as he turned his plane toward the Tonkin Gulf. If he could make it well into the Gulf, he'd be safe.

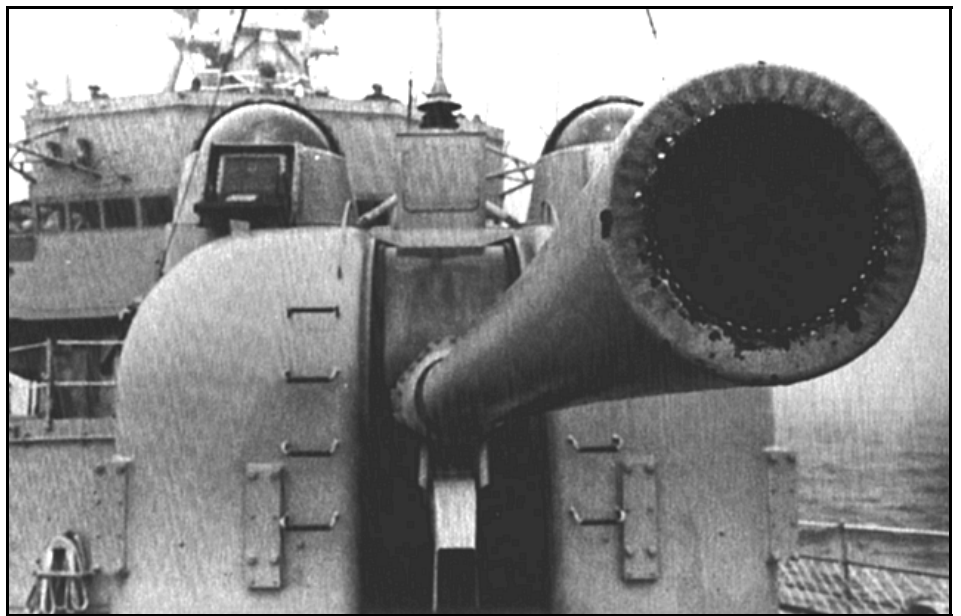
"Mayday! Mayday!" screamed the speaker from a corner of USS Berkeley's Combat Information Center - the ship's intelligence and electronic nerve center to which all external information is for processing and evaluation. Immediately alerted, the Evaluator on watch - Lieutenant William A. Rucker III, ship's Operations Officer - had the position plotted and evaluated as Berkeley's responsibility... "SAR (Search and Rescue) INCIDENT IN PROGRESS!" spat the intercom from Evaluator to the Officer of the Deck on the bridge. The Captain, Commander W.R. Smedberg IV, was immediately notified.

As the ship swung to course 240 and opened throttles, the crew of the Phantom II ejected as their plane neared the shoreline of the Gulf headed east, the chutes blossoming in full view of the heavy NVN fortifications on the mainland and on the island of Hon Me some seven miles further east.

CHUTES LOOKED GOOD

"Good chutes!," called the damaged aircraft's wingman in a twin Phantom II as he circled, notifying Berkeley of the exact position of the downed flyers - off the NVN coast, between the coast and Hon Me Island. Also listening to the alert on guard was the duty Air Force Albatross and her two Navy A1 Skyraider escorts from the USS Kitty Hawk. To the west they raced, ships and planes, knowing full well that if friendly forces didn't get there quickly...the enemy would. Many a day before, the Air Force Albatross had gone in under heavy fire to jerk flyers from the very jaws of the NVN.

MAYDAY! MAYDAY! AND THE DESTROYER BERKELEY SLUGS IT OUT WITH North Vietnam



Coordinating the SAR effort, Captain John B. Kaye, USN, Commander Destroyer Squadron Thirteen aboard Berkeley had been notified of the impending incident seconds after the first transmission on guard. The two SH-3 helicopters from USS Yorktown on the way up into the Gulf to deliver mail to the SAR ships were immediately diverted to the scene. The Captain of the Berkeley spoke to the crew on the ship's intercom, explaining the situation and describing the possible action ahead. The Yankee Team Commander, Rear Admiral Mickey Weisner, was alerted in case additional aircraft would be needed, as was the USAF. USS England (DLG-22) and her sidekick USS Stickell (DD-888) both much further to the south, swung to the northeast and increased speed. Meanwhile, Berkeley, with Arnold J. Isbell (DD-869) in company, was on course west by southwest at twenty-seven knots, building up to maximum speed.

THIRTEEN MINUTES LATER

Thirteen minutes after the first "mayday" the A1 Skyraiders - venerable WWII-type prop planes that still show the jets a thing or two - were on scene with their rockets and guns, suppressing the heavy fire from the North Vietnam coast and from Hon Me Island, and driving off numerous sampans and junks in the immediate vicinity as they attempted to close in on the two downed airmen. One particularly obnoxious junk within a mile opened up on the men in the water and was sunk forthwith by an immediate rocket attack from an A1 as the HU-16 landed and taxied up alongside the downed aviators now under a hail of heavy mortar and automatic weapons fire from the shore. Just thirty seconds later, Skyraider number 510 reported, "The amphibian's hit! She's on fire!" The time was 1647 local (H).

As the A1's wheeled and dived, driving off the boats attempting to capture the men in the water - increased to eight now that the rescue amphibian was sinking - thirty-seven miles to the northeast Berkeley sounded General Quarters, called for additional aircraft support and continued coordination of the SAR effort as the task unit raced toward the scene. To the immediate south, USS Yorktown's SH-3 helos numbers 60 and 52 were nine minutes away, being vectored in by Berkeley's radars, controlled from the Combat Information Center. Also in the air and proceeding to the scene was the smaller UH-2 helicopter from the USS England.

HELO 60 IS HIT

At 1656, as the Skyraiders engaged the enemy fire, helo 60 - braving withering fire from three directions - hovered over the swimmers. As she loaded to capacity with three of the survivors, helo 60 was hit but managed to remain airborne. Limping clear, she was vectored to the Kitty Hawk by Berkeley. Helo 52 moved in, drew a fuselage of fire and was told to retire until some of it could be neutralized. Two Navy F4B Phantom II's from Kitty Hawk were directed in to make rocket runs on the enemy. The hostile fire increased as the enemy limbered up more and bigger guns against the survivors, sending high water-spurts leaping skyward. Berkeley was now twenty miles from the scene, 5 inch 54 automatic guns fully manned with fire control radars seeking surface targets as search and missile radars kept a weather eye on the skies over NVN for possible enemy air activity. Shore bombardment charts were broken out and the team assembled around the plot in the Combat Information Center - at the ready.

THE BRIGHT PENNY

The voice of the USS BERKELEY Association and the former call sign of our ship. Correspondence may be sent to:

USS BERKELEY ASSOCIATION

P.O. Box 700715

San Jose, California 95170-0715

408-973-0566

E Mail: DDGBerk@aol.com

Editor: Jim Barrett

Dues: \$10.00

A "97" on your mailing label denotes your dues have been received.

With two A1's and two F4's suppressing fire, helo 52 streaked in to the survivor position and was able to load two more aboard before she also took a hit from the enemy fire. It was now 1720. She dashed clear with one of her fuel tanks streaming, departing the scene leaving three men to be accounted for, one of which had been seen floating dead in the water. Clouds began to move into the area, limiting the use of the aircraft under Berkeley's control which now numbered seventeen. Three Air Force F-105's loaded with heavy bombs, diverted from their primary mission temporarily, found the cloud cover too low for their ordinance.

ONE SURVIVOR TO GO

As Berkeley continued to close the scene, the UH-2 helo from England arrived, spotted one live survivor just off the coast. The intense enemy fire forced him to remain clear. Two A4C Skyhawks from Kitty Hawk were diverted into the area by Berkeley air controller, Chief Petty Officer W.A. Bulluck, to engage the multiplying enemy batteries and boats. The little helo decided to use this opportunity to snatch up the single survivor in sight, in the face of a Berkeley admonition to remain clear if fire was to heavy since Berkeley's guns would be in range any minute. Skyraider 510, still on station directing attack aircraft arriving on scene to the most lucrative targets, wheeled in and "squirted" a couple of belligerent junks at the helo's request. The helo dashed in, snapped up the man and dashed out, taking no hits.

With two men unaccounted for, Captain Kaye, as the SAR Commander, directed the aircraft in to search for them. Closing the scene at 1815, three miles north of Hon Me Island and about an equal distance to the east of the mainland, Berkeley began to receive heavy fire from the shore...swinging her guns to the west...at 1815 she opened counterbattery fire against the guns. With forward and after mounts in automatic fire directed optically by Lieutenant Norman I. Wight, ship's Gunnery Officer, the ship...still controlling aircraft five miles to the southeast in search of survivors and still keeping missiles pointed at the NVN air threat that might materialize at any moment...was approached by leaping geysers. She increased speed to thirty-two knots, maneuvering to keep her guns on the enemy batteries.

Designed as a weapon of sea superiority, this 4500 ton, 437-foot anti-most-anything-you-want-to-throw-it speed demon of steel and aluminum and electronics...and special men, lived up to her designers' expectations, silencing the shore batteries in a twenty-two minute duel. Having received one near miss alongside the starboard bow that put nicks in the plating and shrapnel on deck, Berkeley concluded the action and retired to sea - successfully completing her baptism of fire.

Multiple fighter sweeps of the area having been completed, accounting for all living survivors, the incident was closed. It was

1840. Of eight persons down, crews of the Air Force F4C and HU-16 amphibian, six were recovered alive...two others had been killed when the amphibian took a direct hit, the rescuers trading their lives for those of their buddies. Valiant indeed had been the crew of the HU-16. Alacrity and raw courage were the essence of Skyraider 510 and his wingman 512. Fearlessness and disregard for their own personal safety were obvious in the actions of the three helos. For the destroyers, theirs was success...a victory. The NVN, in the action, took a beating by aircraft and ships. Many shore targets were destroyed or damaged and at least nine junks and sampans were counted crippled or sunk.

Aboard Berkeley, on duty with the Seventh Fleet since December '65, the thrill of having licked some enemy batteries was boundless. Everyone was a bit numbed by the whip-crack sequence of events. Exposed as much as anyone to the gun duel and in a position to do something about it was Lieutenant Norman I. Wight, USNR...Gunnery Officer of Berkeley. His words follow.

LT. WIGHT'S STORY

"I was the main battery control officer in the gun director. Having listened for over an hour to the radio as the fliers fought against the stifling small arms, mortar and artillery fire coming from the shore and boats...this to buy eight men time enough for the rescue helicopters and destroyers to get there, was almost too much to bear. When we finally got there, two men remained to be accounted for. We moved in as close as possible to direct the search."

"The first cracks of supersonic artillery shells passing overhead were followed directly by waterspouts some fifty yards on the far side of the ship. We're under fire, flashed into my mind. The war is on and Berkeley is threatened by accurate fire from the beach!"

"I screamed into the phones, we're being fired at!" An instant later a flash on the shore gave me my target and the Weapons Officer, Lieutenant Chuck McKenna, gave me 'Commence Firing!' I was glad to accommodate. After two quick salvos, we checked fire to observe the fall of shot...short and to the left. My first adjustment placed our next salvo very near the target. The 'spot' after that was right on.

SHORE GUNS ZERO IN

"Meanwhile, waterspouts were hitting in the vicinity of the ship. One round came so close to our bow that no one knew whether it had hit the ship or in the water. Black smoke and spray covered the forward part of the ship. Most of their rounds were over fifty yards away. It seemed impossible that the first two rounds could hit so close on the outboard side without going through the ship. Later it occurred to me that the NVN gunner's initial shell splashes were so close on the other side that they couldn't see them and therefore were unable to bring them on target."

"The 'spot' onto the target had silenced them and for several minutes, we poured five inch ammunition into them with mount 51 set to burst into fragments 70 feet over the target and mount 52 set to burst on impact. Nothing could have lived through that. When I was sure I had hit the battery, I began introducing small spots into the computer to cover the immediate area around the battery, and then when there were no more apparent targets, checked fire."

"Our maneuvering momentarily had 'masked' our guns. When we had come back left far enough to unmask mount 52, I began an 'area fire' on the ground surrounding the gun emplacement for about a mile in each direction, as it seemed like there had been

other gun flashes in this area at the outset, although no one was firing at us now."

SHIP ESCAPES DAMAGE

"About ten minutes and over three tons of ammunition later, we were out of range and ceased fire. A quick check of the ship for damages showed no personnel casualties, only a few shrapnel scrapes in the bow and few life-line stanchions missing - blown off by the concussion from our own guns.

"An anti-climax came when a battery on Hon Me Island opened fire. We were obviously out of his range as all his rounds were falling several hundred yards short. He wasn't out of our range, but we couldn't see where he was firing from and Hon Me is a pretty small island. About six token rounds at a few suspicious looking spots evidently discouraged him and he stopped firing.

"The Battle of Hon Me Island was over. Our reward came a few minutes later when a Yorktown S2 aircraft who had observed commented, 'your shots appeared to have good effect'."

"Later, when we all talked about being afraid or not, I felt that I was lucky enough to be too busy for fear, or maybe it was the reassuring 'plot set' from Chief Keller in the computer room, or the smooth, instantaneous response of the entire weapons team, or the deafening roar of our own guns in reply, or the apparent calm of the Weapons Officer standing unprotected below."

"There must have been many instances of courage like the one of the helmsman, white with fear, who never varied from his given course though others had dived for cover when the shell hit near the bow...like the ship's young barber, Seaman Harold Van Patten, open bridge phone talker for the Weapons Officer, who in the thick of it asked the Weapons Officer if he could take the neck strap off his phones so that he wouldn't be strangled if he should be blown over the side. There are no doubt many instances of valor, as in every battle, which will never be told."

This article is a reprint of the original press release and photo as published by the Long Beach Dispatch on May 6, 1966.

There probably are more articles about the Vietnam War that have been published by the media. If any of the members should have copies of such newsworthy items that reflect the history of Berkeley during that era, please send them in for review and possible publication in future editions. As always, pictures add support to stories.

MEMBER NEWS

Captain Ron Peterman (C.O. 1989-91) recently took command of Destroyer Squadron Eighteen in Norfolk, VA.

Frank Bennett (1963-66) was honored in February as the 1995 Man of the Year at an Outstanding Citizens Award Banquet in Mesa, Arizona. Frank has been a Realtor in Mesa for the past 25 years.

TAPS

YN1 JACK KALLIA

YN1 Jack Kallia passed away in April 1995. He served aboard from 1973-75. His wife, Charlotte, would like to hear from his friends. 509-588-6729.