



U.S. Navy LST U.S.S. Windham County (LST-1170), similar to the one in this story, off the coast of South Vietnam, 1966. U.S. Navy photo.

Confusion at sea

By Larry Rogers

We first suspected there was a problem when a U.S. Navy radar plane swooped down to within 40 feet of the LST (Landing Ship, Tank) that was transporting our unit, B Battery, 1st Battalion, 83rd Artillery, from Saigon to Dong Ha, a port city just south of the DMZ.

"Strange," my pal Jenks Norwalk said, as the plane flew away, turned, and headed back toward us again. The aircraft repeated this maneuver, and then repeated it again. "What's going on?" I wondered.

It was 1968, and it had been a peaceful voyage down the Saigon River to where it flowed into the South China Sea, and then up the coast of South Vietnam – a five-day respite from fire missions. Our LST had a crew of South Korean nationals, but I wouldn't have given this a second thought if not for the fact that the USS Pueblo had been captured by the North Koreans just a few days earlier. "Can we trust these guys?" Norwalk jokingly asked me.

A few weeks before, with the Tet Offensive looming, our unit had moved from Ham Tan to Bien Hoa – this was the longest distance a heavy-artillery battery had moved during the war so far. It was about 80 miles, and had been done in one day.

Then several days after Tet, on February 10, we had moved from Bien Hoa to Newport, a part of the Saigon-area port complex, and loaded onto the LST to head for Dong Ha.

From the morning our LST departed Newport, we enjoyed sea breezes, card games, and writing letters home. I remember flush toilets and hot showers. I slept on deck one night. It was a welcome change from the way we had been living.

Now it was ending. We had sailed a long way north, and had now turned toward shore – toward Dong Ha – we presumed. But suddenly, the LST turned around, the hills behind us growing smaller and smaller as we sailed farther away from the shore we had been sailing toward just a few minutes earlier. The radar plane, which had been buzzing us, flew away, and two U.S. Navy destroyers joined us and began escorting us south.

Later, we found out what had happened: The radar on our LST had become inoperable. Our crew of South Koreans had become disoriented, and without realizing it, had crossed the DMZ.

When the radar plane had spotted us we were already 17 miles north of the DMZ, within 10 miles of the coast, and headed toward shore. We were in danger, and didn't realize it.

Every man in our battery, along with the four 8-inch howitzers, the LST, and its crew, could have been captured by the North Vietnamese.

"And this happening only a few days after the Pueblo had been captured by the North Koreans!" Norwalk said. "How suspect would our Korean crew have been?"

Had that radar plane not spotted us on the 16th of February, 1968, the international repercussions (not to even mention personal repercussions) would have been enormous. ★

POW/MIA: Getting it

By John Bates

April 29th, 1967, a very important date, was the day the U.S.S. Niagara Falls AFS 3 was commissioned at Long Beach Naval Shipyard. Now move forward to April 29, 2017, fifty years since that very exciting occasion. As a young sailor I was there in 1967, and fifty years later I was at Hyde Park in Niagara Falls, New York, to honor the day. The ceremony took place there at the Veterans Memorial, where MC Ken Hamilton took the spotlight, and moved the program along.

After the event, and back at the hotel where the Plank Owners (first ship crew) stayed, Ken showed up – I think it was the free coffee – but while we were talking, I told him about VietNow. Ken, being a retired Navy enlisted, understood the needs of military members. Ken looked over our magazine, and started to ask questions. He writes for the Niagara Gazette, and his questioning was like that of a reporter focused on the POW/MIA issue. He asked me what I believed about POW/MIAs, and did I think there were any still alive. My answer was complicated, but that if some were still alive, they may have new families by now, and most likely speak the language in the area they are being held.

I told Ken stories of the POW/MIA families, and their fight for information on what happened to their loved ones. Ken, being the journalist he is, asked about the POW/MIA flag – then like a flash of light his eyes suddenly opened wide and he said, "I get it now." He understood that the flag and all the rest is closure for the family, it's about them.

Do we still believe that any of these men are still alive fifty years later? We don't know, but I would say yes – I think there's a good chance some are still alive.

Ken just may have stumbled upon what the POW/MIA movement is now about. The flag, being a large part of it, reminds us of the continued efforts to expose the truth, and not giving up in their efforts to have our government release the truth and to stop covering up information. The flag also reminds us of the bond between the POW/MIA families and ourselves – that they are not alone – with the flag as our common bond. Yes, Ken saw it. I just wish *everyone* could see it as Ken has, for the families. ★

Correction

In his article, "Shadows of the M-16," which appeared in the Spring 2017 issue of this magazine, writer Marc Yablonka included a brief story about a Green Beret who joined the Israeli Defense League (IDF) after his time in Vietnam. After publication of the article, Marc wrote in to tell us that he had inadvertently mixed up part of the story. Here is the way the two paragraphs in that article should have read:

Not so coincidentally, author Jim Morris, (Maj. USA, Ret.), noted chronicler of Vietnam special operations ("Fighting Men," "The Devil's Secret Name," and several other books), who, as a correspondent for Soldier of Fortune magazine, covered the IDF and Lebanese Christian Phalangists during the 1981 Israel-Lebanon war, likes to tell the story that Israeli Defense Forces soldier Steve Hartov told him about of one of Maj. Morris's fellow Green Berets, who came to Israel after his service in Vietnam to enlist as a paratrooper in the IDF: "Why do you want to jump for us?" questioned the recruiting commander from behind his desk. "You are not even Jewish."

"I just want to fight for a country that appreciates what I do," the Green Beret replied.