

The Battle of Barf in the South China Sea

by Pete Neild, CTM2

I'm not one who would get seasick often, perhaps once, or maybe twice in my life. The one that I remember most however was the time on the USS Gudgeon. At least I think it was that Gudgeon, anyway I'll use the Gudgeon to tell the story. If readers of this story can correct me please do. The other two "SS" boats I rode being the Tang and the Trout (Yes of "Always in and never out" fame). Some of you will remember the line, - Harder, Darter, Trigger and Trout always in and never out. I was a rider, ships company referred to us as "spooks". However, I was a maintenance guy and was on board for most of the West Pac, as opposed to the other "spooks" that only came on for the runs. Somehow this put me a level above "rider" category, perhaps about the same level as a "dink".

The Gudgeon (SS567) was on one mission of its extended West Pac deployment somewhere in the South China Sea or the Gulf of Tonkin; whichever location does not belie classified information (if I haven't screwed that up already). Typhoon Pamela was southeast of our location and heading for our little square of the ocean. I remember the CO and the NAV discussing the options.

It seems that Pamela while heading directly for us at the moment, had conflicting weather reports as to where it was going to turn. The Chinese forecast had Pamela turning and headed due north. Whereas the U.S. in Saigon was forecasting a due west movement and was encouraging the forces in and off the coast of Vietnam to take appropriate precautions. That was our puzzle. We were directly between the two forecasts. I remember the discussions going on for a long time. They were weighing the value of the Chinese that had been in that part of the world for thousands of years versus the American with all their technology. It was an interesting discussion and all control room people joined in with their thoughts on the subject. It didn't make any difference though the CO had the final call, he listened to all.

I seem to recall that the 563 Class was good for about 12 hours on the battery. Beyond the twelve hours things got very grim, or so I was told. Fortunately the snorkel provided for Periscope depth (PD) diesel operation in the best of conditions. However, Pamela was not going to be the best of conditions.

I learned a couple of things on this mission the first, the Beaufort Sea State Scale which was a numbering system of wave height from 0 through 9. The second thing that I learned was that storms of this type had a "good" side and a "bad" side. The "good" side was tolerable whereas the "bad" side was to be avoided at all costs.

We were at PD and snorkeling along on the diesels on the "good" side of Pamela. Apparently the decision to ride the diesels as long as possible and delaying the inevitable was a good one. Beaufort Sea State 3 and then 4 were not so bad. The boat was moving through the crests and valleys quite nicely. Occasionally a wave crest would trigger the ball valve and the air sucking Fairbanks Morse twins powering the boat and charging the batteries to their maximum would form an instant vacuum. This vacuum would shortly be cleared causing a pressure wave that tormented everyone's eardrums. As the sea state continued to climb to and past 5 on it's way to 6 this uncomfortable pattern repeated itself to the point of very painful. The captain had decided to charge to sea state six, make an appraisal of Pamela's direction and then go deep and run out from underneath the storm.

The CO finally took the scope and made an appraisal of the storm. It appeared that the U.S. was going to be correct. We plotted the storm's position from the broadcast and examined our position and re-evaluated the wind direction and sea swells. It was confirmed the storm was headed west. During the copying of the broadcast we learned of the damage that some of our skimmer friends were suffering. It wasn't pretty on the Kitty Hawk. Flight deck damage and loose parts being lost to sea, we felt sorry for the black shoe Navy as we went deep and set a course of 045. Their 045 would put them into the Island of Hainan, so their only choice was the cross the path of the storm. We noted that they were all respectively sending off their positions and at the last moment before going deep we reported our position should a last known position need to be used at some point. An idea no one on board wanted to contemplate. Our message was in the same format as the others: "17:xx:xx 110:xx:xx B Sea State 6" however we augmented our message with "going deep - time goes fast when you're having fun." And the "m" in fun was intentional.

As we passed 120 feet things got very smooth. No more instantaneous pressure changes. Life was grand. Deep, with no pressure changes seemed like as good a time as any. Who knew what the sea state would be when we came back up. Forward torpedo room, starboard side top, aft hung rack. As you came through the forward torpedo room hatch on the left were the commode and the outside tip up sink. There was another stall there and I can't remember what was there. My thoughts now are that it was a shower, but I can't remember ever taking a shower on a diesel boat, did they even exist? It may have been another commode, I can't really say because it seemed to be always full of boxes of food. So in reality it doesn't matter what it was shower - commode, I knew it as a pantry my entire time on the Gudgeon.

I awoke when I heard someone saying that we were going to PD. I stayed in my rack and listened to the scuttlebutt reports coming from Sonar and the control room through the wardroom passageway. Careful sweep done, lots of sea noise, no contacts. Going up. There was no motion of the boat. It transitioned to PD easily with no apparent motion other than a slight up angle. I couldn't handle the suspense. I jumped from my rack and went to control. The CO was at the scope.

Sea State 1 maybe 2. He was looking forward. He said, "Damn it!" and nothing else. He cranked for an up angle on the optics. "God Damn it! The Chinese were right." He stepped back from the scope and motioned for the XO to take a look. He looked at the helm and the others that had gathered around, taking in all the inquisitive faces. "Gentlemen, we are in the eye!"

We turned and headed south-southeast. The hope was that the storm's movement and our own speed would shorten the length of the torture. I stayed in control when we hit the "bad" side. The boat heeled over and started going up and down the swells. I remember three things from my time in the control room. I can remember the OD trying to see out the scope but not able to rest his eye on the eyepiece because the scope was shaking so bad it would have bruised his eye. I remember watching the depth gauge going from zero. Yes ZERO, to 120 feet in seconds. I remember the massive pressure changes as the ball valve shut each time we slid down into the valley between two crests only to be swamped by the next crest passing above us.

I then went up to sonar to pass some more time. The sonar watch standers were doing their best but it was pretty hopeless to hear anything in all the sea noise. One thing we all heard were the clam shells topside being ripped off their hinges and breaking free. They would bang once or twice along the hull on their way to the bottom. We all prayed none of them would hit the screws. We were also concerned about all the mooring lines topside. What was happening to them? With the clam shells being ripped off what hope would there be for the lines staying in place. Were they breaking free also and running the risk of getting wound up in the screws? We all prayed.

Now for the part about me getting sick.

After my visit to sonar I went back to my rack. I knew I wasn't going to be able to sleep but at least I would be out of the way. The forward torpedo room was experiencing the worst of the excursions as the boat slipped from the tops of the crests to the bottom of the valleys. I could feel negative G forces at the top and then the increased strain on the bunk chains as the boat bottomed out. I tied myself to my rack. I figured if the chains broke at least I would ride the stainless rather than bouncing my body off the torpedo skids.

A short time later I rolled over to see one of my shipmates brushing his teeth at the tip up sink. He had just started and was brushing vigorously in between trying to maintain his position at the sink. Someone came rolling through the forward torpedo room hatch and as he recovered from clearing the hatch he stumbled into the head. He made it just in time to lose his lunch into the commode. This turned into a lengthy bout and the door eventually slammed shut behind him muffling some of the sounds. This had given my tooth brusher some pause and he was taking note of his surroundings with the brush motionless in his mouth. He noticed me watching him. He shrugged and continued brushing his teeth as the sounds from the head ebbed away. Just then a second rather green shipmate burst through the hatch. He tried the head's door, which was now jammed by the current occupant. He looked around with his cheek's bulging and everyone knew his quandary. He pushed my tooth brusher out of the way and lost his lunch into the sink - repeatedly. The toothbrush was motionless again. He glared at his shipmate hovelled over the sink and it's contents (remember this sink didn't have a drain, you had to lift it up and fold it away to drain the sink.) The brusher looked at me and slowly removed the toothbrush from his mouth. He then slowly turned away from me and back towards the sink that was now covered by the second shipmate's head and arms. He shrugged and lost his lunch over the back of the shipmate's head, arms, and back if I recall correctly. My vision of this was not clear as I was now fighting with the lines that tied me to my rack. I was scrambling because a stomach in turmoil also now motivated me. I managed to fall to the deck and recover in time to add my own liquid decorations to the pitiful shipmate in the sink. I recovered rather quickly to the applause and cheers of the other torpedo room occupants. The tooth brusher and I acknowledged the Kudos for our artwork smiling. All recognized another long lasting shipboard memory had just been created. It joined other stories following our stint with Pamela and became known as "The Battle of Barf in the South China Sea".

Footnote: We pulled out of Pamela and made it to Okinawa for repairs. We had lost all the fairing on the starboard side of the sail, seven clamshells as well as sustaining a number of other structural defects in the free flood area. The pressure hull and all fittings came through unscathed. There were a few minor injuries including one knife wound from a kitchen knife that had been launched from the galley sink table and across the mess deck and two or three broken bones.

Pete Neild

Rider: Tang, Gudgeon, Trout, Puffer, Pogy, Pintado, Bluefish, Bergall, L. Mendel Rivers

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