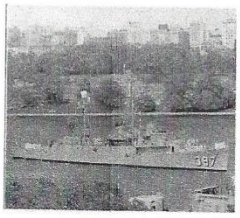
USS WILHOITE

DE-DER 397



JAN FEB MARCH APRIL - 2025

Hi Guys and Gals: Here's hoping all had a great and safe HOLIDAY! I want to wish to all a great and safe Happy New Year in 2025!

I had sent a survey out to all in the newsletter along with a stamped enevelope and only got back about 10. We really wish we could get back from all of you. It would help making sure I have the right addresses and email's also plus telephone which is important. The only reason I need email's and phone numbers is in case we need to send information or talk to you. I will not bother you at all unless it is important to contact you. Please fill out blanks. It also has to do if you want newsletter and reunion information. We are not getting very many Association members. If you are not interested at all in belonging to Association then let me know. I will not be sending you information and using very expensive stamps. Those that have sent in you don't have to send another!!

Steve and Dorann are working hard trying to line up hotels, activities dor our reunion in Texas and we appreciate them doing this. A decision will be made then whether to give up on reunions and or newsletters.

If all are really interested in receiving newsletters but not reunions,. I need to know this. Also we are in need of someone to take over newsletters as I found out I have Glacoma now in right eyer. I'm blind in left already so I'm not sure how long I have before I can hardly see at all. So please if all wants to keep newsletter then someone is going to have take over.

What do you want to see in newsletter? I have a suggestion to see if you would be interested. How about each one write something about their family, their time in the Navy and what jobs you have done. Please send to me your or your wive's favorite recipes. I will take the recipes and make a book for all that sends in the recipes. I love new recipes especially sweet ones. Then we can have a memory book which I will add along with recipes the family information.

Hoping to hear from each of you soon!

"Smooth Sailing" Liz

As you can see not many have paid their dues , some since 2023 and others 2024.

Alcorn Michael (2025)
Berry David (2024)
Bunker Rita (2022)
Caldwell Brenda (2024)
Caldwell John (2024)
Compton Ed (2025)
Cusato Paul (2023)
Dougher Thomas (2022)
Dutchuk John (2024)
Dyson Al (2022)
Frederiksen Geri (2025)
Gennetti Fred (2024)
Gergens Steve (2025)
Hagee Charles (2023)
Hawes Eugene (2022)
Heller Richard (2022)
Horch Linda (2025)
Huff Roland (2024)
Huml Vincent (2023)
Hydro John (2025)
Johnson Mary (2025)
Knight James (2025)
Layton Geoffrey (2022)
Long Leroy (2025)
Marcotte Donald (2024)
Markley Ray (2025)
Mauldin Connie (2022)
McMurdo James (2025)
Morlock Fred (2022)
Morrissey Tom (2025)
Mullin James (2024)
Murphy Obie (2024)
Owens William (2024)
Parker David (2025)
Payson David (2025)
Payton Johnny (2023)
Pohl Art (2025)
Rider Elisabeth (2025)
Robinson Lee (2024)
Ruel Donald A. (2023)
Shanahan, Jr John (2025)
Silhan Peter (2024)
Smith Raymond (2023)
Thompson Ross (2026)
Throm Larry (2024)
Torriglia Paul (2027)
Valiant Martha (2025)
West Helen (2024)
Wickizer Larry (2026)
Yonkofski Ben (2024)

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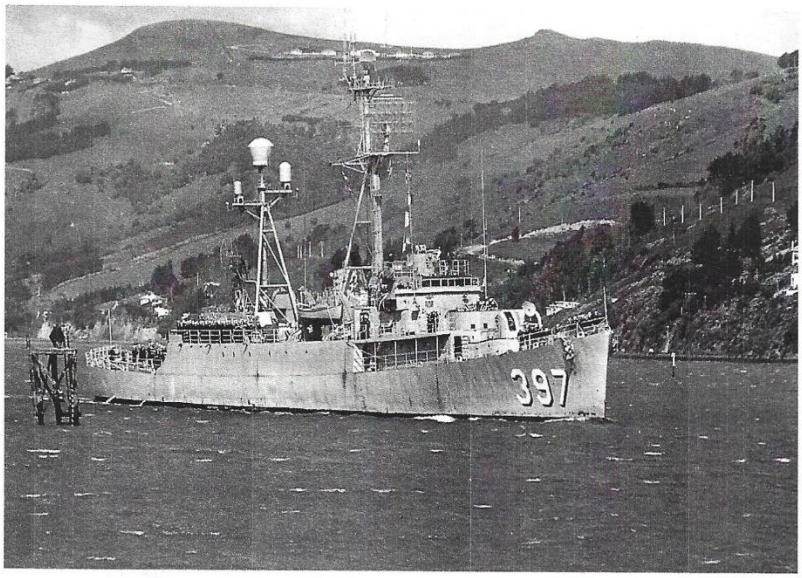
NAVY NEWS



AND

STORIES

The Trawler Incident

by Dave Payson 1964-68

In the summer of 1967, on a moonlit expanse of the South China Sea, we found ourselves shadowing an enemy trawler far out to sea. We suspected it to be carrying a huge cache of weapons for the North Vietnamese Army—the NVA—who, along with the Viet Cong—the VC—we fought in the jungles and rice paddies of South Vietnam and in the coastal waters and river estuaries as well—in ships like the USS Wilhoite, DER-397, a radar picket ship out of Pearl. On rare occasions we took the war out to deep water, and this is the story of one such time. At the time this incident took place, I was Radarman Second Class Payson. And now, 40 years later, I'm putting it all down on paper here as best as I can remember it.

"Smaller than a destroyer but twice as scrappy as any 'tin can' in the fleet," was how we felt about the "Willie" in those days. So far as warships go, she may not have been the imposing hunk of iron and steel my previous ship—the mighty aircraft carrier USS Midway—was (and still is, serving now as a museum ship on the San Diego waterfront). But pound for pound the "Willie" could hold her own with any ship in the fleet, and her crew was proud of her. Her motto—"Will Do"—was ours, too, and we worked hard to live up to it, especially in the trawler engagement I describe here. Oh, we Did, all right, sticking on that trawler's tail like Teflon on a frying pan for days on end, staying out of its visual range the entire time. We followed it from the coast of South Vietnam, our normal operating station, far out to sea, to a group of island reefs called the Paracel Islands. There it hid out for several hours before making its run back to the coast to deliver its weapons to an awaiting enemy onshore. During the whole time, we bird-dogged it, never allowing it to stray from our radar web—until the very end, that is, when all Hell broke loose and the trawler made its run for the beach.

So, where do I begin in the telling of this story? Perhaps it would be best to start with the two officers in charge of the operation—Commander C. R. Stephan and Commander E.W. Hays—and with their plan. With the help of their superiors onshore, they laid out the plan to stop the 75-foot-long, steel-hulled trawler before it could deliver its cargo of weapons and other contraband to the enemy. The original plan, put simply, was to ambush the trawler in deep water before it got close in to the coast, where it could easier evade us in the shallow water. Along with the Wilhoite, our team consisted of the coast guard cutter Point Orient, the navy gun boat Gallup, the navy mine sweeper Pledge, and the navy swift boat PCF-79—able ships all. The plan would have worked like a charm if only the trawler had cooperated with us. But, alas, this was war, and cooperating with the U.S. Navy wasn't high on its agenda.

Based on previous encounters with big steel-hulled trawlers in these waters, you didn't have to be in the top one percent of your graduating class at Annapolis to know these big trawlers didn't surrender. Twice in recent years, trawlers similar to the one I describe here had self-destructed, taking their cargoes and crews to the bottom of the sea rather than surrender to pursuing naval vessels. On one of those occasions, one of our warships had sustained moderate damage but suffered no casualties to her crew. So as we shadowed this trawler, we knew there was a very high likelihood that we had a "tiger by the tail," so to speak, and it wasn't hard for us to imagination what it would be like to be caught in the blast caused by 500 pounds of TNT, should the trawler's crew decide to "push the button" as we closed in for the kill.

Yet, I fear I'm getting ahead of myself in the telling of this story. So allow me to back up some. When we first detected the trawler, it was on the night of 11 July 1967, around 2000, I believe, and I was manning the surface-search radarscope in CIC—CIC standing for Combat Information Center and being just a fancy name for radar room. The radar watch had been routine enough that night, as I recall, until one of our patrol aircraft radioed in a suspicious contact. (I can still hear that pilot's voice crackling over the speaker.) Once I located the contact on my radar screen with the pilot's help, we designated it "Skunk Alpha" and commenced to track it by radar. My buddy John Wayne Bohon, who hailed from Sedalia, Missouri, ran the plot on the trawler from the ranges and bearings I gave him from readings off the scope. Stationed next to me at the Dead Reckoning Tracer (DRT) table, Bohon plotted the track on Skunk Alpha on DRT paper that he had carefully tacked down in his very fastidious way, and after we had established a course and speed on it, we relayed the information up to the bridge. When first over-flown by the patrol plane, the trawler appeared to be heading directly for the coastline, but had turned reversed course for open waters after the patrol plane illuminated it. This maneuver waved more red flags to us than a May Day parade in Red Square. By executing this evasive maneuver, Skunk Alpha had tipped its hand. There was a very high likelihood, we deduced, that this was one of the large, weapons-smuggling trawlers sent down by the North to restock its fighting forces in the South.

From that point on, there was nothing routine about this patrol, and as the trawler headed away from Vietnam, it deviated very little in its course and speed, acting every bit like a vessel with a specific destination in mind (the operative word being "acting"). For the next four days and nights, we stayed on its tail like a fresh coat of red lead on a newly scraped bulkhead, 10 to 12 nautical miles astern of it, comfortably out of sight over the horizon. With a quarter moon waxing resplendently in a starlit sky that illuminated the sea like a silver sheet of mercury, we took every precaution to conceal ourselves, for if the trawler suspected we were following it, it could simply sail off into the night and we couldn't touch it. Our policy was to observe a twelve-mile

terrItorial-waters limit in Vietnam and undoubtedly, the trawler's crew knew this. In CIC, we went to port and starboard watches—modified battle stations. And though we practically lived in the radar room over the next several days, we didn't mind, for it was a welcome diversion from our normal routine of patrolling the coastal waters for thirty days at a time, searching junks and sampans with our motor whaleboat, looking for smuggled weapons and whatever other contraband we could find. Besides, we were "psyched up" and running on adrenaline tracking the trawler. This was our first contact with a "significant" enemy ship, and it was an exhilarating, yet scary, feeling knowing that we could soon be doing battle with it

Our radar capabilities made us the heart of this mission, which was a good thing. But this had its downside, which was that Commander Hays, who usually ran the ship from the bridge, was constantly underfoot in the radar room, hanging over the surface-search radarscope and analyzing every move the trawler made. And then, by the second night of the operation, Commander Stephan came on board. He was the head of Market Time's Northern Surveillance Group and the officer in charge of the efforts to locate and stop any North Vietnamese attempts to infiltrate arms and personnel into the I Corps region from the sea,. So we had two commanders to contend with. The trawler, at this point, existed for us only as a blip on a radar screen. But by the end of this operation, when the trawler made its final break for the beach, its fate sealed, it would become only too real to us. But, alas, dear readers, once again I'm getting ahead of myself in the telling of this tale.

By the middle of the third day of our surveillance (13 July, that would've been), the trawler's captain's strategy was becoming clearer to us. Still outbound, the trawler was heading straight for the Paracel Islands, a remote cluster of small islands and reefs that were jointly claimed by Vietnam, China and Japan, though none of those countries had a presence there at the time of this story, in 1967. Oh, that trawler's captain was a smart one, all right, we realized, as he took the trawler in amongst the rocks and hid out in the archipelago of small reefs and shoals for several hours, concealed from our radar, and for a long period of time (what seemed like days), we began to doubt ourselves, dreading that somehow the trawler had escaped our clutches, slipping through our radar net. But how could it be? It was impossible! It had to be that the trawler's skipper was taking every precaution. Put yourself into his head. If there were U.S. warships out there shadowing him, then he was going to wait them out, possibly trick them into showing their hand, in which case he'd turn into just another deep-water fishing vessel on the open seas, and we couldn't touch him, due to our self-imposed rule-of-engagement, meaning we had to follow the North Vietnamese-claimed twelve-mile international water restrictions! Hell, out here we were 200 miles from the coastal waters of Vietnam! Oh, yes, he was a smart one, all right! You had to hand to him.

I well remember the long hours we waited and watched in CIC while the trawler played its game of "hide and seek" with an adversary he couldn't be sure was there. Commander Hays was in CIC most of the time while the trawler was in the reefs and rocks, and we were sure that he was going to give himself a heart attack from the stress he put himself under. He was constantly on the radio with Commander Stephan during this time, who had left his command post in Da Nang and was now on the Point Orient, waiting for us to follow our "prey" back in, and when we got close enough, he'd come aboard us, transfer his flag to us, as they called it. The trawler wasn't cooperating with our plan, however. We knew it was in there somewhere hiding amongst the reefs and rocks of the Paracel Islands; we just had to keep our confidence up and stay in our stealth mode, though it was hard, for we had to remain passive and sweat it out. I can still hear Commander Hays talking to Commander Stephan on the radio, giving him a pep talk: "Yes, sir, it's got to come out from hiding sooner or later, and when it does we'll be ready for it." Hunkered over the radarscope, I remember thinking, somewhat naively perhaps, that this trawler was very big game, the prize trophy, the way they are talking over the radio, the whole world must be watching us, and we'd better not mess it up. Nowadays forty years later, I realize, the whole world wasn't watching us, but the U.S. Naval Command was, and that was scary enough, to all of us.

So, hour after hour, we waited and sweated it out. Captain Hays had us at general quarters by then, and there was nothing for us to do but to wait, and for me, to study the radarscope with the radar sweep methodically traveling its 360-degree arc and revealing no sign of Skunk Alpha; nothing moved in that picture, which was of amazingly clear, showing every little detail of the island formation, every little rock and inlet and tide pool; such a complicated and highly detailed picture it was, I remember. It would've rivaled the bests of today's high-definition pictures, I have no doubt. But crystal-clear clarity notwithstanding, nothing moved on my screen, least of all a seventy-foot-long, steel-hulled trawler, which would've showed up as big as a barn on that picture. Four hours into our radar stakeout and half hypnotized from concentrating on the sweep of the radar for so long, I relinquished the radarscope to John Shanahan, one of my good buddies from Philadelphia, PA, and John Wayne Bohon, and I went topside to get some fresh air (by then Commander Hays had "relaxed" GQ somewhat). When we stepped out on deck from the 01 level hatch, we found ourselves under a strong moon and a canopy of stars. What made the scene surreal was there, before us, rising out of the South China Sea and strung out along a line like some Far East version of Stonehenge, were the Paracel Islands. So close did they seemed to me, that I had to fight back a strong wave of panic. Surely, I said to Bohon, they could see us, and the mission would end right here, for they would never come out from this island shelter. John Wayne Bohon, who was probably the best radarman in all of Vietnam during that period, set me straight in a hurry. "Payson," he said, don't be such a boot! Square away.

We're 17 miles from those islands right now. Line of sight in the open sea is about twelve miles, maximum. So there is no waythery can see us, not even with the most powerful binoculars made. We are below their horizon. Bohon always had a way of straightening me out, and I relaxed some. But not much.

We didn't hang around topside much longer. We both wanted to get back down to CIC and get on with the hunt, if a hunt there was going to be. Before we stepped inside the hatch to descend down to CIC, I took one last long look at the island and uttered a silent epitaph to myself, but it was loud enough that Bohon heard me, too. "Come out of there you son-of-a-gun. We're waiting for you, and we're going to get you."

Finally, on the evening of 14 July, about 2200 hours, the trawler did come out. I was back on the surface search radarscope in CIC when it emerged. Due to the high definition of the radar picture, I actually watched it for several sweeps as it extricated itself from the reefs, before it emerged. One minute it had been just another rock, the next it had turned into a moving radar contact; it had turned back into Skunk Alpha. I didn't say anything until the fourth sweep, because I wanted to be sure it was the trawler. We notified the Captain then, and he made it down to CIC in record time from his quarters. His first action was to order the ship to general quarters. The atmosphere in the ship was charged with electricity, and this was especially true in Combat. Everyone wanted that trawler. We'd been tracking it for three days counting the long wait, and now we smelled blood. This strange engagement had gotten personal to us. Once it was free of the island and in open water again, it was echoing as big as a barn on my screen. With the captain hunkered over us, Bohon and I resumed our plot on the trawler. The captain adjusted our course and speed to stay comfortably on station behind the trawler, which was making about 12 knots and headed back in the general direction South Vietnam, which at that point was about 200 miles southwest of our position, but it was too early to know for sure; once we hit the open waters of the South China Sea, it could head off in any direction. I could hear Commander Hays talking excitedly over the radio to Commander Stephan, Market Time commander, setting their strategy. I remember thinking they sounded like a couple of excited boys in a toyshop.

Back we came across the South China Sea, hot on the trawler's tail. I was relieved off the surface scope for a 4-hour shift, but back in my rack, I could barely go to sleep back, so afraid was I that I might miss something. I wonder what they're like, I remember thinking, as I tossed fitfully in my rack. I was half dreaming about the men on the trawler. We fooled them all right. They don't know we're here and following them. They waited and waited at the island to make sure. Probably studied all the signs and weighed their odds very carefully before they decided to head back in to the coast. They don't know we are here. Or maybe they suspect it, and have decided to try it anyway, despite the long odds they face. I had to admit, though, they were worthy adversaries; I had to give them that. They were men like us, for the most part, I thought. But they'll find out the hard way what they're up against when the time comes. Such thoughts bounced through my mind until I finally nodded off to sleep.

By late afternoon, I was back in CIC, riding the surface radarscope. The trawler had slowed speed to about 8 knots, biding its time until the dead of the night and the further waning of the moon's light, we figured, before it made its final run to a still undetermined point on the beach to deliver its cargo of weapons to the enemy. Earlier in the day, the Gallop, executing an "end-around" maneuver, had delivered Commander Stephan to us, and he had subsequently set up shop in our midst as "Officer-in-Tactical Command" (which is a fancy way of saying he was in charge of the trawler operation, though the "Willie" was still under the command of Commander Hays, of course). After several days of tracking the trawler, we had compiled an impressive record of our track, both outbound and back toward the coast, most of it in John Wayne Bohon's neat, concise hand, and someone made the observation that we should save the DRT paper of the track for the Smithsonian Museum, because one day it might be an important piece of history and, who knows, even made into a Hollywood movie. And there were many times during the last two days of the operation that we fought a losing battle to keep straight faces as the two commanders wore a path between CIC and the bridge, often tripping over each other like in a Marx Brothers movie, to get the lead on each other, either back to the radio, or up to the bride, or over to me, where I sat perched on the surface search radarscope. Tired as we were from the stress and the long hours of watches, they kept us entertained with their antics, we did our best to maintain proper protocol and do things by the book with them around so much. This wasn't easy for us because we generally did things by our own book in CIC, not the Navy's. But the commanders were everywhere, and what really set them off was when the radio speaker crackled with the latest intel on the trawler from the Market Time Northern Surveillance Group in Da Nang. When a new message came in, we radar "grunts" ducked our heads and tried to stay out of their way. Any way you slice it, we had more than our share of commanders during the mission.

Finally, on the heels of a glorious tropical sunset that was so typical in this part of the world during the summer, welcome darkness came to the Gulf of Tonkin, almost as if someone had switched off a light. Three-quarters the way across the sky, the moon hung above the horizon like a pearl onion and the stars begin to wink on. If you were the trawler's captain, then you might surmise that this was not the ideal night to try to deliver your cargo; too much light was being cast from the moon and the stars. You'd know there was a good chance that the American navy was out there somewhere, hunting you. But you 'd be betting it all on the fact that they didn't know your exact location, even though you might have a gut feeling they did and would be waiting for you when you came in. Maybe you would sense it. If you were the trawler's captain or a member of its crew, then you'd be fighting back the fear, and you'd know there'd be no turning back now. Your comrades in the South desperately needed the cargo you carried. And if the Americans trapped you with their superior ships, then you could still destroy your vessel and escape with your life. There was always that chance, and this fact helped you draw on your reserve of courage, as did the worn picture of your family in your pocket, which you looked at one more time for the hundredth time.

When the Wilhoite was within 25 miles from the coast, Commander Stephan received a radio communication from his superiors in Da Nang saying that the trawler's destination could well be the mouth of the Sa Ky River, just south of Cape Batangan. Soon the radio crackled to life again and this report was confirmed by a U.S. Special Forces recon team in the area that had sighted an NVA "welcoming committee" in the same area that the R.O.K.s had. In an urgent message, we would learn later, both the U.S. and Korean troops were ordered to "stand-off" and not take any action against the enemy, lest they mess up the trawler intercept operation underway at sea by the navy. By 2200 hours, the trawler had slowed its progress to a crawl, biding its time, we suspected, until maximum darkness was reached before making its final run to the beach. With the aid of a navigation chart John Wayne Bohon had placed beside me on the DRT table, Cape Batangan and the mouth of the Sa Ky River could be easily picked out, and we studied the chart, comparing it to the radar picture. Skunk Alpha's radar image painted on the scope like the Hope Diamond, along with the radar contacts of the other ships that were our partners in this dragnet.

So, with the moon marching across the starlit sky, the waiting game continued between the hunter and the hunted, and each time the radio crackled to life with a message from Da Nang, the two commanders would fly into action, either springing over to the surface scope to gawk at the radar picture and ask Bohon and me inane questions about Skunk Alpha ("Is it doing anything suspicious yet?" "You're not going to lose it, are you?").

Or they would disappear out the door that exited CIC, resurfacing on the bridge a few minutes later, where our buddy RD3 John Shanahan, who hailed from Philadelphia, PA, on lookout duty up there, would relay hilarious accounts down to us about how the two commanders would literally take over the bridge when they showed up, knocking the other officers out of the way as they charged from one wing of the bridge to the other.

By this time, it seemed to me, we had grown overconfident, almost cocky, in CIC. Maybe we figured we had the trawler in the bag, so to speak; once it came within 12 miles from the coast, we could spring our trap at any time, and should it choose to stand and fight or try to escape us, we—our collective armada of midsize to small ships—had the firepower to blow it out of the water. Such was our mindset at that point of the operation.

The two commanders were taking nothing for granted, though. Back from the bridge, they hovered over me in CIC, blocking my view of the screen. "PCF-79," Commander Stephan said. "Excuse me, sir," I said, not understanding what he meant. "The swift boat PCF-79 has joined us in the hunt, son. If that trawler gets past us, PCF-79 will be waiting for it close in. It should be somewhere in this area," he said, jabbing a finger at my scope, pointing roughly in the direction of Cape Batangan. I studied the scope intently. Nothing. Bohon leaned over from the DRT table to help me, but he saw nothing there, either. "Keep a close watch for it, son," the commander said before moving away, Commander Hays close at his heels. Embarrassed (if that's the right word), I muttered a yes-sir. With a smirk on his face, Bohon cast a sideways glance at me. Okay, I had to admit it—I was flattered by the attention from Commander Stephan, but I wasn't about to admit it to Bohon. No way!

By 2230 hours, Skunk Alpha was tracking a course in the general direction of Cape Batangan and the mouth of the Sa Ky River, which we guessed was its final destination. By now Bohon was on about his 200th sheet of DRT paper, each sheet as highly detailed and precise as an architect's drawing. The trawler was biding its time, we figured, waiting for the right conditions to make its move—and undoubtedly taking every precaution to ensure it wasn't being followed. One of the radarman, an impatient Bostonian, put it this way: "Why dan't it stap fiddle-fahting around?" We were still some twenty nautical miles off the coast, still in International waters, and as long as the trawler remained outside the twelve-mile limit, we couldn't touch it. Most likely, our enemy knew this better than we did, having probably made this run dozens of times in the past, smuggling weapons to their comrades in the South. For every trawler we caught, how many got through?

So we waited not so patiently for this trawler to make its move, for there was nothing else we could do without revealing our presence. In CIC and throughout the ship, the crew's anxiety level ran high; our collective nerves were on edge, frazzled. After four days and nights of tracking the trawler, we wanted action. We wanted to terminate that bastard in the worst way.

The two commanders wanted the same thing, of course—but not at all costs. Based on previous encounters with similar trawlers by other navy ships in these waters, we knew the chances of it surrendering would be nil. Twice in the last two years, similar trawlers had blown themselves up along with their crews rather than face capture by pursuing naval forces. Looking back on it now with the benefit of 20/20 hindsight, the plan we developed was more than a little flawed, especially when you consider what happened a short time later as we drew closer to the beach, and the "psy-ops" warfare strategy. Would we take the trawler in deep water? Or would we wait until it got much closer into shore so we could salvage its cargo for propaganda purposes? Out here it would be a "turkey shoot" with our superior firepower. And then there was the whole issue of trapping it like a "cornered animal" and it self-destructing and taking us down with it. So in retrospect the plan devised by our commanders and the military geniuses on shore had more holes in it than a sharpshooter's target at marine boot camp. But despite all this uncertainty, we proceeded as planned.

At midnight, with the moon two-thirds the way across the sky and hidden behind a large bank of clouds that dampened its illuminating power, the trawler made its move. "Sirs, the trawler's increased speed and is heading in," I reported, fighting to keep my voice steady, but I was so excited I nearly peed my pants. The supercharged atmosphere in CIC suddenly became super-electrified, and instantaneously, it seemed, the word spread throughout the ship that the moment of reckoning had come—the trawler was making its run. You didn't have to be on the bridge or in the radar room to know it was happening. The telltale signs from the ship—her sudden increase in speed, her change in course, the increase in the throb of her engines, her vibrations that began to rattle her bulkheads, told you what was happening. The trawler was going in, and we were going after it. "Close to within five miles," Commander Hays barked into the squawk box to the bridge, his voice shaking with excitement. Then, Commander Stephan turned to Commander Hays and said, "Tell them I'm on my way up." On his way out of CIC, he added to Commander Hays: "Don't be long." With that, I noticed the tension lines began to ease over the Captain's face. It'd be surprising if he'd had more than a few hours sleep the past four days. He was probably worried, we surmised, that Commander Stephan was taking over his ship. You can't blame him for feeling that way. Poor guy.

Then he took one last look over my shoulder at the radar screen, said something to the CIC watch officer, and bolted out the door, bound for the bridge to join Commander Stephan.

Now, as I recall it to the best of my memory, once Skunk Alpha commenced its run in, things began to happen in a hurry. With the sounding of the general-quarters klaxon, radarmen began to spill into the radar room, pulling on their clothes as they headed for their battle stations. John Wayne Bohon and I were already there, of course, and we continued recording ranges and bearings on the trawler and passing the information up to the bridge. Our data confirmed what we already suspected: the trawler was headed for Cape Batangan, where the Sa Ky River emptied into the South China Sea. Our buddy John Shanahan, who was always smiling, it seemed, made it down from his lookout station on the bridge in record time, and, as he passed us by on his way to his battle station at the VP board, he flashed a us a "kick-ass" signal, and I noticed a look of grim determination on his face; his signature smile was gone. I still remember that dead-serious, determined look on Shanahan's face because it epitomized how we all felt at that time—exhilarated, excited, yet determined to bag the bastard! After four long days and nights of shadowing the trawler, this operation would soon be coming to an end, one way or another.

Skunk Alpha was now about seven miles from the coast and the river mouth. We were five miles from the trawler, and it was echoing a strong radar return befitting a steel-vessel. The radar showed that the Gallup and Point Orient had closed in on the trawler as well. We were tightening the noose around its neck, so to speak, in accordance with the commanders' plan. Had it spotted us yet? Our task force, which was made up of comparatively small vessels with low profiles, was now well within the trawler's visual range, but a bank of large clouds had dampened the moon's illuminating powers, which earlier on this night had been considerable. So given these conditions, there was a good chance it didn't know we were out here, surrounding it. I ran the cursor out to the closest point of land: 8 miles—well inside the international waters limit Vietnam claimed; we could capture or kill the trawler at any time and be "legal" within the rules of engagement set forth by the U.S. forces for this crazy war. The CIC watch officer and the chief radarman were hanging over my scope, pressing in on me, breathing down my neck. I felt like telling them to back off and give me some breathing room but I didn't, of course. The radio in CIC was alive with chatter now, crackling loudly with excited transmissions between the ships, the onshore Market Time honchos, and a scout helicopter that had been called in to assist us. In the midst of all this, the bridge called down and wanted to know where PCF-79 was; they couldn't find it on their scope up there. Tuning out everything else, I studied the sweep intently and finally found the swift boat close in to the shore, and supplied its position to the bridge. We were five and a half miles from the coast now and closing fast. Everything was moving in fast-motion, it seemed.

It was as if time had been compressed into one tiny increment of the total for the past four days, a hundred-plus hours reduced to10 more minutes.

Four miles from the coast, the question of whether or not the trawler knew was being tracked by U.S. warships was answered—emphatically and dramatically. If I'd I been paying closer attention to the radio transmissions in CIC instead of concentrating so hard on the radar screen, I might not have been caught off-guard when Point Orient suddenly increased speed and closed the trawler to the point their radar contacts merged. Only then did we learn that the Point Orient was to broadcast a "psychological message" in Vietnamese to the trawler's crew, urging them to surrender. (This is what they called a "psy-ops" warfare strategy.) Not surprisingly, it took about five seconds for this tactic to backfire, and thus the element of surprise we had enjoyed over the trawler during the entire operation was lost, our cover blown. Now we did indeed have the dreaded "cornered animal" on our hands, and all hell broke loose. I remember thinking with a heavy dose of bitterness: There goes several days worth of time and 500 nautical miles of radar surveillance down the tubes! Throughout CIC, cursing and blasphemies rang out from my radar-mates, and even from some of the officers. Many among us were "wilting" the air in response to the unfortunate turn of events. I shan't repeat here what was said. But we all felt it, nonetheless.

To this day, it's never been revealed why it was decided to give the trawler a chance to surrender by broadcasting the "psi-ops" message to its crew, thus compromising the mission. But it was built in to the original plan, we learned later. Undoubtedly, politics played a key role in the decision. Too often that was the way it was in that war—fighting with one hand tied behind our back while awaiting for permission from LBJ in Washington to shoot at the enemy, which seems ludicrous, I know—but welcome to the unpopular war of Vietnam. In the case of this operation, though, it was dangerous and foolhardy to tip off the trawler. As I have stated previously in this story, we knew that the big steel trawlers used by the North to smuggle weapons to the South were wired to self-destruct if it looked like they were going to be intercepted by U.S. forces.

Our secrecy compromised, the trawler commenced a desperate run for the beach, and for agonizingly long minutes we thought it was going to blow itself up and take the Point Orient (and possibly us) down with it, too. Miraculously, though, the trawler didn't take this action, possibly because its captain felt that he still had a chance to make it all the way in with his cargo. Maybe—and this is pure speculation on my part— he felt the advantage was his because the night had turned dark and stormy and he knew the lay of the coastline and its navigational pitfalls from previous runs.

So we churned after the trawler, plodding through the rough seas, which wreaked havoc on my radar picture, and the trawler's radar echo was getting harder and harder to find in the sea return. I remember thinking, oh no, we haven't come this far only to lose it! The tension was thick; panic had set in amongst the radarmen. Our cock-sure confidence, so evident an hour ago, was gone. Desperately concentrating on the radar screen, I could pick out Skunk Alpha only about every third sweep, and then it was gone completely. Reluctantly I had to tell the CIC watch officer and the commanders on the bridge that Skunk Alpha was gone.

As we closed to within three miles of the coastline in pursuit of an enemy we could no longer see on radar or with the naked eye, the radio in CIC suddenly crackled to life in a chaotic cacophony of frantic voices from the bridges of the various ships in our little armada, including our own, all of this noise adding to the confusion. One voice overrode all the others: "Impair, Same Drink Sierra, Fire! Fire!" ("Impair" was the Wilhoite's call sign, "Same Drink Sierra" was Point Orient's). Several radarmen gathered around the speaker listening to the drama unfold, trying to understand what was happening. Then, without warning, one of the ships opened fire, which through our bulkhead sounded like the roar of distant thunder to us. Then, our own three-inch guns opened up, fore and aft, and we recoiled like a boxer staggered by a right cross to the jaw. From the radio came more screaming. It was the Point Orient, claiming she was taking fire from the trawler. Finally, a frantic voice from the Point Orient announced it wasn't the trawler firing on them—it was the Gallup—"Same Drink X-ray." This resulted in a desperate plea from Point Orient: "Same Drink X-ray, Same Drink X-ray, cease fire, cease fire! This is Same Drink Sierra."

Next, Commander Stephan's voice boomed over the radio speaker. "All units, this is Impair. All guns cease-fire immediately! I repeat: ALL GUNS CEASE-FIRE IMMEDIATELY!" Within 20 seconds, all guns, including our own, went silent. Well, at least they're paying attention up on the bridge, I remember thinking. At that moment, a radar contact painted on my radar screen for three sweeps before disappearing in the sea return. Bohon saw it, too. "Skunk Alpha," I yelled to the CIC watch officer, my voice hoarse with excitement. "I think I've got the trawler!"

I was wrong. It wasn't Skunk Alpha—it was "Same Drink Delta November"—PCF-79—that had cut across our bow, traveling at least twice our speed. "WE'VE GOT IT, WE'VE GOT IT, WE'RE GOING AFTER IT!" In CIC, we were riveted to the radio, listening to the drama unfold. The swift boat is going after it! We held our collective breath; some amongst us murmured prayers. We are still in the game! I remember thinking. With this newfound hope, my confidence shot up, as did the other radarmen's. Maybe we were going to come out on top of this after all.

We could hear the swift boat's .50-caliber machine gun hammering away in the background, a steady ratatatat-uh-ratatatatat. Interspersed with the sound of the machine-gun fire and the roar of the boat's engine, we could hear cannon fire, too. Or was it mortar fire? KA-THUMP! KA-THUMP! The gunboat sailor on PCF-79's radio was screaming so loud it was impossible to understand him. But we knew what was happening: the trawler and PCF-79 were battling it out near the mouth of the river. On the bridge, commanders Stephan and Hays must have been cursing their luck that they weren't in the thick of the things. But at least they had a ringside view of the battle from the bridge. I remember thinking later it must've been hard for them to watch the swift boat steal all the glory, and maybe even their future promotions up the chain-of-command as well. Telling the story now, all these years later, I should point out that the battle took place at about 0500Z, in the dead of the night, with the rugged land mass so close it loomed over us like a mountaintop. Green and red tracer fire snaked through the night while White Phosphorous—"Willy-Pete"—erupted in blinding flashes that lit up the night like a Fourth of July fountain cut loose for the grand finale. Across the black waters between them, the two vessels unleashed their firepower at each other. This description of the battle we heard from the radarman on duty on the bridge. I can still remember how he played it up. "God, it's a thing of beauty!" he yelled down over the sound-powered phones to us in CIC. "He" was the illustrious Bill Clink, RD3, by far the "saltiest" radarman in OI Division and maybe even in all of Vietnam. A former RD1—or had he even been a chief at one point?—his arms were covered with bruised-blue, faded tattoos of serpents, snakes, dragons, mom, a heart, and the devil, and he talked in a raspy voice like a pirate. A parrot perched on his shoulder would've suited him nicely.

There was no surrender in the trawler's crew, was the way Clink described it as we gathered around him later in the radar room, his silver-crowned left incisor glinting in the eerie green light of CIC. They fought us, he said in his raspy pirate voice, tooth and nail to the bloody end, right up until the swift boat scored a direct hit with a mortar round of Willy-Pete in the trawler's pilothouse, ending any chance the trawler's crew had of escaping. Instead, Clink said, with its pilothouse erupting into a glowing ball of white-hot fire, it veered out of control and tore its hull open on a jagged bank of rocks protruding above the waterline. Then the swift boat circled it and finished it off with a steady hail of .50-caliber fire that ate into the trawler, chopping it up and sending shards of metal and sparks flying until the air was thick with the obliteration. "They were F-ing madman," Clink said. And he wasn't referring to the trawler's crew. He meant the PCF-79 gunboat jockeys. "F-ing madman, I tell you. It was a thing of pure beauty!"

As the swift boat was finishing it off, a tremendous explosion ripped open the trawler's hull, transmitting a blast of heat that curled the paint back on the swift boat's hull like an art deco candle and gave the swift boat's crewmembers an instant shave. PCF-79 fell back in a hurry in the face of the blowtorch-like heat, and it's a good thing it did, for the larger ships, including the Wilhoite, came charging in with guns blazing, desperate to get a few licks in of their own, even though the trawler by this time was in ruins and defenseless. Clink described the scene "like sharks on a feeding frenzy." And then added to that image by saying, "Payback is a bitch." When the sun rose over the horizon shortly thereafter, it dawned on a scene right out of Dante's Inferno—a fiery hell on a placid sea, with U.S. ships firing at the trawler from every direction. Then, just when things were getting interesting and our gunners were zeroing in on the trawler so that they might actually hit it with their next salvo, Commander Stephan called a cease-fire, probably realizing that whatever was left of the trawler's cargo would be valuable for the U.S. propaganda machine, and that he'd have to answer to his superiors if the trawler were totally destroyed by our hard-charging, overzealous band of ships.

Finally, we were allowed to leave CIC in short shifts and go topside to view the destroyed trawler. From the main deck, Bohon, Shanahan, and I stared at its charred remains of the trawler, which rested at a radical angle on the rocks it had grounded itself on. We watched it with a morbid curiosity, I suppose, lost in our own thoughts, and processing the image for a time much later when we would tell it to our grandkids or write it up in a story like this. At the time, our emotions were mixed. For the past many days, the trawler had existed for us as a radar contact on a radar screen, as Skunk Alpha, and now, quite frankly, it was shocking to see it like this, so very real and utterly destroyed. On a craggy point of land jutting out from the Cape, a menacing-looking band of R.O.K. soldiers (reputed to be the most ruthless soldiers in Vietnam) and an equally fierce-looking band of U.S. marines kept their distance from each other, wearily, looking as if they'd like nothing better than to mix it up, and to hell with Victor Charlie. He usually was nowhere to be found anyway.

Surrounding the trawler by now were junks, sampans, fishing boats, and every other kind of indigenous watercraft imaginable. They pressed in as close as they dared, rubber-necking, their occupants just dying to get their hands on the trawler's cargo, which would be worth a fortune on the black market in Da Nang. But none of the Vietnamese in the boats dared to get close to the trawler, for PCF-45, one of PCF-79's brethren swift

boats, manned by a crew of battle-hardened gunboat commandos, stood fifty yards off the trawler, ready to do some serious damage to anyone who dared approached the trawler and try to plunder its cargo. We studied the trawler and the water surrounding it, for any evidence of the trawler's crew but found none. They couldn't have survived, really, not against PCF-79's superior firepower and maneuverability in the rough seas. They'd been worthy adversaries and fought bravely to the end, according to Clink; you had to give them that. But this was war, and we weren't here for fun and games. Nonetheless, we wondered what that must have been like for them. We didn't talk about it much after that, and when we did, it was usually in vague and abstract terms. I'm not sure why that was, it just was.

Back down in CIC, we made preparations to get underway, to head north and resume our normal Market Time patrol. It would take us a few hours to get back on station. By mid-morning the story of the trawler and its destruction was big news in Vietnam, and Stars and Stripes was finally allowed to print its story. At some point before we hoisted anchor to head up the coast, Commander Stephan transferred his command from the Wilhoite, and Commander Hays got his ship back, I imagine to his great relief. We left the trawler in our wake forever. Those topside, like Clink, watched it until it faded out of sight. By then I was back in CIC, in my old familiar spot: manning the surface-search radarscope. Ironically, as a radar contact, the half-sunk trawler painted "loud and clear" for ten miles until it finally faded off my scope.

On our regular Market Time patrol the next day, we learned that Premier Nguyen Cao Ky and Vice President Nguyen Van Thieu personally decorated the crew of PCF-79 and some of the others involved in the capture of the trawler with the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry. Too bad they forgot to include the rest of the ships' crews in the operation! We were disappointed, but it wasn't the end of the world, especially after Commander Hays told us a couple days later that the Seventh Fleet honchos had decided to send us to Bangkok for five days R&R as our unofficial reward. Who needs a Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry, anyway? Give us five days in Bangkok any old day! Prior to this patrol, we had been station ship in Hong Kong for ten days, and in a few days we'd be headed to Bangkok. Still . . . there was some lingering disappointment among the radarmen that we didn't get a little more glory for our surveillance effort.

Two days later we read in Stars and Stripes that more than 90 tons of weapons, medical supplies and other contraband had been recovered from the trawler—everything from C-4 explosives to 12.7mm anti-aircraft guns to nearly a million rounds of ammunition.

Also discovered was 2,000 pounds of TNT rigged to detonate at the push of a button. Luckily for PCF-79's crew (and probably the rest of us as well), the round of Willy Pete fired by one of the swift boat sailors completely destroyed the pilothouse where the detonation button was located. None of the trawler's crew survived long enough to push the button.

Looking back on it now, the Wilhoite—more specifically, the Wilhoite's radarmen— played a key role in helping achieve th7e SA Ky River Victory during that summer in 1967, and it's something I'll always be proud of. Reliving the events of this story through the telling of it here has helped me appreciate what we accomplished. Without the benefit of radar surveillance, the outcome could've turned out very different, with an unhappy ending for the U.S. side, and the trawler could've sailed off into the sunset, never to be heard from again.

In addition, I have to take my white hat off to the officers who planned the operation. Without their convoluted plan, the highly publicized victory over the trawler wouldn't have been possible. If the operation had gone off in accordance with their plan, and we'd sunk the trawler in deep waters, its cargo and all the publicity that went with it would've gone straight to the bottom of the sea never to be heard from again. And if we hadn't tried that little psy-ops trick, revealing our presence to the trawler and spooking it into making its final desperate effort to escape, only to be blown out of the water by PCF-79 and run aground on a highly visible reef next to the mouth of the SA Ky River. There it sat kittywampus on the rocks, choking up black smoke and nicely posed for the endless array of photos that were soon displayed to the world in various media outlets.

The U.S. forces that participated in the SA Ky River Victory deserve credit for a job well done, there can be no doubt about that. Working as a team, they stopped the trawler and the 90 tons of weapons and ammunition it would've delivered to the enemy. Undoubtedly, in the hands of the NVA and VC those weapons would've been used against friendly forces with grave consequences. I'm proud to have been a part of the trawler mission, and I'm proud to have served on the Wilhoite during the Vietnam War. Altogether, we made three extended patrols to the war zone between 1965 to 1967. I was discharged from the Navy in January 1968. Later that year, the Wilhoite returned to Vietnam for the last time. She was decommissioned in July of 1969, in my home state of Washington, two full years after the trawler incident. On 19 July 1972, she was sold for scrap to General Metals Inc. in Tacoma, three miles south of my hometown of Steilacoom, Washington.

This concludes my story. As I stated at the beginning, to the best of my recollection, every detail of this story is true, as best as I can remember them after forty years. Those were good years, exciting years, of my young life. And I remember my Navy days with great fondness. I did see the world, or at least a good portion of it. And that's exactly what they promised me going in.

The End

Postscript: Long after I got out of the Navy and the Vietnam War came to its painful conclusion for the United States, the Internet was invented, and by the mid-90s, aided by its powerful search engines, I found an article entitled "Trawler!©" written by none other than Commander Stephan himself. His article is coupled with an account written by PCF-79's heroics in the trawler engagement, entitled "SA Ky River Victory," linked from a Patrol Craft Fast Web site found at http://pcf45.com/trawler/trawler.html.

For her part in the SA Ky River Victory and for actions on another Operation Market Time patrol later that same year, the Wilhoite was awarded the Navy Unit Commendation with two battle stars. I was out of the Navy by then, but learned that I was entitled to this commendation in the course of writing this story, and with Oscar Granger's help, I ordered my NUC ribbon and battle stars from the Web site U.S.A. Military Medals. Now I'm hoping to be presented my ribbon and battle stars on the flight deck of the USS Midway at the next Scope Dope reunion in San Diego. That would be nothing short of spectacular!

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What two things can you never eat for breakfast! Ans: Lunch and Dinner

What stays in a bed most of the day and sometimes goes to the bank? Ans: A stream

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A minister waited in line to have his car filled with gas just before a long weekend. The attendant worked quickly, but there were many cars ahead of him. Finally, the attendant motioned him toward a vacant pump. "Reverend," said the young man, I'm so sorry about thedelay. It seen as if everyone waits until the last minute to get ready for a long trip." The minister chuckled, "I know what you mean, "It's the same in my business."

Thoughts To Think About

Make home a Happy place for the children. Everyone returns to their happy place.
Always keep a small light on in the kitchen window at night.
It's a whole lot easier to get breakfast from a chicken than a pig.
Homemade's always better'n store bought.
A tongue's like a knife. The sharper it is the deeper it cuts.
It's easy to clean an empty house, but hard to live in one.
Enjoy doing your children's laundry. Some day they will be gone.
All children spill milk. Learn to smile and wipe it up.
Invite lots of folks to supper. You can always add water to the soup.
Always light birthday candles from the middle outward.
You'll never catch a runnin' chicken but if you throw seed around the back door you'll have a skillet full by supper.
Visit old people who can't get out. Some day you will be one.
The colder the outhouse, the warmer the bed.
You are good enough!! Actually you are probably overqualified but let's start the day off humble.

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A little Humor

What do you call a bee that can't make up it's mind? A maybe.
I tried to sue the airline for losing my luggage. I lost my case.
I wasn't originally going to get a brain transplant, but then I changed my mind.
I need a smoke detector that shuts off when you yell: "I'm just cooking."
Retirement. Twice the time half the money.
Experience. The term people give to their mistakes.

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Raising teenagers is like nailing Jello to a tree.
Wrinkles don't hurt.
Families are like fudge...mostly sweet, with a few nuts.
Today's mighty oak is just yesterday's nut that held its ground.
Laughing is good exercise, it's like jogging on the inside.
Middle age is when you choose your cereal for fiber, not the toy.
My friend Jack says he can communicate with vegetables. That's right...Jack and the beans talk.
I was struggling to understand how lightning works and then it struck me.
I went to the paint store to get thinner...it didn't work.

GREAT TRUTHS ABOUT GROWING OLD

1) Growing old is mandatory; growing up is optional.
2) Forget the health food. I need all the preservatives I can get.
3) When you fall down, you wonder what else you can do while you're down there.
4) You're getting old when you get the same sensation from a rocking chair that you once got from a roller coaster.
5) It's frustrating when you know all the answers but nobody bothers to ask you the questions.
6) Time may be a great healer, but it's a lousy beautician.
7) Wisdom comes with age, but sometimes age comes alone.

THE FOUR STAGES OF LIFE:

1) You believe in Santa Claus.
2) You don't believe in Santa Claus.
3) You are Santa Claus.
4) You look like Santa Claus.

SUCCESS:

At age 4 success is . . . . Not piddling in your pants.
At age 12 success is . . . Having friends.
At age 17 success is . . Having a driver's license.
At age 35 success is . . . . Having money.
At age 50 success is . . . Having money.
At age 70 success is . .. . Having a driver's license.
At age 75 success is . ... . Having friends.
At age 80 success is . . .. Not piddling in your pants.

Pass this on to someone who could use a laugh.
Always remember to forget the troubles that pass your way;

BUT NEVER forget the blessings that come each day.

Sink The Flag Ship

Sent to us by Richard Scheeder 1958-1960

(Now telling Sea Stories To Someone That Is Listening Up Above)

We were on the way to WestPac and were preparing to do gunnery exercises. Normally a fleet tug would pull a sled with a target for the ships to practice the accuracy of their shots. We were to far out from land for a tug so we were using the Cruiser Oklahoma City as a reference. The idea was to have the gun sites display the Cruiser exactly the way a target should appear-in the cross hairs. This, while the gun was offset at an angle from the gun sites, so the resulting shots would splash down in her wake-- WELL ASTERN of the Cruiser. Procedures dictated that a Safety Observer be present in each mount. His initial duty was to confirm that the guns were offset from the site to assure the safe fall of shot. When the ship was ready to fire he had the duty to view the target area through the cross hairs of the site. If the range was clear the Safety Observer would close his key. This then allowed the Gunners to fire from the mount when directed. If the Safety Observer considered it unsafe to shoot he simply opened his key and the Mount could not fire.

While the Trathen approached the firing point the Safety Observer who had confirmed setting the offsets become seriously ill and had to be replaced.

The Engineer Officer was summoned from Main Control to relieve the Safety Observer who had already left the Mount. On arrival the Engineer, unaware the guns had been offset, took his seat and looked through the gun sites to find the guns aimed directly at the Cruisers main Deck between her stacks. He was aware the ship was close to her firing point via the Sound Powered telephones connected to the Bridge and Gunnery Officer. There was immediate and panicky communication from the Engineer Safety Observer saying not to fire any Mounts. There was much yelling and screaming at the Engineer. In spite of assurances, that he should be seeing the Cruiser in the cross hairs, he refused to close his key. Nothing anyone said convinced him to close his key to allow the Mount to fire. It only inspired him to yell back with more vigor to hold fire on all mounts. Trathen did not fire.

Trathen missed her turn to fire and had to go around while the Engineer was brought up to speed on the Safety procedures that were in effect. After much hand wringing the Engineer closed his key for the second pass, still praying for the safety of the Cruiser and the safety of his own back side. He breathed a sigh of relief when he advised the fall of the shot was well astern of the Cruiser as he was promised it would be.

` The Engineer was now a designated a qualified Range Safety Observer. His expertise with gunnery procedures was the subject of taunting for the several weeks. He was offered the position of Safety Observer for drinking fountains, safety lines, urinals, commodes and many other similarly dangerous pieces of Trathen equipment.

The moral of the story is "Do not send an Engineer to do a Gunners work".