

H061.1 U.S. Navy in the Korean War – March to July 1951

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(For previous articles on the U.S. Navy in the Korean War please see H-grams 050, 054, 055, 056, and 058.)

By March of 1951, the basic pattern for combat operations had been established that would endure for the remainder of the war. The Chinese Communist New Year's Offensive had reached its culminating point, and as of 14 March, the U.S. 8th Army re-captured the South Korean capital of Seoul, the fourth time the city changed hands during the war (and leaving it a devastated ruin.) The battle line stretched across the Korean Peninsula near the 38th parallel, roughly where the border had been when North Korean forces first invaded the South in June 1950, although it would see-saw considerably in the first half of 1951. North of the line were primarily Chinese forces, which had first intervened in the war in the late fall of 1950, as well as some reconstituted North Korean divisions. United Nations forces, under the overall command of General of the Army Douglas MacArthur, held the line to the south. U.S. forces made up the great preponderance of United Nations forces, along with about ten other nations and the forces of the Republic of (South) Korea.

At sea, the larger effort was in the Sea of Japan and was primarily a U.S. Navy affair with some United Nations ships in support. A smaller force operated in the Yellow Sea and was mostly United Nations ships with significant U.S. Navy support. The fast carrier striking force (TF-77,) under the command of Rear Admiral Ralph Ofstie, included carriers VALLEY FORGE (CV-45,) PHILIPPINE SEA (CV-47) and PRINCETON (CV-37.) TF-77 aircraft generally attacked the Chinese/North Korean logistics network in northeastern North Korea, with railroads and roads, especially

bridges and tunnels, as the primary targets. The carrier aircraft would shift to close air support during periods when the Chinese were on the offensive. U.S. 5th Air Force bombers from Japan attacked targets in northwestern North Korea, escorted by USAF jet fighters based in South Korea against the ever-growing threat from Russian-piloted "North Korean" MiG-15's based in Chinese Manchuria. USAF fighter-bomber aircraft based in South Korea generally attacks targets closer to the battle line as they lacked the range to reach targets in northeastern North Korea. As a result, U.S. Navy carrier aircraft had northeastern North Korea to themselves. However, although rarely challenged by enemy aircraft, Chinese and North Korean anti-aircraft artillery defenses were constantly improving.

Since one of the primary logistics routes was the coast road along the Sea of Japan, U.S. surface ships frequently bombarded bridges, roads, and tunnels, with battleship MISSOURI (BB-63) and heavy cruisers being the most effective, along with occasional insertions of British commando forces, armed shore parties and South Korean guerillas to attack logistics infrastructure. The surface ships (and the aircraft) also laid siege to the North Korean ports along the Sea of Japan, primarily Wonsan and Songjin (120 NM northeast of Wonsan.) (Because the war in Korea was a United Nations action and not a declared war, the term "blockade" could not be used as a blockade is an act of war. Apparently the term "siege" was legally acceptable to the UN.) Enemy shore batteries would frequently challenge U.S. ships, generally with minor result at best. Sea mines supplied by the Soviet Union remained the primary threat and the North Koreans deliberately set many of them adrift (over 300 would wash up on Japanese beaches.)

In the Yellow Sea, the UN naval force (CTF 95) was centered around British carrier HMS THESEUS and the U.S. light carrier BATAAN (CVL-29.) BATAAN had a Marine F4U Corsair squadron embarked (VMF-312 relieved VMF-212 in March) and a Marine helicopter squadron. Several British or Commonwealth light cruisers and a

multinational force of destroyers operated in the Yellow Sea, ensuring North Korean ports remained closed. Because of the extreme tidal variations on the Yellow Sea coast and geography ashore, naval gunfire support was less useful in disrupting enemy logistics than on the Sea of Japan shore. During periods when Chinese offensive activity threatened Seoul or the port of Inchon, the U.S. would augment the Yellow Sea force with a heavy cruiser, usually TOLEDO (CA-133,) with longer-range 8-inch guns.

The logistics interdiction campaign executed in Northeastern North Korea by Task Force 77 aircraft was particularly challenging. For one, Chinese forces could subsist on much less food and supply than UN forces, so it took fewer trucks and trains to support an equivalent number of Chinese troops. The Chinese also had the manpower and was adept at carrying heavy loads in back packs, along with numerous pack animals, including even camels. The Chinese (and North Koreans) had learned very quickly to remain camouflaged and concealed during the day and only conduct major troop and supply movements at night, in order to significantly reduce the probability and effectiveness of airstrikes. The road network in North Korea was relatively primitive, which also meant it was relatively easy to repair or bypass. Although it was easier to disrupt railroads than roads, the Chinese were very adept at rapidly repairing tracks. In addition, bridges and tunnels were very difficult targets to knock out, especially as they became more heavily defended as the war went on. There were also 395 major bridges in TF-77's area. Extensive intelligence collection and analysis went into narrowing the bridge target set to about 48 key bridges that would have greatest disruptive impact on enemy logistics if they were taken out. The Chinese did the same analysis and defended them accordingly.

Carlson's Canyon

An example of the see-saw battle between strike aircraft and repair crews was the railroad bridge over a deep ravine south of Kilchu, near Songjin, North Korea. The extreme height of the bridge made it difficult to repair and it had tunnels at both ends, which made it difficult to bypass, thus making it a lucrative target. Although there were twin tunnels at each end, the bridge itself was single track. AD Skyraiders of VA-195 "Tigers," led by Lieutenant Commander Harold Gustav "Swede" Carlson, off PRINCETON (CV-37,) first attacked the bridge as a target of opportunity on 2 March 1951. Carlson returned to the bridge on 3 March with more planes, heavier ordnance and a better plan, and with eight AD Skyraiders dropped one bridge span and damaged three others. In another strike on 7 March, Carlson and his squadron knocked down a second span. TF-77 Commander, RADM Ralph Ofstie was impressed by Carlson's persistence and nicknamed the area "Carlson's Canyon," which is how it has come down in history. (Author James Michener fictionalized it as "The Bridges at Toko-Ri," in a best-selling book and 1954 Hollywood movie starring William Holden, Mickey Rooney and Grace Kelly – also one of the more realistic Navy movies made.)

Despite the Carlson's Canyon moniker, the Chinese and North Koreans also displayed extraordinary persistence and ingenuity in reconstructing the bridges, despite constant harassment strikes by night flying AD Skyraiders of the VC-35 detachment, also off PRINCETON, as well as some Skyraiders from VA-195 who flew at night as well. The Officer-in-Charge of the VC-35 Det, Lieutenant Frank Metzner, was credited with devising a tactic to skip-bomb a 2,000-pound bomb with delayed-action fuse into the mouth of train tunnels (which were usually only about 17 feet wide.) The tactic required four F4U Corsairs to lead the run, suppressing any anti-aircraft fire, followed by a single AD Skyraider, with three 2,000-pound bombs, coming low, slow and straight at a shallow enough angle for the bombs to

skip along the tracks and at least one into the tunnel. The Skyraider would then need to climb steeply to avoid smacking into the cliff face. RADM Ofstie was skeptical at first, but agreed to give it a try. The tactic worked, and was used on occasion, but was still incredibly dangerous.

Meanwhile, the repairs on the Kilchu Bridge were progressing rapidly. On 15 March, Carlson's squadron attacked again, this time in addition to bombs, they used napalm pods to set fire to the wooden construction scaffolding (somewhat of an engineering marvel itself) and temporary wood beams across the spans. Post-strike photo reconnaissance showed the new-construction destroyed, the scaffolding incinerated, and another of the original spans dropped. Then US Air Force B-29 bombers seeded the area with delayed-action fused bombs to detonate at irregular intervals to discourage further repair efforts. And still the North Koreans wouldn't quit.

By the end of March, repairs on the Kilchu Bridge were almost complete, except for laying track. This triggered a massive strike on the bridge by VA-195 and the rest of Air Group 19. This time, the only things left were the bridge pilings. RADM Ofstie decided that was enough effort on the Carlson's Kilchu Bridge; there were many other targets that needed to be struck. The North Koreans decided they'd had enough too, and proceeded to build a four-mile bypass that included eight smaller, lower and less conspicuous bridges that were harder to hit. The Kilchu bridge was a good example of the courage, determination and ingenuity of U.S. Navy carrier pilots, as well as the general futility of the mission, especially when the Chinese could stockpile all the supplies they needed in the sanctuary of Manchuria just across the Yalu River.

On 3 March 1951, at the request of U.S. 8th Army, the U.S. Navy conducted an amphibious demonstration off the island of Cho Do near the North Korean Yellow Sea port of Chinampo to divert Chinese attention. Three assault transports

and two attack cargo ships of Transportation Squadron ONE (TRANSRON ONE,) and an escort of destroyers, made the requested demonstration. The U.S. Army was pleased by the result and subsequently requested more such amphibious feints. U.S. Navy commanders were more dubious, believing that enemy command and control was so sluggish that the operation was over before the enemy even reacted, succeeding only in putting the ships at unnecessary risk of mines.

On 8 March 1951, the “siege of Songjin” commenced. Although U.S. ships had bombarded targets in and around Songjin previously, this date marked the commencement of continuous U.S. Navy presence off the port. Light cruiser Manchester (CL-83) and destroyers EVANS (DD-754,) SPERRY (DD-697) and Dutch destroyer HMNS EVERTSEN marked the occasion with an extensive shore bombardment.

For five consecutive days between 14-19 March 1951, battleship MISSOURI bombarded targets along the coast road and was credited with destroying eight railroad bridges and seven highway bridges. Whether by gunfire or bombs, bridges are actually tough targets to take out. On average, knocking out a bridge took about 60 rounds from 16-inch guns. This would be MISSOURI’s last hurrah of her first combat deployment since WWII as she commenced a return stateside on 19 March.

Generally, the Chinese and North Koreans were good about avoiding massing troops within range of naval gunfire, but a seven-ship naval bombardment on 15 March near Wonsan reportedly inflicted 6-7,000 enemy casualties. The same day, a bombardment by destroyer WALLACE L. LIND (DD-703) inflicted 2,000 casualties at nearby Singi. These actions significantly disrupted North Korean attempts to reconstitute their forces after their devastating defeats in the fall of 1950 following the Inchon landing. (Along the main battle line, Chinese troops primarily operated in the west and center opposite U.S. Army in the west and U.S.

Marines in the center. At the eastern end of the line, North Korean troops faced off against South Korean troops. Ironically, the Marines were the farthest from the water, and since the evacuation of Hungnam in December 1950, had been used as ground infantry, somewhat to the consternation of Navy and Marine leaders in Washington. On the other hand, with no apparent UN appetite to conduct any actual amphibious assaults into North Korea, the U.S. Navy steadily drew down the amphibious shipping capability in the theater.)

The Blind Pilot

On 21 March 1951, two VF-191 F9F Panther jets off PRINCETON were searching for trucks to strafe when the jet flown by Ensign Floryan "Frank" Soberski took a hit from ground fire, partially shattering the canopy and hitting Soberski in the face with shards of plexiglass, blinding him. All Soberski could see was a dim gray light as his wingman, Lieutenant (junior grade) Pat Murphy coached him out from over enemy territory. With water temperature of 33 degrees, and rough seas, ditching in the Sea of Japan was likely to be fatal. So, basically flying as a welded wing, with critical commands from the Landing Signal Officer (LSO,) Murphy did what seemed impossible and coached Soberski down to a safe recovery on the carrier. Soberski would later regain his sight. This incident is fictionally depicted in the 1954 movie "Men of the Fighting Lady" with Van Johnson in the role equivalent to Murphy. Filmed aboard ORISKANY (CVA-34) with extensive actual color combat footage, the movie is one of the more realist Hollywood depictions. (Note, Essex-class carriers (CV) and Midway-class carriers (CVB) were reclassified as attack carriers (CVA) on 1 October 1952.)

Actually, there had been a very similar previous incident (that I missed in previous H-grams.) On 17 September 1950, Ensign Edward D. Jackson, Jr., flying an VF-112 F9F-2 Panther off PHILIPPINE SEA, was leading a strafing mission on a congregation of small river boats near the North Korean capital of Pyongyang.

Jackson hit steel cables strung across the river as an aerial booby-trap which smashed into his canopy, blinding him with shards of Plexiglas and his own blood. Despite lapsing in and out of consciousness, Jackson's wingman, ENS Dayl E. Crow, was able to talk him out over the Yellow Sea, and with the critical assistance of LSO Lieutenant (junior grade) "Les" Bruestle, coached him to a successful recovery on PHILIPPINE SEA. With 36 stiches and an emergency blood transfusion, Jackson survived and regained his sight.

On 27 March 1951, carrier BOXER (CV-21) relieved VALLEY FORGE (CV-45) and VALLEY FORGE commenced her return to the West Coast from her second of a record four Korean War deployments. The same day the destroyer-mine sweeper CARMICK (DMS-33) and patrol frigate GLENDALE (PF-36) suffered a minor collision in the fog off Songjin. GLENDALE is noteworthy as one of nine Tacoma-class frigates transferred to the Soviet Union toward the end of World War II as part of lend-lease program Project Hula at Kodiak, Alaska, and she served in the Soviet Navy as EK-6 from 1945 to 1949. After repairs from the collision, she was transferred to the Royal Thai Navy, which was participating in the UN force, re-named HTMS TACHIN (PF-1,) serving until 2000 before becoming a museum ship.

On 28 March, Vice Admiral Harold E. Martin relieved VADM Arthur d. Struble as Commander U.S. SEVENTH Fleet, reporting to VADM C. Turner Joy, Commander Naval Forces Far East (COMNAVFE.) Struble had been in command since the beginning of the war and had been dual-hatted as Commander Joint Task Force 7, responsible for executing the Inchon and Wonsan amphibious landings and the evacuation from Hungnam. VADM Martin had earned a Silver Star in command of light carrier SAN JACINTO (CVL-30) during WWII and also later was commander of Task Force 49, an organization intended to assist the Soviet invasion of Japan (which didn't happen)

On 1 April 1951, F9F Panther jet fighters were employed as fighter-bombers for the first time, when VF-191 jets off PRINCETON bombed enemy targets. To that point the Panthers had provided fighter top cover and sometimes flak suppression (with guns and rockets) while AD Skyraiders and F4U Corsairs flew bombing missions. With virtually no enemy air opposition during this period, Panthers were armed with 100 or 250-pound bombs and used as fighter-bombers. The hydraulic catapults on the carriers were not powerful enough to launch a Panther in light or no wind conditions carrying a heavier bomb load.

On 3 April 1951, Rear Admiral Allan E. Smith re-assumed command of the UN Blockading and Escort Force (TF 95) from British Vice Admiral Andrewes, RN. (Apparently "Blockading" Force was an OK use of the term as long as it laid "siege" to a port and didn't "blockade" it. Go figure.)

On 7 April 1951, Special Task Force 74, under the command of RADM Roscoe Hillenkoeter (future first Director of the Central Intelligence Agency,) put a 250-man raiding party of the 41st Independent Royal Marine Commando ashore near Songjin to destroy coastal railroad tracks. The insertion was covered by heavy cruiser SAINT PAUL (CA-73,) destroyers LIND (DD-703) and MASSEY (DD-778,) with the force lifted by landing ship dock FORT MARION (LSD-22) and fast transport BEGOR (APD-127.) The operation suffered from some coordination problems (the minesweeping operation gave away the element of surprise) and insufficient intelligence on beach conditions (rocks that would have destroyed landing vehicles had the seas not been smooth.) Fortunately there was no opposition on the ground to the landing and the force destroyed about 100 feet of rusty track. However, BOXER's Air Group suffered its first loss when Lieutenant (junior grade) H. T. Walker's Corsair disappeared in a fog bank as he was trying to crash land on the beach after being hit in the engine by ground fire. As it turned out, TF-77 air attacks against "upstream" track and bridges had been particularly effective and

the track destroyed by the Commandos had not been used for over two month. The mission did result in significant efforts to improve the sharing of intelligence, particularly aerial photo-reconnaissance, between TF-77 and other elements of the UN Naval force. One method to enhance coordination was the establishment in June 1951 of an air drop and pick up station on Yo-Do Island in Wonsan harbor to facilitate exchange of info and photos between the Wonsan area and TF-77 (Following the evacuation of Wonsan and Hungnam in December 1950, South Korean troops re-occupied several of the islands in the expansive harbor. Although Chinese troops would periodically try to drive the South Korean outposts off, they failed to do so.)

Strait of Formosa Operation, 8 – 15 April 1951

On 5 March 1951, Commander Naval Forces Far East issued OORDER 3-51, which included Intelligence reports of a buildup of Communist Chinese forces, including a large number of junks, which could be an indicator of Chinese intention to invade Formosa using the junks as amphibious transport. With U.S. forces committed heavily in Korea, there was concern that China might take advantage of that to finish off the Nationalist Chinese, under Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, in their last major stronghold on the island of Formosa (now Taiwan.) At the very beginning of the Korean War, the U.S. SEVENTH Fleet had established a permanent patrol (eventually designated Task Force 72) in the Formosa Strait. Generally consisting of three or four destroyers, sometimes augmented by anti-aircraft light cruiser JUNEAU (CLAA-119) and one or two submarines, TF-72's mission was to deter Chinese Communist attack against Formosa. It was also intended to dissuade Chiang Kai-shek from doing anything to reinitiate the Chinese Civil War (which the Communists had won) at an inopportune time.

On 25 March 1951, the Supreme U.S. Commander in the Far East, General of the Army Douglas MacArthur sent a top secret message to the Joint Chiefs in

Washington requesting JCS view of a proposal by Commander Naval Forces Far East, Vice Admiral C. Turner Joy, to send Task Force 77 through the Formosa Strait into the South China Sea and then back to the Sea of Japan. The stated purpose of the operation was to be a show of force to deter any Chinese attempt to invade Formosa/Taiwan. In addition, the operation would serve to gain Intelligence on Chinese operations, provide area familiarity for U.S. forces, and boost the morale of Nationalist Chinese forces on Formosa. The JCS responded favorably to the idea.

Some historians have argued that MacArthur had an ulterior motive for the operation, as he had become increasingly frustrated by the sanctuary given the Chinese in Manchuria under the United Nations and U.S. rules of engagement. In February, MacArthur had communicated with the JCS requesting authority to immediately strike targets in mainland China in the event China attacked U.S. forces outside the Korean area of operations. The JCS responded with a somewhat ambiguously worded response that on the one hand appeared to grant such authority to immediately strike, but on the other hand directed MacArthur to inform the JCS what he intended to strike and get permission before doing so. The argument is that if MacArthur could provoke the Chinese to attack U.S. forces outside the Korean area, that would give MacArthur the excuse he would need to attack Chinese targets in Manchuria and mainland China, thus widening the war – something explicitly against UN and U.S. national policy. The TF-77 operation would thus be the means to provoke the Chinese. When the British got wind of the operation, they wanted no part of it, viewing it as unnecessarily provocative and a threat to their agreements with the Communist Chinese regarding the future of Britain's colony in Hong Kong. There is some interesting circumstantial evidence that MacArthur wanted to provoke a confrontation, but no definitive proof. However, as executed, the operation was definitely provocative.

On 30 March 1951, COMSEVENTHFLT issued OPORDER 75-51 directing the execution of the Formosa Strait operation to commence with the departure of TF-77 from its operating area off eastern North Korea on 7 April 1951. The action caught carrier PRINCETON (CV-37) in port Sasebo in major upkeep, and TF-77 Commander RADM Ralf Oftsie (embarked in PRINCETON) had turned over tactical command of TF-77 to RADM William G. Tomlinson, Commander Carrier Division THREE, embarked in carrier BOXER (CV-21.) At the time, COMSEVENTHFLEET, VADM Harold M. Martin, was embarked aboard carrier PHILIPPINE SEA (CV-47.) Mitigating against the provocation to war theory, PRINCETON was the most capable and combat experienced of the three carriers; PHILIPPINE SEA only had an all-propeller (Corsair/Skyraider) airwing. Although the BOXER had F9F Panther jets, her air wing included mostly recently activated reserve pilots, and the ship herself had only recently arrived in the theater.

At 1730 on 7 April, BOXER, PHILIPPINE SEA, and ten destroyers of TF-77 departed their normal operating area, heading out of the Sea of Japan on a U.S.-only operation, although carrier HMS THESEUS and light carrier BATAAN (CVL-30) were ordered to shift from the Yellow Sea to the Sea of Japan to cover the gap. TF-77 initially took a course as if to pass to the east of Formosa, but on the afternoon of 10 April veered sharply to the right to head into the Formosa Strait. There had been some additions and subtractions from the screen during the transit south, so when TF-77 entered the strait the two carriers were accompanied by anti-aircraft light cruiser JUNEAU (CLAA-119,) and 12 destroyers. Three destroyers of the TF-72 Formosa Straits Patrol were already in the strait.

By 1000 on 11 April, the two carriers were almost dead center in the Formosa Strait, when PHILIPPINE SEA commenced launching 63 sorties followed by another 60 from BOXER at 1100. The mission of the aircraft was to conduct an "aerial parade" along the 3-mile limits off the Communist Chinese coast as a highly

visible show of force. At the time of launch, three destroyers were on “bird dog” stations along the Chinese coast to provide radar warning and if necessary, at-sea search and rescue for any downed pilots. The destroyer JOHN W. THOMASON (DD-760) was positioned at the north end of the strait, 15 NM off the Chinese port of Fuzhou and about 100 NM north of TF-77. Destroyer FISKE (DD-842) was stationed to the west of TF-77, 15 NM off the Chinese port of Canton (Guangzhou.) Destroyer JOHN A. BOLE (DD-755) was stationed in an unusually exposed position off the Chinese port of Swatow (Shantou,) 130 NM southwest of the nearest U.S. ship, the FISKE, and 150 NM southwest of TF-77. According to BOLE’s log, she was steaming slowly on station 12-15 NM off Swatow. According to her crew, she was dead-in-the water, three miles off the port, surrounded by about 47 motorized, armed Chinese junks.

Nothing of what some crewmembers say happened to BOLE ever made it into official documentation (which doesn’t mean it didn’t happen,) nor is there a record to explain why she was where her crew says she was. There continues to be speculation that BOLE was the “bait” for MacArthur’s desired Chinese provocation. A somewhat more benign explanation is that given the concern over the build-up of Chinese junks opposite Formosa, her mission was to get in amongst them to gather Intelligence. Regardless, by any reasonable standard, the ship was deliberately placed in a precarious situation.

USS JOHN A. BOLE (DD-755) was an Allen M. Sumner-class destroyer, armed with six 5-inch/38 guns in three twin turrets, two forward and one aft. Her secondary armament was 12 40mm guns (2 quad and 2 double mounts,) five 21” torpedo tubes and anti-submarine weapons. BOLE was commanded by Commander Marion H. Buaas, a 1938 U.S. Naval Academy. Interestingly, Ensign Marion Buaas was the Executive Officer of the armed yacht USS ISABEL (PY-10) which had been sent by-name on the personal orders of President Franklin

Roosevelt on a high-risk surface reconnaissance mission from the Philippines to Japanese-occupied Cam Ranh Bay, Indochina on 3 December 1941. (see H-gram 003/H-003-3.) The details of the ISABEL's mission were highly unusual, leading to speculation that it was an attempt by Roosevelt to get the Japanese to fire the first shot. There is no proof that was Roosevelt's intent, just as there is no definitive proof regarding MacArthur's intent for the TF-77 operations, but it certainly could have turned out that way.

In the days prior to the operation, BOLE had twice taken on a cryptography specialist, which resulted in changes to procedures in how the ship encoded and decoded messages, apparent equipment changes in the code room, and restricting access to the code room to the Communications Officer only. Such activity would not be incompatible with the ship being provided the equipment for a signals intelligence mission. What is more difficult to explain was an apparent senior officer (unidentified to this day) who was highlined aboard BOLE on 10 April and remained sequestered in the Captain's cabin for the 11-hour duration he was aboard BOLE until being highlined off.

According to crew recollections, an announcement was made that the ship was on a highly classified mission and no one was to talk about it. The ship was at General Quarters (Battle Stations) for over 5 and a half hours. Radar operators noted the large number of surface contacts (the junks) and proximity to land (3 miles.) Lookouts described the vessels as motorized junks, each armed with what appeared to be a 76mm gun, and estimates of the number ranged from 41 to 47. Engineers recalled that the ship was not making way. According to the crew's accounts, the BOLE and the armed junks remained stationary, just warily watching each other from 1100 to 1600. The situation became even more tense at 1300 when the aerial parade came overhead, and aircraft flew mock strike profiles on the junks. Official accounts state aircraft remained out side the 3 NM limit but crew

accounts claim aircraft flew mock dive-bombing profiles over land and drew shore-based anti-aircraft fire. Official accounts indicate sporadic anti-aircraft fire from shore, but are vague as to exactly where and when. (This would become increasingly common over the next three years as the Chinese often fired on U.S. aircraft and downed several (see H-gram 029/H-029.)

Throughout the tense incident, the BOLE and the Chinese junks maintained discipline and no shots were exchanged. At 1600, BOLE slowly exited the area, and the junks made no effort to impede her departure. Although the incident had nothing to do with it, the public announcement that General MacArthur was being relieved by President Truman occurred while the BOLE was surrounded by Chinese junks.

In addition to the aerial parade, the BOXER also launched six photo reconnaissance sorties by F9F-2P of VC-61 Detachment Fox with six jet escorts. In addition, BOXER launched 12 combat air patrol sorties and six anti-submarine patrol sorties. Accounts also indicate that the carriers had moved weapons up from magazines in case retaliatory strikes were required.

During the night of 11-12 April, the carriers moved to the north of the strait for underway replenishment, but returned the next morning and launched a second aerial parade along the Chinese 3 NM limit, followed up by more photo-reconnaissance. A third aerial parade was launched in the afternoon, this one flying over Formosa as a show of support for Chiang Kai-shek and the Chinese Nationalists. On 13 April, VADM Martin flew ashore to meet with Chiang. TF-77 then departed the area and returned to the Sea of Japan on 16 April. Several destroyers remained with the TF 72 Formosa Strait patrol. Meanwhile, the Chinese and North Koreans repaired much of the damage to railroads and bridges in North Korea previously inflicted by TF-77, pretty much unmolested.

Given that the Communist Chinese did not invade Formosa on the spring of 1951, it is conceivable that the TF-77 operation in the Strait of Formosa succeeded in its overtly stated mission, to deter the Chinese from doing so. It's also possible the Chinese were bluffing, or that they changed their minds due to the heavy losses they suffered in the two Spring Offensives in Korea. If the mission of TF-77 was to provoke the Chinese into attacking U.S. forces outside the Korean area of operations then it failed because the Chinese steadfastly refused to take the bait. Given British antipathy to the operation, and the deep penetration of British Intelligence by spies working for the Soviet Union, it is conceivable the Chinese were tipped of to MacArthur's possible ulterior motive. Like many things in history, it is possible no one will ever know for sure.

On 11 April 1951, after increasingly vocal and public disagreements regarding UN/US strategy in the war, President Harry S. Truman relieved General of the Army Douglas MacArthur and replaced him with General Matthew Ridgeway (who did an incredible job of turning the 8th Army around after the serious defeats during the Communist Chinese offensives in the fall and winter of 1950.) The move was controversial with much of the American public, who were also becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the conduct of the war. Although other military commanders, including Navy leaders, kept their opinions out of the public, most agreed with MacArthur that giving the Chinese sanctuary in Manchuria was a lousy way to run a war. The rules of engagement did not allow the Chinese airfields and logistics supply nodes just across the Yalu River in Manchuria to be attacked, which the Communists used to full advantage.

While most U.S. commanders in the region were willing to expand the war into Manchuria, the rest of the United Nations allies (including the British) were emphatically against it. Since the U.S. was providing 90% of the forces and suffering more than 90% of the casualties, many U.S. commanders resented having

the UN allies exercise veto power over the operations, the tail wagging the dog. Nevertheless, overall U.S. strategy remained deeply concerned that the Korean War was a diversion by the Soviet Union to tie down U.S. forces as prelude to a move against Western Europe. Substantial forces (such as Midway-class aircraft carriers) were held back from the Korean theater. Although some members of the Joint Chiefs agreed with MacArthur, they quickly fell in line. MacArthur's apparent increasing desire to resort to the use of atomic weapons against the Chinese was also a factor in Truman's decision.

On 22 April 1951, the Chinese launched their first major spring offensive, routing a South Korean division on the eastern flank before the 1st Marine Regiment stemmed the advance. Over the next five days in fierce fighting, the rest of the 1st Marine Division slowly pushed back and then finally crushed the Chinese, inflicting heavy casualties.

Between 29 and 30 April, heavy cruiser HELENA (CA-75,) light cruiser MANCHESTER (CL-83,) destroyers BAUSELL (DD-845,) ROGERS (DD-876,) AGERHOLM (DD-826,) and ANDERSON (DD-786) shelled targets in the Kojong-Tongchon area of the North Korean coast south of Wonsan as part of an amphibious demonstration to divert Chinese attention. The demonstration was supported by assault transports OKANOGAN (APA-22,) TELFAIR (APA-210) and attack cargo ship WINSTON (AKA-94.) On 1 May, HELENA, having just returned for her second Korean War deployment, was shelling targets near Wonsan when she encountered unusually heavy shore battery fire. HELENA was bracketed by 104 rounds, all of which missed.

On 1 May 1951, carrier HMS GLORY relieved HMS THESEUS in the Yellow Sea, continuing operations with light carrier BATAAN.

Hwachon Dam Strike

As the battle line steadied up in March, approximately where the border had been between North and South Korea at the start of the war, the Hwachon Dam presented a major problem for United Nations forces. Located 50 miles northeast of Seoul, the dam controlled the water level in the Pukhan River, which separated Communist Chinese forces from the U.S. Army, and in the Han River, which flowed through Seoul. Although the dam had briefly been under UN control when the Chinese were pushed back in February and March, the Chinese had regained control by April. The Chinese were then in a position to lower the level of the Pukhan River so it could be forded without bridges in the event the Chinese went on the offensive, which they were planning to do in late April. Conversely, the Chinese could open the flood gates and inundate the valley in the event UN forces tried to cross the river.

The Hwachon dam had been constructed between 1939 and 1944 by a Japanese-owned Korean company, during the long period when Japan occupied Korea. The dam's purpose was to generate hydro-electric power. The concrete dam was 900-feet across, 276-feet high, and 20-feet to 240-feet thick at the base, and was reinforced by rocks on both the upstream and downstream sides.

An attempt was made to destroy the dam by the U.S. Air Force using two B-29 Superfortress bombers with two guided 12,000-pound bombs (ASM-A-1 Tarzon,) which drifted wide and did not have the desired effect. The Chinese soldiers and North Korean technicians responded on 8 April 1951 by opening 16 gates (each 20 by 60 feet) causing the Pukhan River to rise by seven feet, forcing U.S. Army engineers to pull back several pontoon bridges and washing away a railroad abutment. By this point it was clear that destroying the dam and releasing the entire flow of the reservoir was not a good idea. Rather it was only necessary to disable some of the 18 sluiceways.

The 8th Army then attempted to capture the dam via an overland assault, and the 7th Cavalry Regiment and 4th Ranger Company were given the mission, which required a steep uphill fight with inadequate roads to bring up artillery support, against determined dug-in Chinese resistance. The Rangers originally intended to make a night assault by boat across the reservoir, but this was scrapped in favor of a ground assault by the cavalry regiment, which then bogged down. In a belated attempt at an amphibious assault onto the far side of the dam, nine serviceable plywood assault boats were brought up to the reservoir, but only four outboard motors. Delays resulted in the Rangers not getting their entire planned force across the reservoir by daybreak, and they lost the element of surprise. Those that made it across were subjected to Chinese counterattack and some hand-to-hand fighting. The Rangers held out until the evening before withdrawing back across the reservoir and the entire operation was called off.

On 30 April 1951, CTF-77 RADM Oftsie received an urgent request from 8th Army for Navy aircraft to attempt to disable two or more floodgates on the Hwachon Dam. In typical Navy fashion (the "ATO" hadn't been invented yet to slow things down,) a strike was airborne that afternoon. Eight AD Skyraiders of VA-195 off PRINCETON, led by squadron commander Harold "Swede" Carlson, were escorted by five VF-193 F4U Corsairs to provide flak suppression. The Skyraiders were armed with 2,000-LB bombs and racks of 11.5-inch Tiny Tim rockets with 500-LB warheads. Carlson and his wingman flew into the valley first in order to draw fire from ground positions, which were then attacked by the Corsairs. The strike scored multiple hits with bombs and rockets, and all aircraft returned safely, but post-strike photo-reconnaissance by F9F Panther jet confirmed that the gates had suffered no significant damage.

"Plan B," suggested by PRINCETON skipper Captain William Gallery, called for using the dozen Mark 13 aerial torpedoes stowed deep in PRINCETON's

magazine. Torpedoes had not been used since the end of World War II. With some considerable difficulty, due to lack of experience in the ordnance handlers, eight torpedoes were loaded on to AD Skyraiders. With the exception of the Air Group Commander Richard C. Merrick and Carlson, only about three other pilots in the air group had any experience with torpedoes. (Carlson had flown TBM torpedo bombers off escort carrier NEHENTA BAY (CVE-74) during 1944.)

On 1 May 1951, eight AD Skyraiders armed with torpedoes launched from PRINCETON. Five Skyraiders were from VA-195, led by Carlson, and three were from VC-35, with CAG Merrick flying strike lead. Eight VF-192 F4U Corsairs and four VF-193 Corsairs flew escort and flak suppression. The approach to the upstream side of the dam was very difficult, with the aircraft required to fly two-by-two between 4,000-foot mountain peaks. Although the torpedoes were improved versions of the Mark-13's that performed so abysmally early in WWII, the Skyraiders still had to fly a comparatively steady, low and slow approach for the torpedoes to work properly. Besides the steep mountains and anti-aircraft fire, wire obstacles were also a hazard. Fortunately, anti-aircraft fire was much lighter than the day before, possibly from having been worked over so well by the Corsairs.

All eight Skyraiders dropped their torpedo within tolerance. One torpedo went haywire in an erratic off-course pattern and one torpedo was a dud. The other six torpedoes hit and worked as intended. One sluice gate was demolished by two direct hits and a second gate was rendered inoperable as a result of one direct torpedo hit. All aircraft returned safely to the carriers. All the torpedo plane pilots were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for the last aerial torpedo attack in history. VA-195 subsequently changed their name from the "Tigers" to the "Dambusters." The squadron still exists as VFA-195, and F/A-18E Super Hornet squadron stationed in Japan as part of Carrier Air Wing FIVE. The Hwachon Dam still exists and is South Korea's second largest source of electric power.

On 18 May 1951, CAG Merrick was shot down by enemy ground fire and killed. He was awarded a posthumous Navy Cross for the Hwachon Dam and another strike.

“The President of the United States takes pride in presenting the Navy Cross (Posthumously) to Commander Richard Charles Merrick, United States Navy, for extraordinary heroism in connection with military operations against an armed enemy of the United Nations while serving as Commander Air Group NINETEEN (CVG-19,) attached to the USS PRINCETON (CV-37,) and as strike leader against enemy North Korean and Communist Chinese forces in Korea in May 1951. On two separate occasions, displaying extraordinary qualities of leadership and personal heroism, Commander Merrick participated in and led such aggressive attacks against the enemy and enemy installations that the resulting damage imposed a visible setback to the Pukhan River as scheduled (this seems garbled to me,) and of relieving an extremely hard-pressed and threatened unit of our own forces. His bravery in the face of intense enemy fire were characteristic of this outstanding officer whose conduct and performance were at all times an example of the spirit which fosters the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service. He gallantly gave his life for his country.”

On 5 May 1951, the South Korean patrol ship/minesweeper JML-306 struck a mine and sank off Chinampo North Korea, suffering six killed and 18 wounded.

On 6 May 1951, Rear Admiral George R. Henderson relieved RADM Ralph A. Ofstie as Commander of Carrier Division FIVE/Task Force 77, breaking his flag on PRINCETON. RADM Ofstie went on to be Deputy CNO (air) and then Commander SIXTH Fleet, but died while in the job. He had been awarded a Navy Cross as Commander Carrier Division 26 (KITKUN BAY (CVE-71) and GAMBIER BAY (CVE-73)) as part of “Taffy 3” during the Battle off Samar in October 1944.

Between 6-7 May 1951, heavy cruiser HELENA and destroyers ORLECK (DD-886,) FISKE (DD-842,) BUCK (DD-761,) and HMS COCKADE shelled targets in the Kosong/Kansong area near the 38th parallel, inflicting extensive damage to enemy troops, shelters, gun positions and transport facilities. According the subsequent reports, the naval gunfire saved South Korean troops in the area from “complete annihilation.”

On 11 May 1951, destroyer ORLECK bombarded concentrations of enemy troops on the east coast. With the aid of Shore Fire Control Parties (SFCP,) ORLECK inflicted over 300 casualties.

Also on 11 May, at the request of U.S. Fifth Air Force, TF-77 planes attacked four railroad bridge targets in western North Korea, outside TF-77's normal area. The carrier aircraft strikes included 32 AD Skyraiders with two 2,000-LB bombs each, 32 F4U Corsairs for flak suppression, and 16 F9F Panthers for top cover. The attacks dropped three spans on the four bridges. COMNAVFE expressed concern to COMSEVETHFLEET over this expansion of mission and directed that future such requests needed to be routed and approved by higher authority.

On 16 May 1951, the Chinese launched their second major spring offensive, this time threatening to envelope Seoul. As the Chinese Army advanced, the U.S. 8th Army requested that maximum air effort be devoted to close air support, and TF-77 strikes shifted accordingly. 18 May proved to be the worst day to date for TF-77 aircraft as six aircraft were lost to enemy ground fire (five F4U Corsairs, one AD Skyraider,) with three pilots killed, one missing in action and two recovered. Between April and June 1951, total carrier aircraft combat losses included three F9F Panthers, 8 Skyraiders and 19 Corsairs, as enemy ground fire became more intense and more effective.

On 20 May 1951, recently re-commissioned and newly-arrived battleship NEW JERSEY fired her first rounds in combat since WWII near Kansong, North

Korea. The next day, while shelling targets off Wonsan, NEW JERSEY was hit by a shore battery round that bounced off turret No. 1. However, one crewman was killed and three wounded by a near-miss. The same day on the west coast, British commandos conducted a raid and demonstration near Cho-Do Island, with gunfire support provided by heavy cruiser TOLEDO (CA-133) and air-spotting provided by Marine aircraft off light carrier BATAAN (CVL-29.)

On 23 May 1951, LSMR "rocket ships" were used for the first time during the siege of Wonsan, as two LSMR's fired a total 4,903 rockets at enemy concentrations in a 35-minute period, along with shelling by a light cruiser and destroyers as part of coordinated Operation Fireball. The North Koreans quickly cleared troops out of rocket range. However, enemy shore batteries near Wonsan were unusually active on seven successive days, and on the night of 24 May an unusual amount of small craft activity was detected by radar. Light cruiser MANCHESTER (CL-83) and destroyer BRINKLEY BASS (DD-887) fired on the contacts and broke up the enemy formation. At daybreak, four sampans were still afloat with 11 dead and one wounded aboard. MANCHESTER reported that the sampans had each been reinforced to carry four M-26 moored contact mines each

On 29 May 1951, destroyer STICKELL (DD-888) and patrol frigate BURLINGTON (PF-51) put a raiding party ashore near Songjin, which destroyed three steel-decked junks with hand-grenades. STICKELL conducted a number of missions putting South Korean guerillas and intelligence collection teams ashore on the east coast of North Korea.

On 31 May 1951, the re-activated and recommissioned heavy cruiser LOS ANGELES (CA-135) arrived in theater with RADM Arliegh Burke embarked as Commander Cruiser Division FIVE.

On 1 June 1951, carrier PHILIPPINE SEA, deployed since July 1950, commenced return stateside and was relieved by BON HOMME RICHARD (CV-31.)

BON HOMME RICHARD served in the last months of WWII and was decommissioned at the end of the war. She was recommissioned in January 1951 in response to the Korean War. (Of note, the original spelling of John Paul Jones' ship was BONHOMME RICHARD. This was misspelled as BON HOMME RICHARD on CV-31 but then corrected for amphibious assault ship BONHOMME RICHARD (LHD-6.) LHD-6 was decommissioned on 21 April 2021 after being deemed beyond economical repair following the fire that started 12 July 2020.

In early June, the U.S. 8th Army requested a change in air strike strategy, which was granted by senior leadership. This became "Operation Strangle." Rather than attacking logistics lines running through North Korea, the great majority of air attacks would be focused on the roads south of the 39th parallel, i.e., in the immediate rear of the Chinese forward lines. This would prove ineffective as the Chinese had over 20,000 trucks and could replace them from the sanctuary in Manchuria as fast as they could be destroyed. The Chinese Army subsisted on much less than U.S. or UN forces, so each truck could support more Chinese soldiers than U.S. or UN soldiers. There were also numerous alternate ways for the trucks to pass around damaged roads and bridges. If the trucks couldn't get through, the Chinese made extensive use of pack animals and humans to carry the loads through to the front. In the meantime, the Chinese and North Koreans had time to rebuild or repair many of the roads, railroads bridges and tunnels that had been previously destroyed or damaged, at significant cost, further north, to the great frustration of both Air Force and Naval Aviators.

On the night of 2-3 June 1951, fast transport BEGOR (APD-127) with Underwater Demolition Team 3 (UDT-3) landed a force of South Korean guerillas on Song-Do Island on the east coast of North Korea near Kojo (south of Wonsan.) Another raiding party was put ashore near Songin from destroyer RUPERTUS

(DD-851,) however after receiving small arms fire, the party returned to the ship with three North Korean captives.

Between 2 and 5 June Commander-in-Chief Pacific Fleet (ADM Arthur W. Radford,) Commander U.S. Naval Forces Far East (VADM C. Turner Joy) and Commander SEVENTH Fleet (VADM Harold M. Martin) embarked on battleship NEW JERSEY for conferences at Pusan and battle area tour off Wonsan. This was repeated on 27 June with Chief of Naval Operations Forrest P. Sherman, three weeks before he died of a sudden series of heart attacks.

On 10 June 1951, in an ongoing effort to increase the effectiveness of night strikes on enemy logistics movements (which occurred almost entirely at night) two Navy PB4Y-2 aircraft (Navy version of B-24 four-engine bomber) dropped flares to support night attacks by Marines aircraft of VMF(N)-513.

USS WALKE Mine Strike

On 12 June 1951, destroyer WALKE (DD-723) suffered a major explosion while escorting TF-77 carriers 60 miles off the coast of North Korea. The explosion devastated berthing compartments, killing 26 Sailors and wounding over 35 more. The ship listed heavily and at one point was in danger of sinking. Nevertheless, under the command of Commander Marshall Fery Thompson, the crew succeeded in stopping the flooding and saving their ship. Four crewmen were awarded the Silver Star for repeatedly going into the damaged compartments to retrieve wounded Sailors. The cause of the explosion was assessed to be a drifting North Korean mine. However, given the distance from the coast, there was speculation that it might have been a torpedo. However, there were no North Korean ships left on the east coast capable of conducting the attack, and although rumors persisted (and still persist) of Soviet submarine involvement, no evidence has surfaced (sorry) of that. There was evidence that numerous mines were deliberately set

adrift by the North Koreans and in this case, the “big ocean, little ship” theory failed, and WALKE was extremely unlucky.

On 14 June, destroyer-minesweeper THOMPSON (DMS-38) had just destroyed a railroad bridge and was conducting “junk busting” operations near Songjin within 40mm range of the beach when four enemy coastal defense guns in hiding opened fire. Some reports state THOMPSON was hit 13 or 14 times, but the only serious damage appeared to be a hit on the flying bridge that killed three Sailors and wounded three more and knocked out her primary fire control system. Despite this, THOMPSON returned fire, destroying one gun and damaging another.

On 20 June 1951, destroyer BRINKLEY BASS (DD-887) became the first to experiment with coordinated ship-air ground attack in conjunction with U.S. Air Force B-26 twin-engine bombers. The ship would identify targets for the B-26's and the B-26's would identify targets for naval gunfire that the ship couldn't see. The tactic was fairly successful and would be repeated.

With the costly failure of both Chinese spring offensives, the Chinese reached the conclusion that they did not have the logistics capability to drive the UN forces off the Korean Peninsula (something senior Chinese military leaders told Mao Tse-tung very early on.) In addition, large numbers of Chinese troops were surrendering. The Chinese then shifted to a mostly defensive hold strategy. On the United Nations side, there was no appetite among civilian political leaders to resume large-scale offensive operations. The battlelines became increasingly static as stalemate set in; the same hilltops would change hands multiple times, at great cost. The first significant negotiations for an end to the conflict commenced in July, but these would get bogged down (to a significant degree over the fate of the surrendered Chinese soldiers, many of whom did not want to go back to China.) The war and casualties would drag on for two more years, as would the

largely futile attacks against Chinese and North Korean logistics lines. Within the United States, disillusionment with the war continued to increase.

Sources include; "The U.S. Navy and the Korean War: Chronology of U.S. Pacific Fleet Operations, January – December 1951," "Attack From the Sky: Naval Air Operations in the Korean War" by Richard C. Knott: Naval Historical Center, 2004. "Such Men as These: The Story of the Navy Pilots Who Flew the Deadly Skies Over Korea," by David Sears: Da Capo Press, 2010. "Holding the Line: The Naval Air Campaign in Korea," by Thomas McKelvey Cleaver: Osprey, 2019. "The Swatow Incident: Prelude to Total Victor – Or Nuclear Disaster?" by L. Tracy Winslow: Archway Publishing, 2019.
