Monday Maritime Matters

Description

Blogging has been light, but today, while checking the normal places, I find a picture posted by my virtual shipmate, SteelJaw Scribe, showing one of my haze gray homes about to get hit by 2 2.75â€³ rockets from a Mexican Navy helicopter.

CONOLLY (DD-979) absorbing naval gunfire during SINKEX 4/29/2009

USS CONOLLY (DD-979) was sunk 4/29/2009 off Jacksonville, FL as part of the UNITAS 50 multinational exercise. She was my â€œhomeâ€• from late September, 1983 until early May 1985. I served as the Engineer Officer on my first Department Head assignment. Reading that link, Iâ€™m proud to see, even without a responding combat system and damage control teams, it sure took a lot of ordnance to put he down. Sure the â€œBUFFsâ€• were laid on for some high altitude fun with Harpoons, but CONOLLY was gone by then. More info on the entire exercise, to include the other SINKEX photos, are here.

Update 8/18/2009: Found the YouTube post by a very uppity USS DONALD COOK Crew. None the less, she took a beating and keep aflaot. She sure made them earn their pay, while giving them valuable anti-Surface warfare experience. Letâ€™s go to the video!

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Back to the original post:

The picture at SteelJawâ€™s place, of course started the nostalgia engine running. Irony: I stepped aboard CONOLLY in the middle of UNITAS XXIV. She went to her demise during UNITAS L. The next thought: USS CONOLLY was to be the one DD-963 to be preserved, and not sunk. The plan was for CONOLLY to become a museum in the Great Lakes area. A lot of energy had been put towards that goal, but last year, the game plan changed. Given that determination, the PAUL F FOSTER (DD-964) is currently the Self Defense Test Ship out at Port Hueneme, CA, and is the one last hope of a single DD-963 hull, of the 31 built to replace the GEARING Class destroyers from WWII.

The SPRUANCE Class was built to stay in service for sometime, and having commissioned DD-984, USS LEFTWICH, the 22nd hull of the class, there were many open spaces on the ship for future growth. They even named them as such, and most ships had made the â€œEW Growth Area #2â€• the main shipsâ€™ classroom on the 03 Level aft of the bridge. Years later, as I inspected the combat systems readiness of the Atlantic Fleet, I saw those spaces mostly full of equipment, taken over by OUTBOARD installations and various other new gear.

LEFTWICH weighed in at a heavy, compared to a DD-710 Class hull, at 7900 tons. Conolly was in the same configuration when I reported aboard. After CONOLLYâ€™s first Regular Overhaul (ROH), which took place at Portland, ME as the first ship to use the recently acquired Bath Irons Works facility in Portland, we left for sea trials, as the first non-test ship for Tomahawk of the class, sporting two huge armored box launchers (ABLs) on the focâ€™sle, two MK-15 CIWS mounts and the Mk-23 Target Acquisition System (TAS), with 300 tons of lead ingots taking up space in my fuel tanks as counter weight, making displace right about 10,000 tons. The shipalt to add Kevlar armor to the superstructure, however, was canceled, due to the miscalculations the engineers had made, as one other ship listed significantly in Pascagoula, when the reflated her after drydock.

I stepped aboard her in Puerto Mont, Chile, having been picked up at the airport there by then LT John Taylor, the Weapons Officer, who I had served with while an instructor at Fleet Combat Training Center, Atlantic (FCTCL), just before this assignment. CDR Harry Maixner was the Commanding Officer, LCDR Stan Weeks the XO, LCDR Mike Moe the Operations Officer, LT Karl Boggott the Supply Officer. The MPA was LT Al Curry, Electrical Officer was ENS Nolan Hale, and ENS Mike Tow was the DCA. LTJG Mike House, was COMMO at the time, and later became my DCA, when Mike moved to MPA during overhaul, when Al left. GSMC(SW) â€œJCâ€• Weigman was my only khaki clad enlisted man in the propulsion side, with HTC Bob Conklin in Damage Control. LT Bill Goodwin was the Engineer, and his men had a great deal of respect for him. Big shoes to fill, and no time in the department behind me. Mike Moe had been the Engineer before Bill and had split toured aboard to Operations Officer. Harry Maixner was a no nonsense gunnery guy, out to run the best ship. Ask the crew of the USS SCOTT (DDG-996) what helium balloons and empty 5â€³ powder casing can do to your tactical picture late at night, if you get the chance. Harry was going to win, and he had the tactical acumen to pull it off, too.

It was a great tour and I had asked not to go thereâ€¦not the ship, but the billet. I had spent two sea tours above deck, and one ashore teaching combat systems. In SWOS Department Head School, I asked to stay in the Combat Systems arena. I figured I was a dead ringer for a FFG out of Mayport, as I had been teaching Pre-Comm for FFG Combat Systems teams, CSOs and CO/XOs at FCTCL. Wouldnâ€™t even have to send me via the pipelineâ€¦I was teaching i. Nope, my detailer sent me to be a Snipe. Later in my career, he was XO on USS BRISCOE, and when I was visiting another shipmate there, I asked him why. His answer: â€œYour record said you could do it.â€•

I stepped aboard into a situation where the Engineers had just had to rebuilt the clutch-brake assembly for GTM 2A in place. Turns out it was the first time the fleet had seen it and even the civilian engineers out of San Diego who had flown to Valpariso (the port city for Santiago) had no clue what to do. The GSMs, lead by JC Weigman wrote the procedures on the fly. That work was adopted for use everywhere. A few days later, while conducting NGFS firings at Tic Toc in Chile, the same casualty occurred on GTM 2B. I told Bill Goodwin and CAPT Maixner I would still sign the relieving letter as Engineer Officer, knowing the caliber of the crew. A few nights later, specifically 180032SEP83 local, we were steaming at 22 knots (top speed for one engine online) in the South Pacific and GTM 2A failedâ€¦catostrophically. I was Officer of the Deck, and called CCS on the 21MC â€œWhatâ€™s happening, CCS?â€• â€œGTM2A is offline, starting GTM 2B, sirâ€• I grabbed the tactical radio and informed USS SCOTT of our casualty, then called the Captain. Capt Maixner took the report and told me to always notify him FIRST. Aye, aye, sir!

I completed the midwatch without further incident and in the morning, after the system had cooled, I was on the cat walk aft of GTM 2As exhaust plenum looking in the manhole cover, at Al Curry, who had

a double handful of black sand. I asked what happened to the engine? He held up his hands. Somewhere, in a box, I have a quart fuel sample bottle, 2/3s full of that fine grained metal, with a black tape label stating â€œGTM 2A 0032 18 SEP 83.â€•

We changed the engine out in Montevideo, Uruguay, in a storm, alongside a pier, using a floating crane. It was done by a crew of dedicated sailors, who, despite the bending of the rules, the disappearance of a few cases of steaks from the galley, and some Shipâ€™s ball caps and plaques, in one hour less than â€œebook,â€• (83 hours vice 84) and when we went for a start, it had all been done correctly. Nothing had to be redone. Ohâ€¦that repair had been preceded by a 35 straight hour rebuilt of the other clutch brake, at sea, because the USAF decided they wanted to see Uruguay, and didnâ€™t want to wait until we reached Brazil, which was the plan. The analysis showed the main fuel control value failed wide open and the excess fuel poured into the combustion chamber caused thermal stress on the high speed turbine and power turbine blades, which caused the destruction, not human error.

There are more stories about my time on CONOLLY Some are in the blog on this search.

It was my second most rewarding tour, but not by much. My XO tour was shaped by my experiences as an Engineer, where I learned that some departments never sleep, and are countered upon for a myriad of things, generally missed by those who walk the upper decks, and just have the things they need provided by the â€œsnipes.â€•

I met the CO and he told me I would be standing bridge watches. I reminder him I was his new Engineer Officer. He told me he had plenty of good engineers, he needed more people to drive the ship. It didnâ€™t make much sense then, but soon I was standing bridge watches, first to transit the Chilean Inland Waterway.

Enough of the reminiscing, but Iâ€™ll say this: We were the first 963 to refuela another ship at sea. I was thereâ€¦I did blog it. If any of you PACFLEET guys with a good PAO come around, sorry, you didnâ€™t do it first.

Bottom line: The men of the Engineering Department aboard CONOLLY trusted me enough to let me think I was leading them, and to figure out how to get an â€œEngineerâ€™s Chairâ€• installed in CCS, next to the EOOWâ€™s Desk during overhaul. I used the lessons they taught me (â€œThere are only gremlins if you admit it,â€• â€œSir, thereâ€™s a short in the galley and Weâ€™re not sure when we can find it, but we sure donâ€™t want anyone hurt,â€• and the value of â€œBrain Booksâ€•) I used then, and several to this day. I owe them a thank you for their patience and mentoring.

Category

1. History
2. Military
3. Military History
4. Navy

Tags

1. "Sea Stories"
2. CONOLLY
3. DD-979

4. DD979
5. Engineer Officer
6. Engineering
7. Navy Life
8. Sea Time
9. USS CONOLLY

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