â€œYou Ever Back One of These Out of Station?â€•

Description

UNITAS, itâ€™s a wonderful deal, which, as one of my commenters noted to my post here, is no longer. The â€œdeploymentâ€• is no longer done.

I arrived aboard USS CONOLLY (DD-979) in late September, 1983. Assigned as Engineer Officer, I felt it was my duty to quickly and properly qualify as Engineering Officer of the Watch (EOOW). My CO, CDR Harry Maxiner, had other plans. Reporting aboard in Puerto Mont, Chile, the ship was to begin a transit down the Chilean Inland Waterway. That breathtaking passage is about 1/2 the length of Chile, with the foothills of the Andes to port and jagged island and smaller mountain chains to the starboard side. It is a route taken because the South Pacific at that time of year is very rough. Chilean Naval Officers are the pilots for the transit. There is a group of them assigned with this as their duty for their Navy and visitors such as us.

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Capt Maxiner told me I would be standing watches on the bridge. I was disappointed, but, orders is orders. Thatâ€™s another interesting story.

We would be arriving home in Mid-December and then, after leave and standdown (30 days), we would be prepping the ship for a complex overhaul. For 10 months, we would be held captive by Supervisor of Ships in Portland, ME, so Bath Iron Works could do the work on us. That over haul would go from Feb through Dec. After that would be some local work ups and qualification of newly installed Tomahawk, MK23 Target Acquisition System (TAS) and MK15 CIWS. Next in the operational schedule would be a trip to that wonderful garden spot we just call â€œGitmoâ€• for 6 weeks of â€œRefresher Training.â€• By my rotation date, I would be off the ship before she sailed to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and headed to the second half of my Department Head tour.

In order to be selectable for Command at Sea, there is a (go figure) checklist. One of the items (again, go figure) is demonstrating the ability to handle a ship. Included in the list of ship handling evolution was taking the ship alongside another. The other evolutions didnâ€™t require the presence of another ship, so they could be done entering any port, or when the ship was independently streaming.

I had three months when we would be operating around other ships, and then the overhaul, then Iâ€™d depart (if the plan would hold for my normal rotation). I needed to go alongside a ship while on UNITAS, or Iâ€™d not get the option later. Not good for the Fitness Report to leave out â€œqualified for Command at Sea.â€•

While I stood bridge watches for the first month, the alongside opportunities didnâ€™t present themselves. I went to the Senior Watch Officer, at the time Lt Mike Moe and asked for him to put me on the list for the next time weâ€™d be refueling at sea. He told me the junior officers needed the handling time and I was a â€œproven commodity.â€• â€œThatâ€™s true Mike, but Iâ€™m staying in and we have no idea how many of them will go to Department Head School.â€• It didnâ€™t work, he said maybe later. I countered with my short time window to do this, and he wasnâ€™t terribly concerned.

I went up to the bridge and found the Captain on the port bridge wing. I began to tell him about my desire to wrap up my shiphandling this cruise. He looked at me, listening, and when I was done, said â€œOk, go take the conn (the person who is legally able to give engine and rudder orders, usually the Junior Officer of the Deck).â€• I looked at him, and it must have been in a funny way, then he said â€œWe just got ordered to go alongside the MINEAS GERIASâ€• (an aircraft carrier of the Brazilian Navy).

I took the conn and we took waiting station starboard, hoisted â€œRomeoâ€• at the dip, indicating we were ready to approach. The Romeo flag on the MINEAS GERIAS was â€œclosed upâ€• and we smartly increased speed and began to come alongside. This process requires a lot of attention to detail, a throrough understanding of the handling characteristics of your ship, and hydrodynamic interactions between ships close aboard. Iâ€™ll cover that in another post.

I settled the ship in at the desired position alongside, at 120 ft separation, and matched the speed of the carrier. We remained there about 10 minutes, then received a signal to return to our screening station. Capt Maxiner looked at me and said â€œHave you ever backed one of these out of station?â€•

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The conventional wisdom is you depart from your place alongside by increasing speed, and, until your stern is clear of the other vesselâ€™s bow, and then you begin to steer away. Capt Maxiner was suggesting that we go backwards to leave.

The SPRUANCE Class Destroyers were the first combatant class to be fitted with controllable, reversible propellers (CRP). The shaft turns the same way all the time (in this case, the two shafts counter rotate as well, turning inboard from their respective sides), with large hydraulics physically changing pitch on the blades. Because of this, you can reverse your course very quickly, since the engines donâ€™t have to be stopped to turn the shafts in the opposite direction.

UPDATE: 74 of Bow Ramp corrected me. in the comments: â€œFor the record, the Ashville class gunboats were the first US Navy combatants with CRP shafts. We could go from DIW to 40 knots in under 60 seconds and from Ahead Flank to DIW in 300 feet (under two ship lengths.)â€• I stand corrected. Thanks!

â€œNoâ€• I said. â€œDo what I sayâ€• was the next order. â€œAll back flank.â€• â€œALL BACK FLANK!â€• I spoke into the handset to the helm. The ship quickly began to shudder as we rapidly decelerated. The eyes on the people on the MINEAS GERIAS got big as pie platesâ€¦.The carrier, proceeding at 12 knots, with us now approaching 0, pulled ahead quickly. The four turbines whined as the fuel pumps sent the maximum amount of liquid into the combustion chambers on the GE LM-2500 main engines. Our bow rapidly cleared their stern. Our screening station was on the port bow of the MINEAS GERIAS, so coming away from her starboard side, we had to get around her to carry out or orders. â€œALL AHEAD FLANK THREE!â€• was the next command to the lee helmsman. The engines were up to speed, so now it was up to the hydraulics of the Byrd-Johnson system to change our direction. â€œLEFT FULL RUDDER!â€• â€œLEFT FULL RUDDER, AYE, SIR!â€• came back in the amplified speaker. The crew of the MINEAS GERIAS was moving aft to watch us back out of station. â€œRUDDER AMIDSHIPS!â€• as I saw we could steer straight ahead and clear the transom of the carrier. â€œCombat, course to station!â€•

As we secured the navigation team on the bridge, Capt Maxiner looked at me and asked â€œIs that what you needed to do?â€• then laughed a big belly laugh, as he sat perched in the captainâ€™s chair

on the bridge wing. â€œYes, sir, that was it.â€•

While slicing through the ocean at 32 knots may not sound near as exciting as some of the things Neptunus Lex graces us with, itâ€™s still a trip to be able to haul about 8000 tons of Tin Can about with such grace and flair. Like everything else, when you do it right, it looks great. On the other hand, if not, it can be scraped paint and ruined careers. Iâ€™ll also say, with certainty, no one ever was heard to yell â€œDo some of that SWO (Surface Warfare Officer) stuff!â€• just in case you were wondering, even when we looked as cool as Tom Cruise, sunglasses on, short hair blowing in the stiff breeze across the deck, while the ship surged along with â€œa bone in her teeth.â€•

Captain Maxiner was a tactician, ship handler and gunner, with the heart of a warrior. One post I hope to get to is his use of 5â€³ gun powder casing tubes, and weather ballons to kick the USS SCOTTâ€™s â€œcan.â€•

Stay tuned, same station, but unknown time, for the next episode.

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Date Created
May 25, 2005
Author
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