â€œWe Donâ€™t Have Enough Fuel to Reach Africaâ€•

Description

History, itâ€™s fun stuff, especially when you are present.

Each year, the Navy sends a group of ships, to exercise with the navies of Central and South America. The cruise is named â€œUNITASâ€• and has been a long tradition of showing the flag in the southern part of the Western Hemisphere. While there is good professional, at sea experience to be had, and the opportunity to meet with your professional counterparts from other countries, there also is a requirement to enter port and attended Ã¢â‚¬Å“mandatory fun.Ã¢â‚¬Â• More on what that looks like is a topic to be reserved for a later post.

In the later part of 1983, two of the ships of the UNITAS task force were detached to go on the West African Training Cruise (WATC). One ship was mine, USS CONOLLY (DD-979), where I was assigned as Engineer Officer. The other was the USS JESSE L BROWN (FF-1089).

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We had both been import in Brazil, in a port north of Rio de Janeiro. The BROWN was next to the pier, and we had been nestedÂ• (moored to the outboard side) to the BROWN. The day before departure, both ships were scheduled to refuel. The hoses first went to the BROWN, and upon her completion of fueling, the hose would be brought across her deck to our fueling stations. I had my fueling team stay aboard that day, anticipating it would be our time to fuel about noon.

About mid-morning, the Duty Engineer called me and said BROWN was done fueling and we were getting ready to receive the hoses. I recall thinking that had been a very fast refueling, but, ordered the engineers to get us fueled.

We sailed east the next morning without incident, the BROWN leaving port right behind us. Our destination was Liberville, Gabon, and hers Equatorial Guinea. While we were Ã¢â‚¬Å“proceeding independently,Ã¢â‚¬Â• because our destinations were close together on the continent of Africa, we would end up sailing close to one another for about half of the transit across the Southern Atlantic Ocean.

We sailed in the warm, almost empty ocean for several days, when we received a message from the BROWN: â€œWe donâ€™t have enough fuel to reach Africa.â€•Â• Exacerbating the problem tremendously was the fact that the USS SEATTLE (AOE-3), who had sailed south to meet the UNITAS group for exercises with the Brazilian Navy, had already headed back north the States. CONOLLY was the only ship within thousands of miles that could help.

No destroyer is designed to give fuel away. That being said, we have to get fuel down from the topside refueling stations, and itÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s just a matter of pipes and valves, and having some sort of pumping system to reverse the flow. There is a very minimal capability to do this, in particular for a condition where you may have to de-fuel the ship. Having the competent crew that we did, I sat down with CDR Harry Maxiner (the Captain) and LT John Taylor, the Weapons Officer, and a few key players to figure out how to transfer fuel at sea to another ship. We had two options. One was to rendezvous with the

BROWN, have one ship go to all stop and rig fenders, so the other ship could come alongside and moor together. Option two was to pass the fuel via connected replenishment while underway, using a manila Ã¢â‚¬Å“highlineÃ¢â‚¬Â• and 2 Ã‚Â½ inch fire hose as the delivery method. Option two had the least impact on the arrival schedule in Africa for both ships. In any case, the transfer rate of fuel would be very slow, so to stop at sea for a better part of a day would put us both behind in meeting our â€œshow the flagâ€• commitments.

LT Al Curry, my Main Propulsion Assistant, GSMC(SW)Â• Weigman, and men of Ã¢â‚¬Å“MÃ¢â‚¬Â• Division got the plan together for using our fuel transfer pumps (used to take fuel from the storage or Ã¢â‚¬Å“bunkerÃ¢â‚¬Â• tanks to the service or Ã¢â‚¬Å“dayÃ¢â‚¬Â• tanks) to send the fuel about 50 feet up in the fuel piping, where it would cross over to the BROWN in the fire hoses. John Taylor put the Boatswains Mates to work laying out the lines, hoses and blocks necessary to make a RAS (replenishment at sea) rig.

We rendezvoused with BROWN and Captain Maxiner set it up for us to make the approach (meaning BROWN would sail at a set course and speed and we would come up from astern of her, off to one side about 120 ft, at a higher speed, until we were alongside her where the location of our fueling station and her receiving station were across from each other, then match BROWNâ€™s speed). The best part about this is that meant our officers and crew would get the experience of shiphandling in close quarters, and all BROWN would have to do was make sure their helmsman steered his course.

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The approach was generally uneventful except for our smirks at our peers, who, Iâ€™d conjecture, had been too anxious to get out for a last day of liberty in Brazil (and let me just add, liberty in Brazil is wonderful), than making sure they had been â€œtopped offâ€• prior to sailing. It is customary when a ship comes alongside a delivery ship, such as the USS MILWAUKEE (AOR-2), my first duty at sea, the delivery ship would announce over the topside 1MC circuit (the loudspeakers) something to the effect of â€œAboard the USS JESSE L BROWN, welcome alongside USS CONOLLY. You are the first ship alongside this deployment. Standby for shot lines fore and aft!â€•Â• After that, the receiving ship deck crew would have the fueling station supervisor blow a long whistle burst and direct the signalman to indicate readiness to accept the shot line. The delivery ship station crew blew a whistle and the directed the gunnerâ€™s mate to shoot. The passing of the hoses to the BROWN as planned and we pumped about 30K gallons of fuel to her in the next four hours.

It was history. No SPRUANCE Class destroyer had yet done this. To document the event, we sent a message off to Destroyer Squadron TEN, our parent command. In response, we got a message back, telling us they would log in the successful completion of a â€œZ-26-S Delivering Fuelâ€• exercise in our training and readiness matrix. In the TREAD Manual, that was not one we had been required to do (for obvious reasons). They gave us a score of 100%.

The BROWN proceeded to Equatorial Guinea, making it safely. We still had plenty of fuel to arrive in Liberville on time. We had bragging rights for the first, and gloating rights over our counterparts aboard BROWN. We didnâ€™t have any close interaction with them for the rest of the cruise, such as a port visit together, where IÃ¢â‚¬â„¢m sure my Ã¢â‚¬Å“snipesÃ¢â‚¬Â• would have made the point of who was better in the local bars. Our homeport was Norfolk, and the BROWNâ€™s was Charleston, so we went on our separate ways, returning home in mid-December of 83.

Our mistake on the CONOLLY was to not have the Public Affairs Officer write up the event for an article in All Hands, or Surface Warfare Magazine. A few years later, one of the Pacific Fleet SPRUANCEs did

the same type of operation, and they took the time to grab that overworked junior officer and make him draft and submit the article to Surface Warfare Magazine.

I was there, I know who was really first.

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