A Journey into History â€“ Part VI

Description

Part I, Part II, Part III,Part IV, Part V,
Part VII, Part VIII

Part IX

The operations had been intense. Standing Port and Starboard watches in pairs, it was usually LCDR Al McCollum and I. Al was a P-3C ATACCO guy, and I had spent my earlier years â€œdrivingâ€• ships. For two decision makers running 9 ships, all the ASW related air assets from three carriers and all the helo equipped â€œsmall boys,â€• and then all the shore based airplanes out of Rota and Sigonella kept us pretty busy.

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We had a lot of work up time, and at our prior sea tours, a pretty good bit of ASW work. This was different. For the first thing, there was no way to beg, borrow, steal, or sneak a peek at a schedule of events (SOE) for the â€œbad guys.â€• Now the â€œbad guysâ€• were not some our our guys, or allied guys. They were the real deal with a twist on top of it. Twist: The Soviets had subs in the Med, and the Libyans had subs in the Med. Why was that sigificant you ask? Well, the Libyans had purchased Foxtrot class diesel subs from the Soviet Union.



Guess what the Soviets had deployed to the Med during this episode? You got it, Foxtrotsâ€¦.So, since there is potentiall now â€œdaytimeâ€• when you are doing ASW, meaning you canâ€™t hang back until the sun rises to get a visual to confirm your other sensor information, if a subsurface contact, that had the acoustic and other characteristics was dtected in a threatening posture, would an order to engage bring on WWIII with the Soviets, or would we be the heros? Thankfully, we never got to find out.

It had been a long day, Mar 24th, 1986, punctuated by some fun in the late afternoon. Khadiffi had two SA-5 missiles at our Combat Air Patrol (CAP) F-14s flying over the Gulf of Sidra. This fell under that magical definition of â€œhostile actâ€• in the Roles of Engagement that every warrior longs for, as the response that follows is solidly supported. Shooting back on â€œhostile intentâ€• is a lot stickier. So, the â€œSAM! SAM! Vicinity SURT!â€• calls fill the net. The strange thing is the SA-5, being a semi-active guided missile, needs a separate tracking radar to be diriecting energy at the target, thet the missile receivers pick up and fly to. The â€œilluminatorâ€• radar signal wasnâ€™t detected, indicating the missiles had been fired in a purely ballistic mode, and therefore had a snowballs chance of hitting a target, unless the pilot was dumb enough to fly into the missileâ€™s path. Our were not. They banked clear of the area, and moments later, as I recall, AGM-88 HARM Missiles were fired from the rails of the waiting A-7 Corsair IIs, that had been trolling along below the search radar horizon of the SAM sites. Oh, yes, the HARMs did their job quite nicely, taking out the search radars.

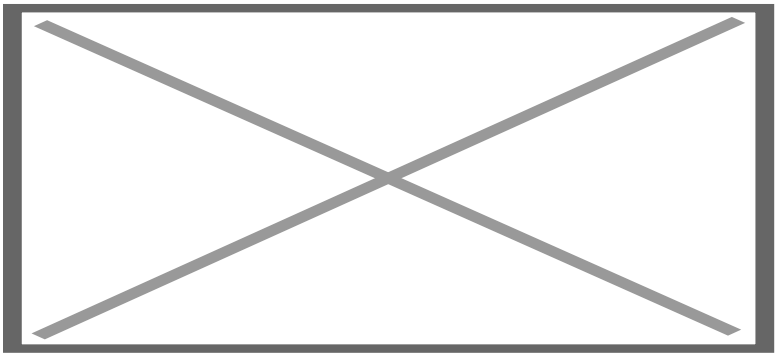
So Khadaffi now had his â€œmoney shotâ€• for his Arab brothers, showing how he took on the great Satan, with out the risk of actually taking out any US military assets, which had the demonstrated potential of leaving us in a quandry over how to respond. I recall debating with CDR SMith, the CCDG-8 Intel Officer and ROE Officer, if that firing truly constituted a hostile act, since the missiles technically couldnâ€™t have hit anything. He assured me it was a hostile act.

From WDBASE:

> On March 24, six SA-5s were launched from the new missile base at Surt against American aircraft. None was hit, however, because the SA-5, with a range of 240 kilometers, could threaten high-altitude reconnaissance aircraft over the Gulf of Sidra but was relatively ineffective against high-performance jet fighters. Subsequently, the missile site was put out of action by carrier-based A-6 Intruders firing High-Speed Anti-Radiation Missiles (HARMs), that homed in on the Libyansâ€™ radar guidance signals. A second strike followed the next day to knock out a replacement radar unit. Although Soviet technicians were believed to be present to oversee the installation and operation of the SA-5 batteries, none was reported injured in the exchanges.
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> At the same time, a French-built Combattante-class missile attack craft was destroyed when it approached United States Navy ships protecting the aircraft carriers. The Libyan vessel was hit by two Harpoon missiles launched from an A-7 Corsair aircraft

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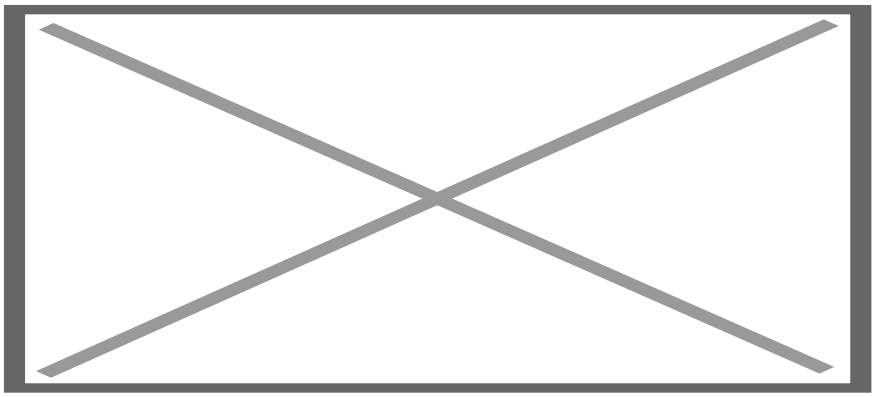
I disagree. The SAMs didnâ€™t hit our planes because they didnâ€™t have radar signals to guide on. Also, about 2000 (8 PM) that evening, one of the A-6 Intruders found a Libyan La Combatante class patrol gunboat sailing north of Tripoli (not an A-7, the call sign of the spotting aircraft was in the 600 series (602 I think), which would have been one of the A-6 squadrons). We had the Surface Combat Air Patrol (SUCAP) radio circuit patch up to our watch station and heard the report. The PG was steaming along like it didnâ€™t have a care in the world, and I suspect they were not alerted to the fact that US forces had been engaged that afternoon. Anyhow, the ASUW radio talker asked what load 602 had aboard, and the response was â€œROCKEYE.â€• ^02 was ordered to â€œTake the La Combattante.â€• and acknowledged the order. We waited several minutes, the net was silent, when finally the ASUWC takler asked for a â€œBDAâ€• (battle damage assessment). 602 came back and said â€œwe got them with Harpoon!â€• The next comment was â€œBut you had ROCKEYEâ€• â€œ6XX had Harpoon, so we had them do it.â€• we figured 602 was a nugget crew and were afraid of a close in pass against a gunboat with a surface to air capabillity, so they got on Sqaudron Common and asked if anyone up had Harpoons loaded. Next over the net was direction to use ROCKEYE, and then look for survivors. The two attack sank the La Combattane. This was the first combat use of Harpoon.



About an hour later, we heard that the F-14 in CAP Station 5 was yelling about taking â€œTriple Aâ€• fire (anti-aircraft artillery). The USS YORKTOWN (CG-48) hustled off to the west to fix the problem, and reported a very high speed target inbound. They also fired Harpoons at the target, but there were no indications of any targets being hit. Post combat analysis showed the fog of war may have settled in and the AN/SPY-1 system may have had a spurious signal display, as the â€œtargetâ€• was showing altitude and much faster speed than the La Combattante could acheive. For the next few days, O mulled over the sequence of events and went up and pulled out our plots from that evening. I back plotted CAP Station 5 from the operational tasking of that night and the area where the A-6s had attacked the La Combattante several hours earlier and CAP Station 5 we very close together. I suspect the aircrew saw the aftermath of the sinking (maybe not fully sunk by that time) ship and thought the fires and secondary explosions were AAA.

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My watch was to end at midnight, but as was the custom of the Commodore, things got crazy, and the relief by LCDR Steve Neheim didnâ€™t happen until almost 0200. Just as I was preparing to leave the watchstation and get some sleep. The USS SARATOGAâ€™s CDC reported â€œtwo high speed contact, suspected OSA IIs, approaching at high speed from the north west!â€•



That report, when asked to be confirmed and was reported as â€œtwo OSA boats, inbound at 42 kts NW!â€• will make the hair on the back of your neck stand up and the muscle memory of many trips to GTMO for refresher training comes back in a flashâ€¦More to followâ€¦itâ€™s late and Iâ€™m already a day late getting this out. Stay tuned!

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