On Power Plants and Breakaway Musicâ€¦

Description

Ships have â€œBreakawayâ€• music and flags. These are used at the end of an alongside replenishment, when, as soon as all lines connecting the ships are cleared, the throttles are advanced and the replenished ship moves ahead of the one it replenished from, on the same course, at first. This is when the Officer of the Deck usually yells into the pilot house for the Boatswainâ€™s Mate of the Watch (BMOW) to hold the 1MC (General Announcing system) mike to a cassette player (and Iâ€™m sure now a CD player), to play the music over the weather deck (topside) speakers. Simultaneously, the Signalmen â€œbreakâ€• the breakaway flag on the side towards the other ship.

For all my 20 years in, this was done as a matter of routine. I began my career on a replenishment ship, so I saw many ship depart from alongside, and heard a variety of music played. For the most part, many ships had their theme music, and almost exclusively played that. A few ship were the song of the moment types, and would just play something appropriate.

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For my first deployment, our ship would be accompanied by USS CONYNGHAM (DDG-17), and ADAMS Class guided missile destroyer, with 2 5â€³/54 Mk 42 guns, and a MK 13 Missile launcher, loaded with SM-1(MR) weapons. That class of DDGs are impressive to watch slicing through the water, with a narrow beam and an elevated bow that gracefully sweeps upwards. They were the picture of the front line guided missile â€œtin cansâ€• from the 50s and 60s.

CONYNGHAM had a great crew and a CO that made them do it right and fast. From the outside, professionalism oozed out of everything they did. Their ship handling was smart and they were on time and on target. Their breakaway flag white background, with a large green shamrock. Their theme music was the Star Wars title track. When they completed an UNREP (Underway Replenishment), the crew would stand at attention until they cleared our side, then they would move like aggravated ants to prepare the ship for the next evolution. The horsepower generated by their four 1200 PSI boilers and twin shafts could get them up to speed quickly and on their way to their next evolution. Being a â€œshoeâ€• on a â€œfat ship,â€• I longer to be a destroyerman, so I would watch, as much as my duties would allow the destroyers that had come alongside. I was always impressed with the seamanship of the CONYNGHAMâ€™s crew. Departing with the Star Wars music playing impressed me every time.

Later the USS SPRUANCE (DD-963) was added to our battle force. She was a few years old now, but because she was the first of the class, she was the proof of concept for the 29 (and later 30) hulls like her to follow in her footsteps. In any case, assigned to our battle group, she would be making her maiden overseas deployment. Unlike previous destroyers, she was powered by 4 GE LM-2500 Marine Gas Turbines. 20,000 horsepower each, with two shafts, and throttles were usually controlled directly by the watchstanders on the bridge.

SRPUANCEâ€™s theme song was, you guessed it, Star Wars. Their breakaway flag was a large yellow background, with large block red letters saying â€œBEWARE JET BLAST.â€• this mimicked the warning seen painted on the island of an aircraft carrier.

One day, the SPRUANCE was alongside before CONYNGHAM. At the completion of refueling, lines cleared, the music came on, the flag was broken, the turbine whine ramped up in seconds and she seemed shoot ahead of us. The CONYNGHAM followed her into station alongside us on the same side. Somehow, it was never the same for me to watch the proud, but aging DDG, play Star Wars and display her flag, as she steamed out ahead of us. No matter how professional, the SPRUANCE had her hands down on performance.

Years later, I was driving one, and the thrill is quite excellent.

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