A Date with Destiny â€“ Part VII

Description

Post updated 4/25/2008 to reflect â€œcorrective inputsâ€• from the H-3 Crewman.

USS BONEFISH 24 April, 1988 USS CARRâ€™s motor whaleboat

Photo Credit: Paul Perris on navsource.org

Last year, on this date, I thought I had culminated a series on the USS BONEFISHâ€™s fire. History has proven to be elusive, and the web has made a more accurate description of the dayâ€™s events, and some of the issues that got the sub to that day more accessible. At the end of this post, the links to all posts in this series are listed for you to catch up on the events leading up to the rescue operations that day.Today is the 20th anniversary of the fire in the battery well aboard USS BONEFISH (SS-582), approximately 160 miles east of Mayport, FL, while the USS JOHN F KENNEDY (CV-67), the USS CARR (FFG-52) and the BONEFISH were conducting training operations together.
As a result of the posting before, the aircrewman aboard the SH-3 Sea King from the KENNEDY has met with me and described the initial chaos from about 30 feet above the water, as he hoisted submariners to safety. He left a comment letting me know the record of the reports I had heard almost 20 years ago were not completely accurate. I was able to find and contact the then XO of the BONEFISH, who graciously spent his time typing up and forwarding his recollections.

One of the most significant discoveries to date has been the comment left by FT2(SS) Bill Baker, which uncovered a selfless act of one of the three men who perished during the fire. Lt Ray Everts purposely refused to don an EBA mask, so that he could effectively use the periscope, unhindered, to clear the surface, as two surface ships were operating in the area. That decision cost him his life, yet ensured his shipmates were not exposed to a further danger of a collision while coming up.

I have also noted, based on the input from LCDR Pete LeStrange that my understanding that the three men lost had not been on the boat but a few weeks is incorrect. Beginning with this post, and over the next few days, Iâ€™ll try to pull more of this information together on the blog for the historical record.

In July last year, Jim Chapman, the AW in the HS-7 helo â€œDusty 613â€• from KENNEDY, and I met to discuss his recollections of the day. Here is the synopsis of the notes I took:

The pilot was LCDR Waickwicz that day. He was the Operations Officer for HS-7. LT Martin was the co-pilot. The helo had been conducting dipping sonar tracking of the BONEFISH when Jim heard the underwater telephone communication indicating there was a fire and they were surfacing. When BONEFISH did get to the surface, they were right there, having gone into a circular pattern to watch the surfacing. The hatches opened and the black smoke was pouring out. Jim manned the rescue hoist and got to work, which ended up being about 2 hours of hovering. Jim said their secondary concern, as he got the sub crew aboard, was that the sub might explode and there they were, not many feet above, most certainly at risk, but they stayed in the hover, getting about 10 to 11 men abaord.

Consider that situation further: It was a hot day, and hot days have thinner air, which then reduces the lift of any aircraft, so hovering close to the surface, let alone above a burning vessel, is a feat of airmanship. LDCR Waickwicz and his co-pilot handled the task until they had all they could manage to get to the relative safety of the H-3.

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Jim described the situation after he got some of the BONEFISH men in the helo as an extremely difficult one. Manning the aft area of the helo ~~alone~~ with only a very junior second crewman, he was the hoist operator and manager of the wounded, which mostly were the badly burned sailors. Jim was laying on the deck of the helo, head out of the starboard side door, using one of his legs to help hold down one sailor who was convulsing. Jim had to consider the operations of hoisting the next most urgent cases, while keeping people from falling back into the sea, while his other aircrewman tended to the wounded and kept a head count.

At one point, a sailor on the sub refused to take the collar and indicated that the helo should head to the area of the aft deck hatch. They did and sent the hoist back down, actual lowering it into the sub. Then they got the signal to hoist up. something was stuck below and as the helo labored to stay airborne, while the blades were flexing (I take that as an sign that the helo is nearing the edge of the performance envelope), and with Jimsâ€™ hand on the â€œguillotineâ€• (the cable cutting safety device switch) out of the rear hatch, a sailor weighing about 250 pounds literally popped out, just before he was about to chop the cable to save the helo.

Jim told me at one point a sailor did don the â€œhorse collarâ€• incorrectly, but once he began to bring him up, he assessed the situation as being safe enough and brought him all the way up, so he could get more men hoisted faster. Capt Johnson had told me this was the reason why he demanded the H-3 leave, and Jim told me LCDR Waicwiaz refused, remaining in position to effect more rescues.

Jimâ€™s helo deposited their survivors on the CARR and got airborne, with the last flight of the day being to take six of the critical cases to the KENNEDY for further medical treatment.

Jimâ€™s glimpse into Dusty 613 helped my understanding of the events that day and tells the story of some very professional action taken by his crew to get the BONEFISH crew to safety. He did tell me his eyes were exceptionally irritated for the next 4-5 days, most certainly a result of the toxic smoke he was

hovering in for several hours.

Jimâ€™s helo was not the only KENNEDY bird in the air that day. When BONEFISH surfaced he said 3-4 more H-3s were launched to assist. What they did, weâ€™ll have to hope for more detail later. Jim also commented that hoist in his H-3 performed flawlessly, which, weâ€™d like to think all equipment does, but he said there was known problems with those hoists, where they didnâ€™t allow for extended use, so this was another bit or remarkable events surrounding the day.

Jim and his pilot co-authored articles on the operation that day that were published in Approach

and All Hands magazines just before 9/11 happened. I havenâ€™t yet tried to chase down those in the archives for review. If anyone has a source, Iâ€™d appreciate a link/point of contact.

FT2 Baker left this comment on the VI post, and itâ€™s worth bringing to the â€œfront pageâ€• of the blog for reading:

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> **Bill Baker FT2(SS)** | william.baker@roadrunner.com |
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> Funny, I was looking for something else and came across this.I have read RichardÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s recollection of it many times. I will give you some of my remembrances:I was on watch as messenger of the watch at the time of the accident (we didnÃ¢â‚¬â„¢t run a full time FTOW - Fire Control Technician of the Watch because it was the old Mk101 system).When the call came out Ã¢â‚¬Å“Fire in Berthing, Fire on Third StreetÃ¢â‚¬Â•, I sounded the general alarm. I then got out an EAB for me and one for the officer of the Deck (Lt. Ray Everts). The OOD disregarded the EAB to take the ship to PD. If anyone has ever been on a scope with an EAB on, you know that you canÃ¢â‚¬â„¢t really do a good search. I believe he disregarded it because of the Carr and Kennedy being in the area, he wanted to get to PD quickly but more importantly, safely. While the boat was on the way to PD, I heard what can only be described as the sound you hear when you throw an old wet decomposing log on a fire. That crackling sound. At that point, smoke entered the control room. I have never believed in smoke as a living thing, but the smoke looked like a hand closing around Lt. Everts. At that point, things are a bit fuzzy. Things I do remember are my EAB getting filled with warm smoke (which I later found out was the dirt, oil, dust from the MSA filters installed in the system burning off). The entire ship went black and literally, you could not see your hand in front of your face.
> The next thing I remember was a couple of hands raking down my arm and someone wheezing Ã¢â‚¬Å“Help, I canÃ¢â‚¬â„¢t breatheÃ¢â‚¬Â•. I didnÃ¢â‚¬â„¢t know who it was but found the persons head, took my own EAB off and put it on his face. Immediately his hands flew to the facemask and I realized he didnÃ¢â‚¬â„¢t want to give it back. I forcibly took it back, took 3 breaths and gave it back to him and told him we were going to buddy breath while I secure another mask. When he had the mask, I got out another one. We buddy breathed till I got the mask setup. During all this, the CO came into control and stated Ã¢â‚¬Å“XO, itÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s not worth it. Abandon shipÃ¢â‚¬Â•. I know that the word went out on the 1MC. I later heard that people aft of the engine room door didnÃ¢â‚¬â„¢t hear the word.

I lost track of Lt. Everts at this time. I know from other accounts that he went to the bridge (without an EAB), tried to open the bridge hatch, but couldnÃ¢â‚¬â„¢t. It was known on-board that the dogs were misaligned, but Lt. Everts came from our sister ship Barbel (SS-580) and was already qualified the ship. Squadron also knew that the hatches were messed up but when the TM1 who transferred to squadron tried to do hatch inspections and they started failing, he was ordered to stop. The inspections were later nowhere to be found. Anyway, I saw Lt. Everts on the deck nearby. I grabbed him, got out another EAB and put it on him. I will never forget the next events. I had Lt. Everts head in my lap and I was sitting cross legged. Lt. Ellsworth had gotten the hatch open and the smoke was starting to clear. Lt. Everts proceeded to go into convulsions from smoke inhalation and looked me directly in the eyes. Just thinking it caused a picture of it in my mind that was as vivid as the day it happened. I heard someone calling for people by station to leave. I distinctly heard helmsman, planesman, etc. What I never heard was messenger. The control room got deathly quiet. I called out Ã¢â‚¬Å“is anyone thereÃ¢â‚¬Â• and got no response. I did it again, and then lifted the mask thinking people couldnÃ¢â‚¬â„¢t hear me because I had the EAB on. Again, I heard nothing. Lt. Everts breathing became very shallow and he was unresponsive. I looked down at him and thought to myself, I can stay here and die with him, or I can get out. I chose the latter. I stood up, and then did the stupidest thing in my entire life. I took the mask off and then attempted to get it free of my belt. In my panic, I ended up pulling my entire belt off. While attempting to locate the bridge trunk, I found the chart table next to the DRT table had come down blocking the ladder. I climbed over it and got about half way up the trunk when I heard my wifeÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s voice Ã¢â‚¬Å“they arenÃ¢â‚¬â„¢t going to do anything about that boat till it kills someoneÃ¢â‚¬Â•. My response was always Ã¢â‚¬Å“IÃ¢â‚¬â„¢m not going to leave you a rich widowÃ¢â‚¬Â•. I then made it to the upper level and told someone up there I was the last man alive out of control. Funny thing was, Tony Silvia was behind me coming out of the hatch and he had the connection of an EAB in his hand. Tony was in distress. On the other end was Bob Bordelon. Shawn Glappa dropped down to the nav level and was attempting to push Bob up. I had hold of his Ã¢â‚¬Å“poopy suitÃ¢â‚¬Â• at the collar. None of the three of us was able to pull Bob up. Bob was not a big guy, but our strength was just sapped. I can still hear the sound of his body tumbling down the trunk.

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Tony was taken off from the fairwater planes by helo. I ended up on the aft deck just past the sail. When the boat would go down in the wave, it would lift us up and when the boat would come back up, we would scramble back to the center and attempt to hold onto the safety track and each other.

When it was my turn to go, I go up, went to the side of the sail and threw my new sneakers into the water. When the lifeboat got close and the boat was up and going down, I jumped on top of the raft and pulled myself inside. The next 2 hours were some of the worst in my life. I was seasick and the only place I could throw up was to unzip my poopy suit and throw up into it. I was by a hatch but couldnÃ¢â‚¬â„¢t lean out. I remember just wanting to close my eyes and sleep. TMC Blackburn grabbed my hand and told me I could close my eyes, but I had to occasionally squeeze his hand to let him know I was still alive. I appreciated that. After a while, a diver came to the hatch and we were taken out one by one to a helicopter. I remember when I was in the water with the guy holding me, telling me what was going to happen, I threw up on him. To his credit, he just washed it off and kept going. He later ended up on the Kennedy on a makeshift bed next to me. He had rescued about twice

the number of people he was supposed to.
From the helo, I was deposited on the Carr and I remember a gung ho corpsman (he had just finished a tour with the marines) came up to me. All I wanted was to get horizontal. They took my clothes and gave me a dry poopy suit and I lay down. I got an IV and then transferred me to the Kennedy. When the chopper started to take off, the door was open, I was strapped into a stretcher and the stretcher moved. I grabbed the post holding the seats and held on for dear life.

While aboard the Kennedy, they had a fire. I remember having trouble getting to sleep (couldnÃ¢â‚¬â„¢t breathe well and throat was sore). On the CCTV was a Captains mast when the fire alarm went off. No one moved. I questioned what I was to do and they told me to go to bed, the fire department will take care of it.

The next day, we go on a helo and were taken to the hospital. En-route, I was allowed to put on a harness and look out the open door. It was cool.

Once at the hospital, they did triage and it was determined that I had pretty extensive smoke inhalation. I ended up on oxygen and albuteral. I was finally able to get in touch with my wife and family. Maybe another time I will tell you what she went through during all this. Suffice it to say, squadron was very unprepared for something like this to happen.

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I was discharged a few days later and went home.

There were some definite heroes that day:
Lt. Everts â€“ For getting the ship safely to PD and the surface.
Tony Silvia â€“ For trying to save Bob Bordelons life.
??? Ledbetter â€“ For jumping in and getting the life rafts to the boat when they were dropped off.
Rescue swimmers â€“ For going above and beyond.
Jim Yates â€“ For telling squadron about the hatches -though they shut him down on this.
TMC ??? â€“ Who tried like hell to get squadron to allow the hatches to be inspected.
Lt. Ellsworth â€“ For getting up there and getting the hatch open.

There were also some not so heroes. I will not mention names. I will say that there is only one person whom I feel will need to answer a higher power at some point. He ordered a young seaman to let him out of the torpedo room because he wanted to be Ã¢â‚¬Å“Johnny on the spotÃ¢â‚¬Â• and ended up needing rescue not once, but twice. He wouldnÃ¢â‚¬â„¢t have needed it at all if he had just stayed where he was. He needlessly risked his life and those of his shipmates. Definitely not someone I would ever want to serve on a submarine with ever again.

Apr 15, 2:28 PM Ã¢â‚¬â€• [] Ã¢â‚¬â€• A Date with Destiny â€“ Part VI

I sent the link to the XO and he indicated, that of the many interviews conducted in the days following the event, this report hadnâ€™t made itâ€™s way up the reporting chain. More history, more heroism that happened.

Pete was kind enough to send his story, and a detailed one it was. The months before, and some of the issues that arose, as well as the report as one who stood staring into the battery well at glowing cheery red connector links on the battery, before being inundated by a fire ball caused by an HP air line rupturing and feeding the fire. I have posted the .pdf here.

It begins here:

> These notes will chronologically cover the 18 months that I was associated with the USS Bonefish (SS 582) from reporting aboard as XO in early January 1988 to the sale of the ship for scrap in approximately June 1989. There are an infinite number of rumors, sea stories and other perspectives floating around regarding Bonefish, the fire itself, and the shipÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s subsequent last days as a US Navy asset. I will comment or provide descriptions for only what I personally know to be true. If I provide any beliefs or opinions they will be clearly identified as such. That said, here we go:
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> January 1988: I report aboard Bonefish and assume duties as the XO. I did meet my predecessor; however, it was not exactly a contact relief. He had been diagnosed as having diabetes and was therefore being medically disqualified for continued submarine duty. As I recall, we had only a few hours to converse on the status of the unit before he departed and I had the job. Over the next few days I learned that the ship had last been to sea in the fall of 1987 and had returned from sea with a number of significant mechanical issues, including severe problems with the main engines, the air compressors and the fresh water still. It appeared that it was going to take some time to return the ship to a sea worthy status. Additionally, crew morale seemed to be very low at that point, although they were all working hard in trying repair and maintain the submarine.
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Iâ€™ll have to get back to reducing some of his point to blend with the rest of the story later today, but if you value lessons learned, there are many there to go around.

One part of the story I have not taken the time to dig for is the towing and salvage operation. A short note last year mentioned a past shipmate of the writer had been the CO of USS HOIST (ARS-40), who was tasked with securing the partially flooded and burnt hull of the BONEFISH at sea. It sounds like it had been quite a chore, but, as with the rest of the story, another part of the professionalism demonstrated in the emergency 20 years ago today.

I plan to continue to update this story as I uncover, or am provided with, more information.

My thanks to Jim Chapman and Pete LeStrange, and to all the commenters with first hand information of this moment in time.

Update 4/28/2008: Added a link to the current bio of RADM Waickwicz (and corrected the spelling of his name).

Category

1. Navy

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