

Collision at Midnight

From the Viet Nam Era

A Story About The Crew of USS Brinkley Bass DD-887

February 2,3,4,5,6,7, 1966

Just a few pages from my Book. Six amazing days in February 1966.

From:

William E. Stover – USS Brinkley Bass DD 887 – 12/1964 to 2/1968 – FTG2

To:

Anyone who may remember the darkest days in February 1966.

My name is Bill Stover. I served the USA for 8 years during the ‘Cold War’ in the USAF and during the Viet Nam War aboard the Destroyer, USS Brinkley Bass DD 887. I served the last 15 months of my AF duty on a ‘Spy’ base at Trabzon in eastern Turkey near the Soviet Georgian border. I spent the last 3 years of my USN duty aboard Brinkley Bass of which 13 months were spent in the War Zone in the South China Sea, near the coasts of South and North Viet Nam and the Southern border of Red China.

The 15 months in Turkey was Isolated and Remote and the entire tour of duty was served during the most dangerous of times in the history of the world community. I was ‘there’ during the ‘Cuban Missile Crisis’. I could talk about the Nuclear Threat and the real dangers we faced but that’s another story.

Service on any ‘Fighting Ship’ of the U.S. Naval Fleet is given while living aboard the worlds best ‘Prisons’. We stood watch at ‘Port and Starboard (6 hours on watch and six hours on other duties)(24 x7) while at sea and at ‘GQ’, at ‘Battle Stations’. All personnel in the Weapons Division were involved in handling explosives and firing big guns during all kinds of confrontations and Incidents of War. We can only speculate as to how many other human beings we killed with the ‘Big Guns’ of Brinkley Bass. Most of our first West Pac Cruise, my duty station was Trainer and ‘Trigger Man’. For 12 hours a day, months at a time, I pulled the Trigger which fired salvos of our four, 5inch/38caliber guns. Again, there is no way to calculate the

thousands of rounds of explosives which were delivered to the enemy from the squeeze of my finger on the 'Trigger'.

I remember many of the young heroes who were stationed on the Brinkley Bass during the hottest days of the Viet Nam War. Jerry Kiser is just one of the many Weapons Division Petty Officers I remember. Most of the sailors I remember were Fire Control Technicians, Gunner's Mates and Boatswain's Mates who were a team within the Weapons Division. I will write about a number of 'Team Mates' as I put to pen the Brinkley Bass 'Story'. Although I haven't heard from or about him for 38 years, I remember Jerry. He was about my age, mid 20s, during the Viet Nam experience. Jerry was BM2 and Lead Petty Officer in the Weapons Gang and Deck Crew while I was FTG2 and Lead Petty Officer in the Fire Control Gang. Because of War, many young men were promoted quickly. Those with intelligence and ability were quickly elevated to Lead Responsibilities. It was unheard of for a Boatswain's Mate to make BM2 in just one enlistment. Jerry was young and cocky, sharp and responsible and he was promoted quickly to BM2 (Petty Officer 2nd Class). If I remember correctly, Jerry spent many hours as Weapons Lead in a Gun Mount Gunnery/Loader Crew. As Deck Crew Lead, He also spent many hours in Refueling and Replenishment Operations where he was responsible for dangerous and tricky operations, all of which were carried out under 'Red Light' usually between midnight and 2 o'clock in the morning. All 'At Sea Operations' in the War Zone were conducted under 'Red Light' and darkness in order to cut down on the vulnerability of attack during daylight hours.

Toward the end the first cruise the Bass was assigned 'SAR' Duties off the coast of North Viet Nam. SAR is an acronym for 'Search and Rescue'. Congress had just enacted the Tonkin Gulf Resolution in response to North Viet Nam Swift Boat attacks on the USS Maddox and USS Turner Joy of the US Fleet in the South China Sea. President Johnson had escalated the War to a 'Fever Pitch'. We were engaged in heavy bombing of Hanoi and Hiphong Harbor. Pilots from the Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps were flying hundreds of sorties each day. They were flying low altitude bombing runs from Carriers on 'Yankee Station', and Bases in Thailand and South Viet Nam. They flew A1s, A6s, and F4s and other 'Fighter/Bombers'. B52s were flying 'High Flight', Saturation bombing runs from Guam. Many years later it was the B52 crews who paid the price for coming up against the improving Soviet SAM Missiles. These young Pilots and Navigators of the Fighter/Bombers of the mid 1960s who were bombing Hanoi and Hiphong were in harms way each time they were catapulted from the Carrier's Flight Decks and every time they were wheels up from air fields in Thailand and South Viet Nam. Too many of these aircraft were shot down by SAM Missiles and Anti-Aircraft Guns. Too many of these aircraft fell from the skies because of mechanical fatigue. Some were lost to human error and personnel fatigue. Others were lost to malfunctions on Carriers and miscalculations by support personnel on the bases throughout the region. The Brinkley Bass together with USS Waddell DDG 24 spent the last few months of their first Wes Pac Cruise of 1965 and early 1966 in 'SAR', Search and Rescue of these 'Downed' Pilots and Flight Crews.

I am writing these pages on the 40th anniversary of the beginning of the worst 6 days of my 8 year military career. February 2nd is my mothers birthday. It is also Ground Hog's Day. It is hard to forget these days. I remember these incidents as if they happened yesterday because I have, as many others who were 'there' have, replayed and revisited this experience many times over the last 40 years. The chronology of the six days is entirely from my memory. Although others may have seen it from other vantage points or from other perspectives, all who were there will never forget those few days in February 1966.

The USS Brinkley Bass DD 887 was ordered from R&R in the Port of Hong Kong back to 'SAR' duties, arriving on station February 2, 1966, and on February 3, 1966, together with USS Waddell DDG 24 was on duty off the coast of North Viet Nam. As on previous SAR duty we operated with a number of Helicopters from carriers and land bases. The choppers on this day were from the carrier Ranger. We had been warned previously that big shore batteries in North Viet Nam were very active, that we should be ready to engage if ever called upon to get close to the shoreline. At about mid-day the two destroyers received the call that a pilot was down very close to the borders of China and North Viet Nam. We were south of this area when the call came in. Choppers were called and we proceeded at 'Full Speed' toward the downed pilot. We pulled in close to the harbor. This harbor was very close to Red China. I was Trainer in the Gun Fire Control Director. I had a small radar monitor to my right. The Train Control Wheels were between my knees. My fingers were tightly fixed to the left and right triggers and my eyes were glued to the eye pieces which provided the best view of any target from the range finder's powerful binoculars of the director system. We had pointed and trained the director system toward the harbor and the downed pilot. Pilots normally approached the Northern Targets at a high altitude from the south. They descended quickly from the east, dropped their armament, quickly ascended toward the South China Sea and evasively maneuvered to avoid SAM Missiles and Anti-Aircraft. They were trained to ascend ASAP so that in the event they were hit, they could eject over water. Most pilots who made it out over water were successfully rescued by "SAR" destroyers or Helicopters assigned to 'SAR' duties. This downed pilot had apparently been hit at a low altitude because he had, of necessity, bailed early and had come down in the very center of the harbor. I could see that the pilot was alive and staying afloat. He was only about 800 yards from the shore, and he was in very dangerous waters. The assigned helicopter was delayed some minutes in arriving. The Bass was pointing in from the north and the Waddell was pointing in from the south. The very big guns from gun emplacements above and behind the harbor and inland on the mountain side, began to fire at Bass and Waddell. Two large Chinese Junks began to approach the pilot, one from the north and one from the south. Bass and Waddell began to return fire and fire upon the junks which were moving slowly toward the downed pilot. The chopper arrived and we thought we would recover the pilot, but as the cable was lowered toward the pilot, the chopper took a direct hit in the middle of the fuselage. The pilot of the chopper reported that his technician was hit and that he must retreat because his ride was falling apart. He quickly pulled back and headed to sea. We heard that the

chopper fell about 5 miles to the west and eventually heard that the pilot and co-pilot were rescued by our second 'SAR' chopper. We cut our gun mounts loose to take different targets. The forward gun mount was firing at gun emplacements while the rear gun mount was firing at the junk which was approaching from the north. The Waddell was firing at the second junk which was approaching from the south. The 'Big Eyes' of the Gun Fire Director were trained on the downed pilot. I watched the entire operation, up close and personal. I watched as a huge hole and ball off flames appeared in the fuselage of the chopper. Our rear gun mount placed some very impressive rounds upon the junk. That junk flamed out and a few minutes later it sank. The second chopper became involved in the rescue of the crew of the downed chopper and they could not respond immediately to our operation. As both ships were dealing with shore batteries and self defense from those big guns, we witnessed the junk coming from the south pull the downed pilot aboard. He was captured, alive. After about 15 minutes of trading fire with shore batteries, commanders decided it was time to retreat to safer waters. As we fell into column with the Waddell, and commenced zig-zag maneuvers, we could see that the big guns were becoming more accurate as we came into their best range. They were most effective as we reached 11 miles at sea, and then we began to move out of their effective range. We called for air support and before we lost sight of the harbor, I counted 80 aircraft dropping bombs on the gun emplacements and on the back side of the harbor.

We spent February 4th at sea on 'SAR' duty. It was a tense and nervous time because commanders were trying to decide whether or not we would return to that harbor and go in close for a recon run. We operated with choppers in a number of 'SAR' missions during the day of February 4, 1966.

We started a normal refueling and replenishment operation about 10 o'clock on the evening of February 4th. These operations had become tricky in the recent past. Many operations were being disrupted by Russian Trawlers (Spy Ships) who were operating in the South China Sea. On more than one occasion we had called for Sea Going Tugs to engage these Trawlers and physically bump them out of the way of our sea operations. Our Fleet had kept an eye on two of these Russian vessels for many days. We knew that they were too far away to interfere so we started our 'Normal' Operation. We had accomplished these operations about every 3 days for the passed number of months. We expected problems because each refueling and replenishment operation presented it's own unique problems. All operations at sea are dangerous, especially in a War Zone. That is the nature of Naval Service. This particular operation was rather uneventful. As in all operations, the two destroyers pulled alongside the replenishment ship. They each refueled and took on stores. The Bass finished first and as usual, remained alongside until the Waddell finished operations. The Flotilla Commodore was resident on Waddell and therefore the Bass always traveled in column behind Waddell. As in all previous operations, the Bass and Waddell pulled away from the replenishment ship at full speed in anticipation of a command to column up before heading for assigned duty station. It was midnight and all of the Brinkley Bass Crew was in motion, moving about the

ship in relieving watch and assuming the mid-watch. We don't really know why disaster struck at this moment. We do know that lives were lost because of a series of events which were far from normal.

I was on watch in the gun fire director, just to be relieved for the mid-watch by another Fire Control Technician. I had on a headset which allowed communications with the bridge. I heard the commands to cut speed to 2/3rd and to bring the ship to the left to start a column maneuver. Apparently the Officer of the Deck thought he had heard the column command. We were far too close to Waddell and these commands put the Bass on a Collision Course with the Waddell. The captain was apparently in his sea cabin just behind the bridge. A lookout (Seaman) yelled that we were on a collision course. Others were screaming. The Captain heard the noise and came running onto the bridge. He ran to the wing hatch and immediately began to take action. He screamed very loudly a series of commands. He yelled, 'This is the Captain, I have the Con, Right Full Rudder, All Emergency Back, sound the Collision Alarm, and brace for shock. At this same time, my watch relief had just climbed upon the top of the director. The hatches on the top of the director were open. He put his head inside and calmly told us that we were going to collide with the Waddell. I stood and looked out of my hatch and then braced for shock. I watched in amazement as the Bass collided with Waddell. We hit at mid-ships. The Bass rode up and down as the collision was in progress. A rooster tail of sparks 100 feet high emanated from between the Bass and Waddell. As the Bass pulled away from Waddell, I could see light coming from the holes just ripped into the hull of Waddell. The Bass drifted to a stop and then began to sink in the bow area.

The ship's crew was quick to respond. Within a few minutes we heard that there was no loss of life. Everyone brought mattresses, wood and tools including pumps. Within a few minutes the decision was made to ask for assistance because we were losing the battle with inflow of water. We had completely destroyed 40 feet of the bow. The gash was about 20 feet high. Although most of the damage which provided holes and allowed inflow of water was above the water line, water was coming in from the ship's bobbing in a heavy sea state. The USS Navasota responded to our call. They put a big boat in the water with timbers, pumps, tools, other materials and a Damage Control Team of 16 Seamen. The helpers were Ship Fitters (Welders and Pipe Fitters) and Damage Controlmen who were Builders and Welders. Together with our crew this Damage Control Team fought water inflow through the night. By morning they had saved the ship. The Bass was afloat.

It was February 5, 1966. The sea state was a 5 (very high waves) by morning. It was decided that the Damage Control Team should be returned to Navasota by chopper. The chopper arrived about 9 o'clock or so. The Ship Fitters gathered on the deck of the fantail because ammo and stores were removed from the lower decks and all decks except the fantail were burdened with materials from below. I believe that Jerry, the BM2 was the Lead Petty Officer in the Deck Handling part of that airlift operation.

All of those being taken aboard the chopper were outfitted with kapok life jackets and were lifted by cable to the chopper. I was positioned on the ECM Deck which was physically located above the location of the chopper. I was not involved in this operation, so I had gone up to the ECM Deck to get a good view of the transfers. The last of the personnel to be lifted onto the apron of the chopper was the SFC, Chief Petty Officer. It is military protocol for the Ranking Person to Lead into any Operation and to follow on the way out to be sure that the path is good going in and that all personnel exit OK.

Disaster struck again, just when the Chief was being brought on board the chopper. The chopper lost stability, turned at least 180 degrees and flipped upside down. In the process, I stood in amazement as I helplessly watched while the Chief fell from the chopper as it flipped. The chopper hit the water, exactly on the Chief, about 10 feet from the fantail of the Bass. I slide down the ladder to the deck below and again fixed my sight on the chopper. Personnel on the fantail and the main deck and our own dash flight deck were throwing life jackets and life rings into the water. I found life rings where I was, and heaved them into the water. The sea state was high and the Bass was basically dead in the water. As the chopper crew and those of the Damage Control Team began to surface, they looked like corks or fishing bobs, popping up from the water. The Bass and these men began to drift apart. They were grabbing life jackets and life rings which would support them if they remained in the water for a prolonged period.

Three Seamen were lost at sea that day. The Chief and an SF1 and an SF2 were lost. They went down with the chopper. Another chopper came to rescue the survivors. Other tragedies which occurred that day will be told about on another day.

The Bass pulled into Da Nang, South Viet Nam the next day. Navy UDT guys went down and checked out damage below the water line. They welded chain in strategic places and advised the Captain to proceed to the Philippine Islands at 5 knots. We proceeded to Subic Bay, Philippine Islands arriving sometime on February 7, 1966.

What a STORY – You think !!!! It happened pretty much that way – February 2,3,4,5,6,7, 1966.

I tracked those lost during those days. I watched every POW return from captivity in 1973. They came off the planes in Manila and again in Hawaii. They were repatriated in order of capture. Those captured first were repatriated first. I remember at least 1 returning POW who had been captured on that day. When the Internet matured, I found the names and home towns of those 3 Ship Fitters who went down with the chopper. Their names are registered in two different logs of the USS Navasota.

Although some of the second cruise was spent on ‘SAR’ duties most of the Bass’s involvement was in Night Shore Bombardment which was usually Harassment of

the Viet Cong, we did get out a few times for 'Plane Guard' with various Carriers on 'Yankee Station', just off the coast of Viet Nam. During this cruise we encountered 'North Vietnamese Swift Boats' and "North Vietnamese Piloted Migs'. We responded with deadly force in every situation. We were at War and as a Patriotic Crew, we took care of duty as 'Duty Called'. I will record some of the incidents encountered by the Bass on the second cruise at another time and in another venue.

This is the story from my point of view and from my unique perspective,

William E. Stover – USS Brinkley Bass DD 887 – 12/1964 to 2/1968 – FTG2
