

Lt.jg. Fubar by Jack Lynch (11)

The bulk of my sea stories came from my second tour, as gun boss on the Davis, a Sherman Class destroyer out of Newport. The stories are many and can be divided into several themes. I'll just string together those which form one theme. I like to think I had some abilities as a naval officer, a good shipmate, and excellent ship handler, a competent manager of men. But, objectively, as a Gun Boss, not so much. I've been planning to write this up as a tale of Lt.jg. Fubar, USN. While it is chronicle of my failures, I think it holds some larger lessons.

At the end of a 10 day leave after graduating from the first class of Destroyer School, Scott Logan, Jack Herbein, and I met up on the July-hot tarmac at McGuire AFB for our 21-hour flight to Frankfurt via Newfoundland and Scotland. After an overnight we went commercial from there to Rome and on to Naples where we were to be turned loose to find our ships scattered about the Med. Scott and Jack were more fortunate than I, my ship was in Naples.

Larry Dunne (12th Company, well known to me as I had been in the 11th) was its Chief Engineer, Ted Baker, '59, was just arriving as Ops. It was 1962 and Davis was fairly new, having been commissioned in 1957. The Sherman Class had been around since 1951 but Davis was only the second Sherman, after Decatur, to have an aluminum superstructure. More on this later. Davis was the flagship of a squadron otherwise composed of aging Sumners and Gearings. Its 5"/54s could fire more quickly and more accurately than anything the other ships mounted, and do so effectively at twice the distance. I had hopes of continuing its unfair advantage with victories in the annual squadron Gunnery "E" competitions. It was not to be.

The skipper, like my first skipper on the Dealy Class DE of my first tour, was known as a spit and polish type – more enamored of "military smartness" than common sense. You know, the kind of thing the 6th Fleet Commander lapsed into by requiring \$88/month sailors to wear dress whites during refueling.

Four things struck me right off. First, the embarked Squadron Commander was the most effeminate Naval officer I had ever met (but, as the "mec" in *Irma la Duce* would say, "That's another story"). Second, legend had it that earlier in the deployment the vacuum tube that powered the ship's air search radar failed and the ship didn't have a spare. Then the ship was sent 300 miles east to serve for 2 weeks as the 6th Fleet's early warning vessel looking for Russian aircraft. The Captain reputedly decided that being seen as not ready for an assignment would damage his career more than letting a few unlikely bombers intrude and didn't report the outage. Third, one of the men in the deck force had been charged by ONI with homosexual activities but, having requested counsel, was kept on board until the ship would return stateside and he would have a hearing at which he could have such counsel. (Again, another story.) And fourth, the ship, and all members of the class, had a nasty habit of losing steering, but all Captains (apparently on the same logic of ours with regard to the radar tube) decided not to report it. Across the sub-class we watch-standers became quite adept at shifting to after steering and controlling the ship by sound powered phones.

All that is background for the tale of my difficulties as gun boss.

My first firing exercise was an anti-aircraft one. I had done the requisite calculations - magazine temps and such - and reviewed the pre-firing checklists submitted by the mount captains. We were given the services of a plane-towed sleeve as our target. It approached and I gave the command, "Commence Fire ". Nothing happened. The Captain called me down to the bridge from gun control and asked, "What do we do now?" I told him that by standard Navy procedure we had to get the propellant cartridge out of the gun, but there was a risk that the primer was in a slow burn and might explode the propellant if that were done too soon. Accordingly, the SOP required that we wait 30 minutes before unloading. He fumed but accepted that. At the end of 30 minutes, I cleared everybody out of the area, removed the cartridge, walked briskly to the side, and threw it as far as I could. We resumed the exercise. The drone approached and it happened again. The captain ordered me to take the cartridge out immediately. I refused to violate the safety rule. He fumed but relented. The exercise was scrubbed. Afterward I investigated the problem and found that salt water had gotten down the barrel, it corroded the firing pin into uselessness, and so the pre-firing check list (certifying that the firing circuit had fired a rifle cartridge primer) had been falsified. Believing that honesty was a Navy value, I put the gunner on report. (I had never done that.) At the Captain's Mast the Captain apologized to the gunner and tore me a new one. Lesson learned.

My next firing exercise was even more exciting. Again, it was an anti-aircraft challenge. This time our target was a drone. I was going to use both mount 51 and mount 31. The drone came in and at an appropriate range I called for the 5" mount to commence fire. Beautiful. At a prearranged closer distance, I gave the order for the 3" mount to fire. All hell broke loose. Both mounts drove to their downward stops firing all the way, blowing off life lines (not protected by the firing cut-out cam) and doing all manner of damage until the couldn't-have-been-fast-enough command "cease fire!" reached the junior officer with the firing key. Here the problem was metal filings resulting from prior use had caused a short across the slip rings up in the director that carried the juice for firing circuit and the director's elevation drive circuit. This was not on the pre-firing check list nor have I found anyone who had memory of such an event. Excrement occurs. For reasons consistent with stuff above, the casualty was not reported to BUSHIPS.

After the fall Cuban business, we were back in the Caribbean for the annual Spring exercise. Firing for score at Culebrea, there came the point in the exercise where the normal responding-to-call-fire-targets was interrupted by an expected emergent counter-battery challenge (taking on a target presumed to be firing back at us). We had been using mount 51 but had to shift to mount 52. In retrospect the coordinates given coincided with a white painted car hulk near the top of the hill. We got the round out promptly, all that remained was to see how close it landed to the car. It missed by 400 yards. The round had been high, must have just missed the nearby crown of the hill because the puff of dirt was visible beyond the crest. But the fact of the crest made the margin of error a lot worse than it otherwise would have been – say had it been low rather than high. After that exercise Davis went into St.

Thomas for a bit of liberty. Due to a friendship between the squadron commander and the port captain, we were given a berth at the wharf while commercial cruise ships had to endure the inconvenience of anchoring out. I decided to use the opportunity to spend a calm night bore-sighting the guns (aiming a gun bore- and director- mounted telescopes at the same star). For mounts 51 and 53 that was a breeze. I never could get the scope in mount 52 steady enough.

Later in that Spring we were operating off the Virginian Capes as part of ASW Task Group Alpha. One day we were ordered to participate in a show-and-tell for a bunch of Congressmen. Our role was to zook up abeam of the carrier on whose deck they were assembled and fire the hedgehog weapon. As most will recall its mount looks like a steel torture bed with a whole bunch of not-exactly parallel spikes sticking up from it. The spikes were firing mechanisms for the rockets which were slipped over them. Each rocket looked like narrow handled, over-sized hitting area, whiffle bat. Each was heavy, I'd guess about 65 pounds. The hitting area part of the "bat" was the heavy business end, a contact fired equivalent of a depth charge. When fired, the dozen or so rockets go off in sequence, arc to a point off the bow, simultaneously splash in an oval pattern, and then sink toward their target. We had many peacetime exercises in which we fired much smaller rockets, light ones about the size of the cardboard roll at the core of a roll of Bounty. We called those practice missiles "mini-mice". To ensure the exercise would go well, the night before I loaded and fired a full load of mini-mice. No problem. On the day of the event we zipped abeam of the carrier and, as directed, fired a full spread of the heavy, real things. Ba-boom, Ba-boom, Ba-boom as the missiles left in pairs. Then silence. Half-way through the firing sequence we no longer had a firing circuit. We turned away in silence. I don't know if Congressman or other official noticed. Again I investigated and found that the insulation around the cable carrying the firing juice had badly deteriorated (unseen under God only knows how many layers of gray paint) and then disintegrated under the shock of the blasts launching the war-load missiles, about 50 times heavier than mini-mice. I don't know if the less rigid aluminum superstructure made a difference. This failure too was not reported to BUSHIPS.

About a year later while I was still on Davis but in Boston Navy Yard for an overhaul, the steering problems came home to roost – on another ship. Decatur lost steering while pulling away from fueling alongside a carrier. It swerved into the carrier and was caught under the larger vessel's anchor. The sea state was such that the anchor hammered down on the aluminum super structure trapping the XO on the shrinking port wing of the bridge. To his good fortune the bulkhead between him and the pilot house eventually split and he was able to crawl out of his potential metal tomb. The Decatur limped into port, the whole left side of its superstructure smashed like a beer can. The Navy didn't have funds in the next annual budget to fix it. So sheets of aluminum were welded to create a sort of lean-to down the length of the superstructure. The vessel was let sit for at least 18 months until funds became available.

My service obligation ended that Spring. I went off to law school but came back to Newport in December for a 2-week Reserve stint. I saw Decatur then. I also caught up with my Davis shipmates and learned why I had had problems with mount 52. You may recall that Shermans had one 5" mount facing forward and two facing aft. One of those, mount 52, was not on the main deck. It was on level one of the superstructure. The shipyard inspection had revealed that the aluminum in the superstructure, the deck house, and the steel in the main deck didn't get along. You remember – galvanic corrosion – the famous mnemonic German PCS Mazintland that jazz. The rear of the deckhouse was no longer attached, mount 52 was free-floating. Go figure.

I wonder if BUSHIPS ever learned that. 'Nuff said.