

Proceed to Assist - The Belknap Kennedy Collision

By Commander Robert C. Powers, U. S. Navy, Commanding Officer, USS Claude V. Ricketts (DDG-5)

On Saturday evening, 22 November 1975, the USS Claude V. Ricketts (DDG-5) was 3.5 miles away from the scene when the USS Belknap (CG-26) and the USS John F. Kennedy (CV-67) collided. I got to the bridge just in time to see the Belknap's entire midships section erupt in towering flames. The Kennedy had a smaller fire on her angled flight deck.

We went in at full rudder and full speed. The lifeguard detail was set. The rescue and assistance team were mustered. The general quarters alarm rang throughout the ship. As commanding officer, I had taken the conn as my crew mobilized automatically to meet the emergency.

When the Belknap struck the edge of Kennedy's angled flight deck she ruptured aviation fuel lines, and the fuel rained down on her in great quantities and ignited. The Belknap's mast and superstructure were crushed, and she drifted astern of the Kennedy with no way on. The big carrier pulled away with fires burning in the port overhang section.

It was a dark night with passing rain and thunder squalls. The leaping and crackling fires on board Belknap lighted the sea for miles around and cast a terrible glow on the rolling swells coming in from the east. The winds were 15 knots with occasional higher gusts, and seas were running from six to eight feet. As Ricketts made her approach, the radio telephone came alive; and our orders were: "Proceed to assist Belknap."

We took station astern of the Belknap. Embarked aboard Ricketts was Commodore Milton J. Schultz, COMDESRON 26. He assigned USS Thomas C. Hart (FF-1092), commanded by Commander J. D. Rohrbough, was assigned to stand by astern, assist the cruiser USS Dale (CG-19) as medical trauma unit, and coordinate boat and helicopter searches of the collision area. The USS Pharris (FF-1094), commanded by Commander B. A. Friedsam, was assigned to stand by Kennedy and render assistance as required. USS Bordelon (DD-881), Commander G. E. Pierce commanding, was assigned as a back-up firefighting unit and to make preparations to take the Belknap under tow. All rescue ships sent their boats to the Belknap to remove injured personnel. The Ricketts' radio central established communications with higher authority and released reports of the rescue operation.

I brought Ricketts in upwind of Belknap, approaching from ahead, putting my starboard side to her starboard side. As Ricketts' bow edged in toward the Belknap's, stern, water from 21 fire hoses began to reach for the raging fires.

Ammunition in the 3-in./ 50 caliber gun ready service magazine aboard Belknap began to cook off, and the noise of the crackling fires was punctuated by the crash of exploding ordnance.

There was a whine and rattle as shrapnel rained onto Ricketts' superstructure.

Working the ship in cautiously, I got her to a position where the hoses could reach Belknap's fires. My executive officer and engineer officer mustered men topside to man the hose teams, fenders, and lines. My damage control assistant took charge of the forecastle hose teams

which were getting massive amounts of water on the fires. Chief Petty Officers were everywhere, organizing, directing, and manning the hoses.

The Chief Boatswain's Mate took his station in the eyes of the ship where the heat and flying debris were thickest and led his men toward quenching the fires. All six fire pumps were on the line, putting out a constant 140 p.s.i. I worked the ship back and forth to allow full play of all of the hoses on the most intense fires.

The crews of Belknap and Ricketts were sitting on a powder keg next to a bonfire, and they still carried out their duties as well-organized teams. Except for the nightmare spectacle of the burning and exploding cruiser, it was like a drill.

On Belknap, pockets of injured men were huddled on the forecastle and on the fantail as hose teams tried in vain to fight the fires that raged out of control amidships. The fires had not spread to the missile magazine area forward of the bridge or the five-inch gun magazine area aft of the helicopter deck, but the flames were coming dangerously close to the torpedo tubes and the chaff rocket launcher just aft of the bridge. At all costs, we had to prevent the ignition of any more high explosives. I moved the ship in closer, and the hose teams were directed to beat the fires away from the ordnance areas.

Some hoses on Ricketts were aimed at the base of the most intense fires; others were aimed at a 30-40 degree angle with the horizontal, creating a dense fog that was carried down onto Belknap by the wind. This fog served to protect Ricketts as well as quench the fires. Our hoses in the solid stream position rained an estimated 2,500 gallons per minute of sea water on Belknap's midsection as reports started to come in.

Ricketts' whaleboat crew reported that it had removed one man from the Belknap's fantail. He was badly burned and thought to be dead.

Kennedy's fires were being brought under control.

Helicopters were searching the seas but could not approach Belknap to remove the injured due to the flames and explosions.

Commodore Schultz directed Bordelon to stand by to approach Belknap's port side once the flames were under control. The downwind approach would be difficult, but there were a few small fires on the port side that Ricketts couldn't reach.

Finally, the fires began to sputter. Ricketts closed the Belknap as great clouds of smoke and steam engulfed her decks and pilot house area. Visibility went to zero. Shouted orders from below indicated that the hose teams were still pouring water on the Belknap. A grinding crunch just aft of the bridge signaled that the starboard side of Ricketts was now right up against the steep side of the cruiser. It was time to back out and reassess the situation. As the engines were backed full, the aft lookout reported, "ship close aboard astern." It was Bordelon standing by ahead of Belknap.

After some rudder and a radio exchange with Bordelon, we backed clear. It started to rain slightly, but the winds were picking up and fanning some fires that were still burning. We had to go back in!

When Ricketts made the initial approach, her motor whaleboat and its crew embarked on their own mission. The boat was lowered away with the staff medical officer on board. The 26-

foot boat pitched and rolled its way to Dale where the DESRON Staff Medical Officer went aboard to assist in setting up a casualty screening center.

From Dale, Ricketts' whaleboat crossed heavy seas back to Belknap. Upon reaching Belknap's stern, Ricketts' crew found several other boats trying to make a landing in the rough seas. Members of Belknap's crew had lashed a pipe ladder over the stern and were shouting that they had injured men who required immediate medical attention.

Disregarding the seas, the whaleboat approached Belknap's stern, and the crew got a line out. Riding swells to the cruiser's main deck and then suddenly falling below her waterline, the crew effected transfer of a seriously injured man who was lashed into a Stokes stretcher. He was unconscious and clearly near death. Casting off quickly, they headed for the Dale.

The injured man seemed to have stopped breathing midway in transit, and a report was sent ahead that he was probably dead. After long minutes of plunging, shipping water, and pumping the bilges, the whaleboat reached Dale. As the small boat lay up against the cruiser's side, it was smashed against her time and again. With great effort, lines were secured, and the injured man passed up to the Dale. As he went up, he regained consciousness and screamed out in pain; he was alive!

The crew cast off and again headed the whaleboat for Belknap. It started to rain, and the wet winds soaked the crew through. Under increasingly difficult conditions, four more injured men were evacuated by Ricketts' boat. The boats from the Dale, Hart, Pharris, and Bordelon performed similar operations again and again.

During the second approach on Belknap, the twisted and charred wreckage of her superstructure could be seen clearly. Her starboard three-inch gun aimed skyward at a crazy angle. Once again, I put Ricketts' bow to her stern, and the hose teams unleashed a torrent of water.

Bordelon put her bow in on Belknap's port side and extinguished several stubborn flames. Finally, the fires went out. Ricketts' men manned the lifelines and passed medical and damage control supplies to the men on Belknap's fantail.

As I started to back Ricketts clear again, a cry rang out from the cruiser's fantail: "On the Ricketts, on the Ricketts, you've got to get the guys on the foc'sle. They're trapped up there." Looking at the big cruiser as Ricketts pulled away, I could see that if injured personnel were on the forecastle, they wouldn't be able to get down the raked bow into a boat. With the rain and wind, they would be further subjected to exposure and shock. I directed my Chief Hospitalman to go over to Belknap, climb up to the forecastle, and administer first aid to the injured. We hailed Pharris motor whaleboat and sent "Doc" over to Belknap.

We laid to for a while, recovered our motor whaleboat, and took stock of the situation.

Although the Kennedy's fires were under control, she was still at general quarters, and her aircraft were conducting search and rescue operations. In addition, the USS Mount Baker (AE-34) and the USNS Waccamau (T-AO-109) were standing by to assist. The flow of information along the chain-of-command was intact.

The time had come to remove the injured men from Belknap's bow. I swung Ricketts about to make an approach which would take her port side to Belknap's starboard, bow to bow. The

high, raked bow of the cruiser would be dangerous to Ricketts, particularly since Belknap now listed to starboard. But there was no other way.

I put the bow gently against the Belknap. I twisted with rudder and engines to keep 'Ricketts' stern out at a safe angle. If I had to take damage from the rolling swells which could pound Ricketts against the cruiser, the place to take it was forward of the main engineering spaces, beneath the bridge at the port weather break.

By using this approach, about 30 feet of Ricketts' forward torpedo deck was approximately level with the Belknap's, forecastle. Passing the injured men, 18 in all, across this bridge to Ricketts, required strength and timing as the two ships rolled together. Every several minutes, the period of the rolling swells would permit the ships to lie on an even keel for about ten seconds, and, during that time, the stretcher was heaved across. Then the seas would take over, the ships would pitch and roll together, and Ricketts would slam into the side of the stricken cruiser. I would twist out, adjust for the roll, and time the position for the next transfer. The minutes ticked by slowly as each man was rigged and passed.

While the injured men were coming over, we passed all kinds of equipment, including pumps and eductors to dewater, first aid kits, foul weather clothing, coffee, jugs of drinking water, hot bread, fire hose nozzles, and oxygen breathing apparatus cylinders to Belknap. Belknap received like assistance from the other ships. It all appeared and was passed spontaneously. Two fire hoses under pressure were rigged from bridge to bridge to fight a small fire that was still burning aft of Belknap's bridge.

During this operation, we received an accurate report of Belknap's condition both from the rescued men and her Captain's brief bridge-to-bridge conversation with the Commodore. The Belknap was intact fore and aft. The fires had been successfully contained to the midship area. The number of casualties was unknown, though a few were known to be dead.

Then as the last of the injured sailors was heaved aboard the Ricketts, we heard the dreaded report: reflash!

Smoldering wreckage aft of Belknap's bridge flashed back into flame. At about the same time, she lost her last fire pump and all firefighting water pressure. We were her only source for water, and we had to stay.

Again and again, the ships crashed violently as I struggled to maintain position. The last fender, torn and battered, fell into the sea. My men began to roll mattresses and rig them as fenders, but they were puny preventatives against the force the rolling waters beneath us generated. We hooked up a hose to her fire main and sent much needed firefighting water to her.

Belknap continued to fight her fires with our water.

Finally, after two-and-one-half hours alongside Belknap, her captain shouted over that the fires were out—Belknap could be saved! Her crew members had struggled throughout the night to save their ship, and they had done it. Ricketts and the other ships of the Task Unit had been there in time to help.

I shouted to "Doc" to get aboard. He stepped across to my torpedo deck, and I cleared with all engines backing full. Belknap lay silently in front of Ricketts, dark in the beginning grey, gloom of dawn. Flickering flashlights proved that she still had life.

Once again, a small fire re-flashed. Bordelon went in and put it out. All was quiet as dawn broke, and Bordelon took the wounded but proud Belknap under tow. We searched the waters all that day on the chance that some men had gone overboard. Finally, when all were accounted for, we found that not a single man had abandoned his ship. Casualties were amazingly light, considering the magnitude of the fire. Six men on Belknap and one man on Kennedy died that gloomy night. A seventh Belknap man subsequently succumbed to burns. Forty-seven were injured, 24 of them were hospitalized. No one on any of the rescue and assist ships was injured. Later, after Belknap had been towed to Naples, Ricketts' crew members gave a party in honor of the brave men of Belknap. The comradeship, emotion, and togetherness displayed there that night was something to be well remembered. Out of tragedy, had come success. U. S. Navy men had battled against fires, explosions, and the forces of nature and emerged victorious.

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