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Into the Lion's Den

A daring raid into strongly defended enemy territory…. The enemy has once again been reminded of the mobility of the fleet.

—From the front page of a *New York Times* article reporting on the Battle of Haiphong Bay.[1]

Photo 1-1

Heavy cruiser USS *Newport News* (CA-148), March 1970.
National Archives photograph K-81521

Shortly before midnight on 27 August 1972, the USS *Newport News*, while flinging salvos from her 8-inch guns at enemy shore targets inside Haiphong Harbor, detected three North Vietnamese *Komar*-class patrol boats moving at top speed. The *Newport News* was leading a daring attack on North Vietnam's major port, assisted by three other surface units (identified below along with their commanding officers.) The last heavy cruiser built for the U.S. Navy, she had been named for the city in which she was constructed, Newport News, Virginia. Her keel was laid at Newport News Shipbuilding & Dry Dock Co. on 1 October 1945, and she was commissioned on 29 January 1949.[2]

Ship	**Comm./ Decomm.**	**Commanding Officer**
USS *Newport News* (CA-148) *Des Moines*-class	29 Jan 49/ 27 Jun 75	Capt. Walter Franklin Zartman
USS *Providence* (CLG-6) *Cleveland*-class	15 May 45/ 31 Aug 73	Capt. Paul Coy Gibbons Jr.
USS *Robison* (DDG-12) *Charles F. Adams*-class	9 Dec 61/ 1 Oct 91	Comdr. Robert Lawrence Lage
USS *Rowan* (DD-782) *Gearing*-class	31 Mar 45/ 18 Dec 75	Comdr. Robert Franklin Comer

Screened by the destroyer *Rowan*, the *Newport News* had been radically maneuvering on easterly courses, and would soon run out of sea room. To the east, a short distance ahead, lay the île de Norway archipelago; to the northeast the coast of Cat Ba; and to the north, the shoals and minefields of Haiphong. It wasn't known if the Soviet-built P-6 (NATO designation, Komar) patrol boats had torpedoes or missiles or both. The boats had used the cover of darkness and the karst islands of the Dao Cat Ba archipelago to mask their presence from radar, and were now moving to close off the only escape route.[3]

Embarked aboard the *Newport News* was commander, Seventh Fleet, Vice Adm. James L. Holloway III, USN. Two weeks earlier, he had received tasking from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to plan for a naval gunfire strike, code named LION'S DEN, against military facilities in the Haiphong-Cat Ba area. The targets were to include the airfield at Cat Ba, military barracks, coastal defense guns, ammunition dumps, and radars. Haiphong lay about three hundred miles north of the front lines, and as the major North Vietnamese port, heavily used by Communist China and Soviet Union shipping, had always been heavily defended.[4]

Photo 1-2

Against a backdrop of karst islands, a CH-53D Sea Stallion helicopter sweeps the bay in Hon Gay, North Vietnam, on 18 March 1973, as part of Operation END SWEEP. National Archives #USN 711571

Moreover, following extensive aerial mining by the Seventh Fleet of the channels and approaches to the port of Haiphong on 8 May 1972, the North Vietnamese had considerably strengthened the defenses in the Haiphong area. These defenses now included search and detection radars, coast watcher networks, coastal defense guns, gun-control radar, surface-to-air missile sites, and fire-control direction centers to coordinate gun and missile use. Intelligence briefers advised that there would be no air threat. The enemy aircraft in the area were day fighters

with no ability to attack ship targets at night. It was also thought that torpedo- or missile-equipped high-speed patrol craft would not pose a threat, because no fast patrol boats had been detected in the Haiphong area in several months. It appeared that coastal defense artillery would constitute the only real threat to the ships.[5]

ENEMY ARTILLERY RUDIMENTARY, BUT …

Seventh Fleet cruisers and destroyers conducting gunfire support on a daily basis generally had a low regard for the danger posed by North Vietnamese shore batteries. When the fall of shot came close, a ship simply moved farther away or changed course and speed, and the shore battery gunners had to recalculate their fire-control problem. The North Vietnamese guns being used for coastal defense were field artillery pieces—deadly against fixed targets but not designed to track moving ones. The technique of field artillery was to fire a few rounds at a fixed point, observe the fall of shot, and then adjust the fire in range and azimuth until the rounds consistently hit the desired point. Fortunately, it typically took more time for a battery to get "registered on the target," than a Naval Gunfire Support ship might be stationary. Of course, there was always the possibility of a luck shot.[6]

Admiral Holloway was well aware that if one of his ships were to become immobilized within range of a shore battery, it would take only a few minutes before the artillery would be hitting it consistently. To bring the targets at Haiphong and Cat Ba within range of the ships' guns, the bombardment group would have to close the shoreline to well within range of the enemy's coastal artillery emplacements. Although their guns might lack accuracy, the sheer volume of fire from the large number of defense sites would increase the chances of a ship being hit.[7]

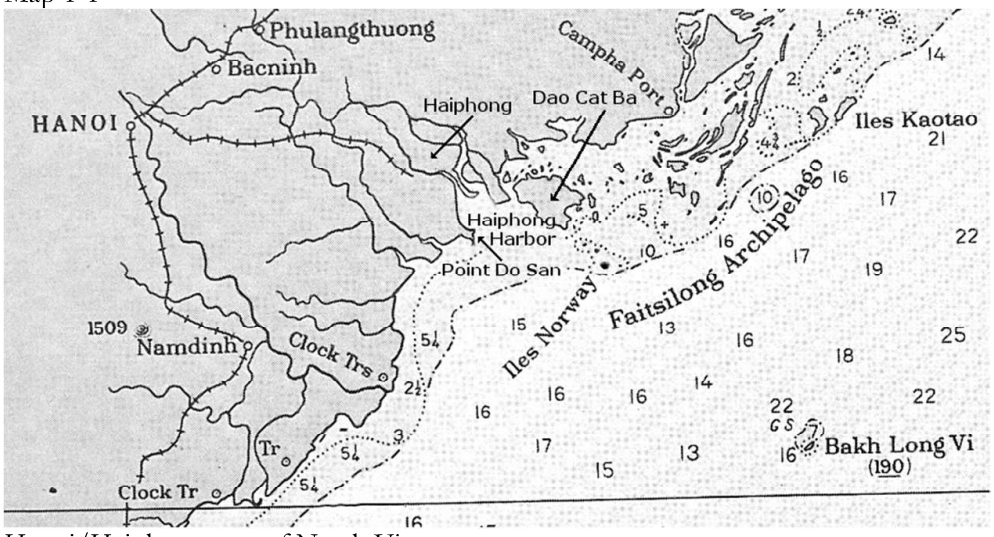
SELECTION AND PREPARATION OF SHIPS

The four bombardment ships selected for Lion's Den were designated Task Unit 77.1.2. Captain John Renn, commander, Destroyer Squadron 25, aboard the guided-missile destroyer *Robison*, was the officer in tactical command for the operation. *Robison* was to team with the *Providence*, a 6-inch gun and missile cruiser; while the World War II *Gearing*-class destroyer *Rowan* would join the heavy cruiser *Newport News*. The *Rowan* was selected for the mission because of a one-of-a-kind weapons system aboard the ship. A field modification had converted her anti-submarine warfare rocket launcher to a Shrike anti-radiation missile launcher. Shrike was an air-to-ground missile used by carrier aircraft against the North Vietnamese gun and missile control radars. The Shrike homed on electronic signals emanating from an active

enemy radar. The *Rowan* surface ship weapon system would be getting its first test in the Lion's Den.[8]

The elements of Task Unit 77.1.2 were pulled from the gunline off Quang Tri Province and dispatched to the Gulf of Tonkin to top off magazines and bunkers from the fleet oilers and ammunition ships on station there. (Most of the guns and ammunition then being used for shore bombardment were the same as those employed in World War II: 5-inch/38, 6-inch/47, and 8-inch/55.) The *Newport News* loaded more than one thousand rounds of 8-inch ammunition. Then the ships proceeded north independently at twenty-five knots to rendezvous about seventy miles southeast of Haiphong.[9]

Map 1-1



Hanoi/Haiphong area of North Vietnam
USS *Canberra* (CAG-2) Western Pacific 1967-1968 cruise book

The four ships were to arrive individually in the rendezvous area and to maneuver independently on random courses until after dark, when they would be unobservable by any local fishing craft that might be in the area. At 2000, the ships would form up in a column with *Rowan* as guide and proceed at twenty-five knots for the Point Do Son light (spelled Do San on the map), which marked the entrance to the Haiphong Channel. The light remained operational as a navigational aid for the duration of the war. Its obvious purpose was to help guide munitions-laden cargo ships from China, the Soviet Union, and other Communist bloc countries to the wharves of Haiphong. After the port was mined on 8 May 1972, the flow of war materiel through it ceased. Yet the light remained on, a fortunate eventuality for Task Unit 77.1.2 as it maneuvered around the shallows, shoals, and mined areas in the approaches to Haiphong.[10]

About ten miles off the coast, the *Providence* and *Robison* were to depart to close their assigned targets, which were generally southwest of Cat Ba. The *Rowan* and *Newport News* would continue on their north-northeast course to the entrance of the Haiphong Channel and after turning to an eastern course, conduct a firing run just outside of the five-fathom curve (30-foot water depth). The *Newport News*, with the biggest guns of the force, was assigned the most important targets. These included the fuel dump and vehicle storage at Cat Ba Airfield, the Do Son radar, Haiphong SAM sites, the Cat Ba military supply dump, fire-control radars and coastal gun batteries. Several of these targets were at the extreme range of her 8-inch guns, and would require the cruiser to penetrate the Haiphong Harbor approaches as far as her twenty-seven-foot draft would allow.[11]

The rendezvous of the four warships occurred on schedule, and there was no evidence of detection by local fishing or commercial craft during the approach to the objective area. At 2200, General Quarters was sounded aboard the *Newport News*, sending her crew to battle stations in preparation for the night's mission. As the heavy cruiser raced north at twenty-six knots to approach the turn point for her firing leg, the Do Son light appeared on time and in its proper place.[12]

NAVAL GUNS OPEN ON SHORE TARGETS

Photo 1-3

USS *Newport News* (CA-148) firing a salvo from her forward 8-inch gun turret, during Operation SEA DRAGON, 12 October 1967.
National Archives photograph #USN 1128303

At 2321, the *Newport News* came right to a heading of 070 on her firing course, and Captain Zartman gave the order to commence firing. The shore batteries immediately began to return fire. The North Vietnamese guns were not using flashless powder, and their muzzle blasts could be clearly seen as aim points for the ship's counterbattery fire. Flashes from numerous gun positions to the north lit up a full 45-degree arc of the horizon off the cruiser's port bow. Enemy rounds were falling in the vicinity, not too close, but splashes were clearly visible to sailors stationed topside to report the fall of shot.[13]

At 2330, the *Newport News* came a little further right to a course of 091 to run parallel to the five-fathom curve, which was only a mile or two north. *Providence* and *Robison*, on the cruiser's starboard quarter, had commenced their firing runs; *Rowan*, up ahead, was banging away with her 5-inch guns against coastal defenses and had launched two Shrikes at radar sites.[14]

Photo 1-4

Guided missile destroyer USS *Robison* (DDG-12) berthed at Sasebo, Japan.
USS *Robison* Western Pacific 1972 cruise book

Stepping out onto the port bridge to better observe the action, commander, Seventh Fleet, was afforded a clear view of the North Vietnamese coast with the muzzle flashes from the shore batteries and the explosions of ship projectiles. Cones of tracer fire rose ten thousand feet into the sky, coming from the anti-aircraft batteries at Cat Ba, Haiphong, and Hanoi, firing at Navy planes in the area. At the apex of

each cone of tracers was a Navy plane attacking a target or transiting the area for an armed reconnaissance of major supply routes from China.[15]

At 2333, the order "Cease fire, cease fire" came over the speakers in the mounts, and the *Newport News*' guns fell quiet. The *Rowan* had completed her mission five minutes earlier and had been detached and cleared to depart the objective area. The *Providence* and *Robison* had also finished up their bombardment duties and were retiring to the south. As the admiral stepped back inside the pilothouse, Captain Zartman informed him that all the *Newport News* assigned targets had been covered and that several secondary explosions had been noted at Cat Ba Airfield and the ammunition dump. As he was speaking, a dungaree-clad sailor serving as a battle phone talker reported, "Captain, Combat reports a surface target, designated Skunk Alfa, at ten thousand yards bearing 088, heading for us at high speed." ("Skunk" is Navy brevity code for "hostile surface contact.")[16]

RAPID ACTION REQUIRED

Captain Zartman quickly issued a stream of orders, Skunk Alfa was designated a hostile threat, all gun batteries were directed to take the target under fire, and *Rowan* ordered to rejoin the *Newport News*. Skunk Alfa, which had been visually identified with night observation devices as a P-6 class Soviet-made fast attack craft, was located five miles distant near a collection of small karst islands extending south of Cat Ba, a site well suited for an ambush. The rocks and pinnacles dead ahead were making it difficult for the fire-control radars to lock on the patrol boat. Even if this were not the case, the ship's forward guns could not fire because the firing circuits for the 8-inch guns cut out at low angles of fire over the bow to avoid destroying an electronics antenna that had recently been installed on the fo'c'sle.[17]

Newport News came hard right to unmask her battery, and all of the cruiser's port-side guns began firing as rapidly as they could be loaded. Within minutes, Skunk Alfa appeared to be on fire and trying to escape on a northerly course. Concurrently, CIC (ship's combat information center) reported two more Skunks with the same characteristics as Alfa, eight miles dead ahead, moving from left to right. As the cruiser's guns swung around to take this new threat under fire, the antenna on the fo'c'sle again prevented their use. The quickest maneuver to counter the threat would be to turn to port, and engage the fast craft with gunfire on the starboard side. However, this action would take the *Newport News* toward shoal water and not the open sea to the south.[18]

No matter, there was little choice. As the ship heeled over in a tight port turn, the cruiser's 5- and 3-inch batteries had their first crack at the

enemy. Despite rapid continuous fire, the P-6s continued to come. Their zigzagging approach through the many ship-sized karst islands confused the cruiser's radars, and tracking by optics was hampered by the darkness of the night and the many islets. Soon, a new challenge was presented the gun crews. Several "star shells" (illumination rounds) fired by the *Rowan* had detonated prematurely. Instead of silhouetting the P-6s from above, the parachute flares hung at a low altitude between the ships and the enemy, screening them behind the glare.[19]

FOURTH ENEMY FAST ATTACK CRAFT REPORTED

Newport News had been steering easterly and southeasterly courses to keep skunks Bravo and Charlie under continuous fire with all batteries, and would soon run out of sea room. When a report was received from *Providence* that a fourth fast patrol boat had been detected, Admiral Holloway decided to call for some help from Navy tactical air. Picking up a UHF radio handset mounted on the bulkhead in the pilothouse, he transmitted a voice message on a guarded (monitored) circuit:

> Attention any Seventh Fleet Aircraft in the vicinity of Haiphong. This is Blackbeard [commander, Seventh Fleet's personal call sign] on board *Newport News* with a shore bombardment force in Haiphong Harbor. We are engaged with several enemy surface units and need illumination to sort things out. Any aircraft in the area give me a call on guard. What we really need are high-power flares. Blackbeard out.[20]

Almost immediately came a response from Raven 44, the flight leader of two A-7 Corsair attack aircraft carrying out an armed reconnaissance flight north of Hanoi, "We have flares and Rockeye on board. I can see all the shooting down there. I wondered what was going on. I am overhead and ready to help." Holloway instructed Raven 44, to light up the area with flares, report on what he could see, and stand by for further orders.[21]

Almost immediately, the entire seascape of the Haiphong Harbor approaches was almost blindingly lit by a million-candlepower flare. Raven 44 reported that he had the *Newport News* in sight with an accompanying destroyer and could see a cruiser and a destroyer to the east. He also spotted two North Vietnamese fast attack boats closing the *Newport News*. With the targets now clearly visible, the heavy cruiser's guns increased their rate of fire to the maximum, as the aircraft carried out a coordinated attack. While one A-7 Corsair dropped a flare,

the other attacked with Rockeye—a weapon that distributed a cluster of lethal bomblets in an oblong pattern over a large area.[22]

It was almost impossible to miss a ship with Rockeye, even a small craft moving at high speed, and under the continuing flare illumination, the Rockeye and ships' gunfire finished off three of the Skunks, but not until the closest one had approached to within three thousand yards. At 2342 the *Newport News* and *Rowan* ceased fire; the battle was over. In the seventeen-minute firefight, the two warships had fired 294 rounds at the P-6s, sinking skunks Bravo, Charlie, and Delta. The remaining Alfa, out of range, on fire and limping north, was about to be eliminated by the two Corsairs. The aircraft were from Attack Squadron VA-93. Lt. (jg) William W. Pickavance was the flight leader, with Lt. (jg) Patrick D. Moneymaker as his wingman. Both would retire from the Navy with the rank of Rear Admiral.[23]

The next morning Task Unit 77.1.2 was disestablished, and the *Newport News*, *Rowan*, *Providence*, and *Robison* continued south to the Gulf of Tonkin to top off powder and projectiles and prepare to go back on the gunline. At that time in the war, all gun-armed major combatants were taking their turns on the gunline. Even the Seventh Fleet flagship, the missile cruiser *Oklahoma City* (CLG-5), was providing shore fire support with her 6-inch battery every three or four days.[24]