

Foreword

Commodore Donohue has done an admirable job of describing the Royal Australian Navy's participation in Naval Gunfire Support (NGFS) operations during the Vietnamese conflict, and Dr. Marolda provides a fine overview of ten years of naval gunfire support, anti-infiltration, and coastal surveillance operations. Rather than echo their work, I want to briefly describe my personal experiences aboard USS *Parsons* (DDG-33) off the coast of South Vietnam during the North Vietnamese Easter Offensive, March through May 1972.

Parsons was at Yokosuka, Japan, preparing for a radar picket assignment in the Sea of Japan when a flash message arrived in late March 1972. It directed us to get under way as soon as possible and proceed at best speed to the Gulf of Tonkin. The North Vietnamese Easter offensive—launched out of the DMZ, the Central Highlands, and the approaches to Saigon in South Vietnam—had begun. South Vietnamese forces in close proximity to the DMZ were being driven back and were in great danger of being overrun. They desperately needed artillery support. Commander Bruhn describes this offensive in vivid detail.

In March 1972, Destroyer Squadron 15 was composed of *Parsons*, and four World War II *Gearing*-class destroyers—*Roman* (DD-782), *Gurke* (DD-783), *Richard B. Anderson* (DD-786), and *Bausell* (DD-845). *Parsons* was newer, a *Forrest Sherman* destroyer commissioned in 1959, and converted to guided missile configuration. For NGFS purposes, she retained a single 5"/54 gun mount, forward, of her original three mounts. She was also the squadron flagship.

The gunline ran parallel to the coastline, about 4,000 yards offshore. The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) used QL1, the principal highway south from the DMZ, for movement of troops and supplies, and it was within easy range of our guns. Ships conducting gunfire were assigned circular stations about 2,000 yards apart and designated by color code, Red, Yellow, Green, etc. The gunline commander (normally an embarked squadron commander) received and passed fire missions to the ships. When they were available, he also put the ships in contact with spotters for called fire.

In the early stages of the NVA offensive, ARVN (South Vietnamese Army) units ashore lost cohesion and often lacked artillery support.

With air support initially disrupted by cloud cover, eight to ten ships in line, abreast, often firing simultaneously and around the clock, delivered desperately needed fire support. At one point, over forty cruisers and destroyers were serving on the gunline.

For nearly ninety days during the Easter Offensive, *Parsons* was either on the gunline or assigned carrier plane guard duties. We wore out our barrel liner and went alongside a tender at anchor in Da Nang to replace it. We fired over 5,000 rounds of NGFS, but were very FRUSTRATED. For effective NGFS, a ship needs a reliable gun. Our crew was well-trained and the fire control system behaved beautifully. Our SINGLE gun was our Achilles heel. Even at the best of times the Mk 42 5"/54 was a complex gun system: micro switches, limit stops, cams and other components had to work perfectly for the gun to hoist, load, and fire. Every ship with these type of mounts had some reliability issues, but our problem was self-inflicted. Early on the gunline, we had to flood the gun barrel because of a hang fire, hot gun situation. Unfortunately, the breechblock was not fully raised, and saltwater penetrated the innards of the mount. Salt water and electronics don't mix well—ever. Herculean effort by the Gunner's Mates restored partial dependability over time, but it was never the same again.

There was a standby station, Station Black, on the gunline, farther offshore. When a ship's gun failed, it was ordered to Station Black to repair it. *Parsons* spent a lot of time there. If there was no prospect for immediate repair, ships were exiled to a carrier escort assignment until they had a ready gun.

Our sense of pride took a real beating. We were a generation newer than the other four destroyers in the squadron, we were the flagship, and we had the 3-D radar and the guided missile system. We were the Proud, Powerful *Parsons*. Unfortunately, our single, balky gun often consigned us to Station Black or inhaling stack gas and jet exhaust behind a carrier. Our squadron mates mounted 5"/38 guns, first introduced in 1934. They may not have had the range we did, but they kept on shooting, shooting, and shooting.

Gun reliability aside, *Parsons'* single gun limited our NGFS missions. We were judged not able to safely participate in Linebacker operations against North Vietnam. While the other squadron destroyers had after mounts, necessary for self-protection against shore battery fire when clearing the coast, we did not. The other destroyers struck against Vinh,

Haiphong, and other targets in the north; we kept the peace at Station Black.

It was very satisfying during the Easter Offensive to know we were mostly firing at real military targets that posed a substantial and immediate threat to our Vietnamese allies, with spotters to call the fall of shot. Other missions were not spotted and had no identified target. *Parsons* was frequently assigned harassment and interdiction missions, firing at random times and targets within a one-square-kilometer area. These areas were uninhabited and without any military value. They may have kept the North Vietnamese awake, but we doubted it, and thought they were, a great waste of ammunition.

Commander Bruhn has delivered a superb, comprehensive treatment of the important role that NGFS played during the Vietnamese war. I doubt if there is a destroyer sailor who served then who did not participate in the delivery of Naval Gunfire. I hope you enjoy this quick-paced and engrossing read.

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