



Newsletter Volume 4 No. 2 Autumn/Winter 2022/23

2023 Symposium

Putting together a successful symposium requires a tremendous amount of voluntary effort and support from many dedicated people. It's like arranging and performing a concert; each instrument plays its unique part to create one melodious piece of art.

We are very grateful to those who contributed their time and effort to the 2023 Symposium. We are also grateful to every member (old or new) who attended or watched remotely... literally it's all about you.

With risk that I might forget some key contributors, I would like to recognize some specific groups and individuals. First is the USS Midway Museum and its CEO, John 'Mac' McLaughlin, who provides our venue at no cost... and such

an appropriate venue! USS Midway Museum has developed an extensive educational outreach effort, a category in which we are included. We proudly display their logo with our own on our Symposium program because they have truly become partners in our endeavor. Thank you, Mac, the Midway Museum Board of Directors, and the entire Midway Museum team. As an aside, I have heard that Mac has decided that it is time for a transition and that Rear Admiral Terry Kraft, USN (Retired) will be taking the helm as CEO. We look forward to working with Admiral Terry on future symposia and certainly welcome him as an honorary member. (I won't press him for dues.)

Two members of the USS Midway Museum deserve special notice. Karl Zingheim, the ship's historian (and member of the WNHA Board of Directors) naturally does all the liaison work between WNHA and USS Midway Museum. But Karl's attention to detail was obvious throughout the ... continued on page 7



USS Midway Museum (Times of San Diego)

Editor's Remarks

This issue of the Western Naval History Association newsletter features an article by member Captain Bill Heard (USN Ret.) remembering times that his ship, USS *Iredell County* (LST 839) came under fire. We thank Bill for his contribution and remind readers that the WNHA welcomes contributions. Please contact the editor if you have a short article for publication.



Dr. Norman Friedman's keynote presentation.



Stephen McLaughlin and Building Stalin's Fleet

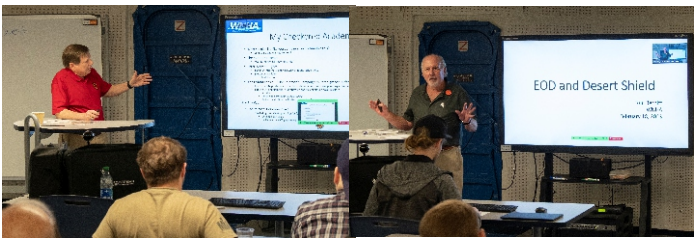


Classroom 6, capacity 49 SRO.



President Sam Tangredi's opening remarks

Vincent O'Hara pitching books.



Terry McKearney & the Solomons Campaign Tom Bennett and EOD in Desert Shield



Jim Bryant and the Evolution of US attack submarines

John Burt and war gaming the Great Mariana's Turkey Shoot



Drachinifel & youtubing naval history

Jeremy Mazur explaining how oral history works



Karl Zingheim and the Point Honda disaster

ON BOARD Iredell County: Taking Fire in Vietnam

Bill Heard (Captain, USNR Ret.)

USS *Iredell County* (LST 839) pulled into Danang Harbor in a driving rain on Saturday, 22 October 1966. I had the conn. Our captain, Lieutenant Edwin C. Hagedorn, the lookouts and I sheltered from the rain as best we could under the short conning tower overhang.

The expansive bay, bounded by high, wooded mountains on the north and marshy lowlands on the south, was crowded with ships discharging pallets of war materiel into lighters moored alongside. Guarding the south side of the harbor entrance was high-peaked Monkey Mountain. Rounding the mountain, we saw a long pier the Navy had built for merchant ships, and farther along a wide beach. Several LSTs were nosed into the beach taking on cargo.

We moved cautiously through the unfamiliar harbor seeking the entrance to the Pearl River that flowed past the old French town of Danang. Sampans steered by



LST 839 on the beach (Wikipedia)

Vietnamese in conical straw hats darted across our course, disappearing under the bow. We held our breath, afraid we would run them down. They quickly emerged on the other side. We had cut off whatever devils were trailing in their

sampan's wakes. Now, their devils were attached to our ship.

We had sailed from San Diego on 8 September, setting course for our homeport of Guam. Pausing for a three-day liberty call in Oahu, the ship reached Apra Harbor on 1 October. We spent five days there getting reacquainted with our wives and settling into new quarters on the Naval Station. On 6 October, the ship got underway. Our first port call was the Marine Corps Air Station in Iwakuni, Japan. There we took aboard several large Conex boxes for delivery in Danang. Griped down on the main deck, they were the only cargo on our first deployment to the war zone.

This Pacific crossing was *Iredell County's* longest voyage since World War II. Built by the American Bridge Company in Ambridge, Pennsylvania, she was commissioned LST 839 in late 1944. She participated in the invasion of Okinawa, and shuttled troops and equipment among the Mariana Islands, the Philippines, and Okinawa for the remainder of the war. Mothballed with the Reserve Fleet at Astoria, Oregon, on the Columbia River in July 1946, she had not been reactivated for the Korean War.

LST 839 was pulled out of mothballs in late 1965, and towed to San Diego. She was reconditioned and upgraded with air conditioning, a Combat Information Center (CIC), new conning tower and other modifications. She was re-commissioned as USS *Iredell County* (LST 839) in June 1966. As her commissioning crew, we took her through underway training in local waters, with beaching exercises on Coronado's Silver Strand, before getting underway for WestPac.

A *Sharp Lookout*

On this day, the ship had entered the mouth of Danang's Pearl River. We kept a sharp lookout for our assigned discharge point, a small ramp not far from the White Elephant, the Navy's headquarters in I Corps. (The American military had divided South Vietnam into four operational sectors: I Corps in the north, II Corps in the middle of the country, III Corps in the south and IV Corps

in the far south.) The headquarters was called the White Elephant because bas relief sculptures of elephants standing on their hind legs flanked the entrance to the Navy compound.

We offloaded our Conex boxes and moved back down river to the LST ramp below Monkey Mountain. For many months to come, this would be our routine: Take on cargo in Danang, sail either north to the tiny naval supply base at Cua Viet, or south to the even smaller supply base at Chu Lai, offload our cargo, and sail back to Danang for more. Our schedule generally included three months in Vietnam, then seven days underway for Guam where we spent three weeks resupplying and refitting. Then, a seven-day voyage back to Vietnam for another three-month deployment. In total, during my time on board, we made eight such deployments.

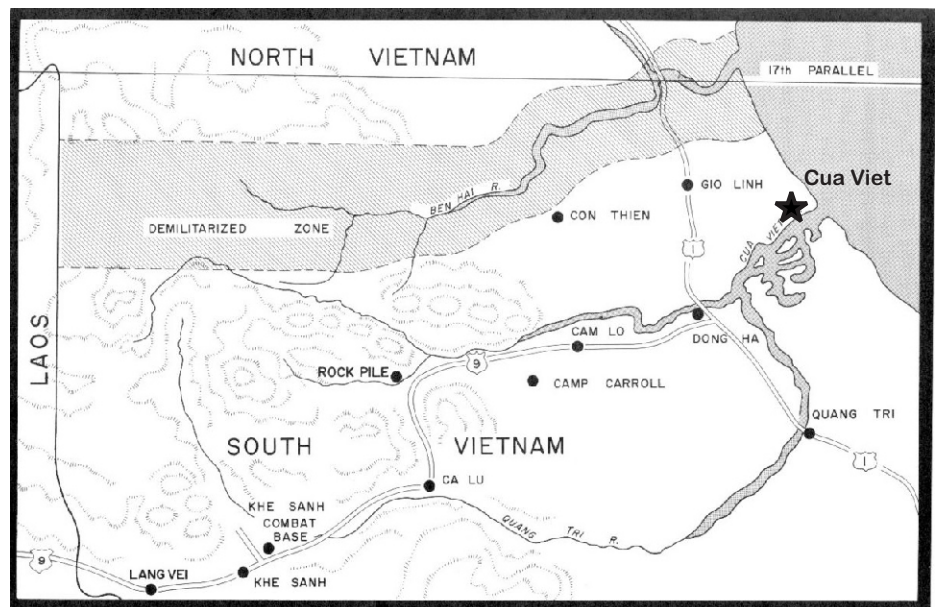
On two occasions, instead of hauling cargo, we transported a battalion of the Army's 1st Armored Cavalry Regiment, and later a battalion of 600 Korean Marines to Chu Lai. Those Koreans were tough and proved it with a demonstration during which they broke several thick boards with karate chops. Our sailors were fascinated. Also adding some unexpected—and unwanted—thrills were three occasions on which the ship came under enemy fire. The first came in late 1967 while the ship was beached at Chu Lai discharging cargo.

Our offloading operation at Chu Lai had begun peacefully enough that day. We had made the difficult dog-leg turns into the tiny harbor with no problem, and had beached at one of the four LST ramps. The bo'sun mates who ran our two massive forklifts were making good progress taking pallets from the tank deck to the beach. Base personnel were busy moving the cargo into the few structures on the little supply depot.

The supply officer at Chu Lai was Lieutenant (j.g.) Roger Staubach, a Naval Academy quarterback and Heisman Trophy winner. He later went on to play for the Dallas Cowboys, where he won two Super Bowls. Our engineering

officer, Lieutenant (j.g.) Rob Brown was a classmate of Staubach's. Rob invited him aboard to have lunch with us. Roger was a nice guy, and we had a very pleasant lunch. We were impressed that, to stay in shape, he ran at least two circumferences of the base every day.

Later that day, however, this pleasant interlude was interrupted when a salvo of enemy artillery shells fell all around the ship. We immediately went to General Quarters and manned our 40mm guns. The base also went on high alert. Apparently, the enemy had only enough ammo for one salvo, so after the first rounds fell there was no more gunfire. Scared the heck out of us, but the damage was only superficial. The shrapnel punched a couple of holes in our galley bulkhead, and several holes in our starboard Papa boat (LCVP). Luckily, no one was injured. That was Number One.



The DMZ (author)

Number Two: Rocket attack

Not long afterward, the ship had loaded out cargo at Danang for delivery to the Marines' Camp Kistler at Cua Viet. We steamed north to the base, and discharged our cargo over the ramp. The sun had set as we cleared the river's mouth. It was a pitch-black night with no stars as we slowly steamed south. The shoreline a couple of miles off

our starboard side was dark; there were no lighted settlements. I had the conn.

At about 2300, one of my lookouts yelled, "Sir, there's a flash on the beach!" I turned to look and, just as I focused my binoculars on the shore, we heard a rushing roar as if a freight train had passed overhead. I immediately ordered, "Left full rudder! All engines ahead full! Darken ship!"

"Aye, Sir!" The helmsman spun the wheel sharply. The lee helmsman rang up Ahead Full on the engine order telegraph. The bow began to swing to port, and I felt the ship surge forward. The lookouts peered through their binoculars looking for more flashes on the shore.

I phoned the captain in his sea cabin one deck below the conn. He answered from a deep sleep. "Captain, this is the Officer of the Deck. I think the Viet Cong just fired a rocket at us. I've changed course to 090 and we're at all ahead full. I've ordered darken ship. Shall I sound General Quarters."

"Hold on," the captain replied, "I'm coming to the bridge." Arriving on the bridge moments later, and assessing the situation, the captain decided not to sound General Quarters. We stayed on our course until we were some miles east of the shoreline, but eventually changed course south for Danang.

The rest of the night was quiet, but had the rocket—if that's what it was—actually hit the ship it could have caused significant damage and almost certain loss of life. A strike to the starboard side of the hull could have penetrated berthing spaces where many sailors were sleeping. A hit to the superstructure at main deck level could have killed those asleep in officers' quarters, wrecking the captain's cabin and the executive officer's stateroom. Had it struck higher, it could have destroyed the Combat Information Center and the bridge, where sailors—including myself—were standing watch. That was Number Two.

Number Three: Explosions at Cua Viet

It was a Sunday morning, 10 March 1968. *Iredell County* was loitering offshore at Cua Viet waiting for a sister ship to back off the ramp and clear the mouth of the river. On the beach, the LST had left behind dozens of pallets of 55-gallon gasoline drums, huge stacks of bombs and artillery shells. The gas and ammunition were staged on the ramp for transport by armored LCUs upriver to the Marine base at Dong Ha.



Mouth of the Cua Viet River and the ammunition fire.
<http://www.pcf45.com/cuaviet/cuaviet.html>

Both Dong Ha and the LST ramp at Camp Kistler lay only a couple of miles south of the Demilitarized Zone. The DMZ, a shell-pocked area four to six miles wide ran some 48 miles across the width of the country. It had been established in 1954 during the First Indochina War as France fought to

save its Vietnam colony from being overrun by North Vietnam. The North's leader, Ho Chi Minh, wanted to unite the country under communist control.

Demilitarized, maybe, but during U.S. direct military involvement from 1964 to 1973, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) often sneaked artillery, rocket launchers and troops into the DMZ. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara had envisioned building a series of interlocking firebases—a latter-day Maginot Line—across the southern edge of the DMZ to stop NVA infiltration. Dong Ha was one of those firebases.

Aboard *Iredell County*, we were now at General Quarters, wearing helmets and flak jackets, all our 40mm guns

manned. After some time, the other LST made it out to sea. We exchanged courtesies as she passed on her way to Danang.

Captain Hagedorn gave the order to enter the river, and we began the transit. The mouth of the Cua Viet River is fairly wide where it meets the South China Sea. Beached on the right bank was a small, war-damaged tugboat that made an excellent radar target for navigators. Sand banks quickly pinched the river into a narrow passage as we continued toward the ramp.

Almost abreast of the ramp and preparing to turn hard to port for our beaching, we heard a loud whistling noise. A shell or a rocket (witnesses disagree) launched from within the DMZ dropped into the midst of the volatile cargo stacked on the ramp. An enormous explosion shook the base. A concussion bubble blossomed out from the ramp and washed over us, blowing out the windows in our conning tower.

A terrific firestorm

Within moments, a terrific firestorm spread across the ramp engulfing the gasoline barrels, artillery shells and ammunition. The roar of the fire and the noise from the exploding gas barrels and ammunition was earsplitting. Red hot shrapnel from the exploding shells rained down on our main deck and superstructure. It was a terrifying Fourth of July fireworks display with destructive and deadly consequences.

The captain moved the ship as far upstream as we could go in the shallow river, and anchored fore and aft. We lay there while the fire and explosions continued. Concussion bubbles swept over the ship from time to time. About the middle of the afternoon, the captain decided to see whether we might be able to help fight the fire.

We lowered our Papa boats, loaded aboard two Handy Billy Wimps, and sent them to the beach. The coxswains beached the boats and the boat crews began spraying river water on the flames. Suddenly, there was a huge explosion. One of



the sailors was blown overboard, leaving his boon dockers standing on the boat's transom. Luckily, the water was shallow, and he was able to walk ashore. Another sailor was knocked into the bottom of the boat and suffered a broken arm. A helicopter med-evaced him to the hospital ship *Sanctuary* steaming offshore. The sailor recovered from his injury, but he never returned to the ship.

A little later, we received a frantic radio call from another ship trapped like we were in the river. It was the Officer in Charge of a little yard tanker that had brought a load of aviation gas from Danang to Cua Viet. "We have an unexploded 105 shell on our deck, and we're loaded with av-gas," he said. "We don't have any gunner's mates on board, and we don't know how to handle the shell. And it's hot! Can you help us?"

The captain called our leading gunner's mate to the conn. Would he and another gunner's mate agree to help the tanker? They volunteered and set out in our boat. On board the tanker, the gunner's mates gingerly lifted the 105 shell from the deck, carried it to the side and threw it into the water. Everyone on board breathed a sigh of relief. When

the gunner's mates returned to the ship, the captain asked our hospital corpsman to give each of them an airline-sized bottle of bourbon for their courage in disposing of the live shell.

Iredell County lay at anchor in the river overnight as the fire slowly subsided and explosions petered out. By the next morning, the captain determined it was safe to get underway. Our decks still littered with shrapnel, and our windowless conn open to the winds, we hauled anchors and steamed out of the river. The crew fell silent as we passed the ramp littered with the still smoldering rubble of the devastating fire. Within minutes, we cleared the river and felt the heave of the South China Sea under the ship. We were never so glad to be back at sea. ###

Symposium (continued from page 1)

Symposium; for example, he's the one who negotiates with the caterer and picked those great meals... always a Symposium highlight. Thank you, Karl.

Trevore Humphrey did great work with Zoom and all the AV equipment. A school teacher, Trevore took some time off from work to support us. For that we are very grateful. Thank you, Trevore.

Of course, we are very grateful to all our speakers and presenters. You are the program. Every presentation was a gem. We would like to single out those who travelled far distances to be with us in person: Norman Friedman, travelling from New York City, and Drachinifel, who travelled all the way from the UK. Thanks for the special effort, gentlemen ... And now we know how Alex became Drachinifel.

Thanks also to Lonnie Gill and his team of naval wargamers for once again bringing all the equipment for the wargaming demonstration.

Finally, I would like to thank my fellow Board of Directors: Vince O'Hara, Steve McLaughlen, Cynthia Watson, Carlos Rivera, Karl Zingheim, and Jeremy Mazur. They are the

brains behind WNHA; I'm just the figurehead.

Very respectfully,
Sam Tangredi, President WNHA.

P.S. With the new year we also request membership dues. The WNHA is a non-profit organization and we charge dues of \$50 member/\$25 student. This includes admission to the annual symposium (if you came, you're paid up), to the Q&As, and to this newsletter. Consider Paypal to info@wnha.net. Thank you for your support.

Contacts and Q&As

Email info@wnha.net for more information about the Association. We welcome new members. Check out our web page at wnha.net. Follow @WNHA3 on Twitter for regular updates of the Association's events. We also have a new Youtube channel where past Q&As presentations have been posted. Here's a list:

- Jon Parshall: "Fuchida and the Flight Deck Myth."
- James R. FitzSimonds: "Aircraft Carriers verses Battleships in Myth and War."
- David Ulbrich: "The USMC and the Dawn of Amphibious Operations."
- Vince O'Hara: "Four Victories. December 1941 in the Mediterranean."
- Evan Mawdsley: "Swan Song: British Maritime Operations in WWII."
- Brian Walter: "The Atlantic Campaign in WWII: Common Myths and Under-Reported Facts."
- Gary Giumarra: "Sledgehammer 1942. A Feasible Amphibious Option?"
- Trent Hone: "Guadalcanal - Give 'em Hell."
- Carlos Rivera: "Closest Point of Approach: Akiyama Saneyuki and Contact with the US Navy."
- Michael Whitby: "Canada and the Cuban Missile Crisis."
- Len Heinz: "New Naval Technology."

and forthcoming on 18 March at 12 noon Pacific: Steve Kemper: "Our Man in Tokyo: An American Ambassador and the Countdown to Pearl Harbor."