

## Sea Story – A True One

By Captain R. Claude “Frenchy” Corbelle, USN, (Ret)

It was Sunday afternoon, early in the month of August 1968 when USS Forrestal (CVA-59) was making her way through the Western Mediterranean during the first days of a 7-month cruise. I was Officer of the Deck (OOD) on the 1200 – 1600 bridge watch, there were no ship’s evolutions ongoing, and things looked like a “ho-hum” Sunday afternoon at sea.

We were hosting the Prospective Commanding Officer (PCO) of USS Independence and our CO had gone with him to the Captain’s In-Port Cabin. Prior to departing the bridge, the CO and I had conversed briefly and one of the subjects breeched was that we had been in the Mediterranean for more than a week now and we had not yet seen one of those pesky Russian trawlers. Our Navy had come to hope not to see one because they had a way of getting in the way whenever we had things to do, such as flight operations, or underway replenishment. This lack of encounter was about to change.

At about 1500 I called the CO to advise him that we had picked up an unidentified surface contact on radar, range 22,000 yards (11 nautical miles). It appeared to be on our reciprocal course at a speed of 8 knots and in the absence of any changes, the closest point of approach (CPA) would be 6,000 yards on our port beam.

“Very Well” and the customary “Thanks, Frenchy” constituted the CO’s response.

I had no more than hung up the phone when the contact changed course. I could identify 2 sticks (masts) over the horizon, looking through the 7X50 OOD standard equipment Bausch & Lomb’s, but could make out nothing of the vessel. However, the two sticks bore a strong resemblance to the pictures we had on the bridge of known trawlers that had frequented these waters.

I called the Captain back to advise him that the unidentified contact had indeed made a 90-degree course change, was still doing 8 knots, and his present course/speed would take him across our bow at 6,000 yards (3 miles). We were doing 20 knots, on some kind of a “sustained speed exercise” for the engineers and preferred to alter neither course nor speed unless absolutely necessary. I advised the Captain of my suspicions concerning the vessel’s identity and advised him that I had ordered the Intelligence Sighting Team to the bridge.

It being a Sunday stand down with little to occupy the idle time, we soon had the entire Intelligence staff scattered about on the bridge and the signal bridge, with a few photo types thrown in. The contact was still hull-down over the horizon, but the visible masts more and more took on the resemblance of our Russian trawler pictures. I also advised the Captain that, in accordance with the International Rules of the Road, Forrestal was the privileged vessel; the vessel crossing our bow was coming from our port side and was therefore the “burdened” vessel. In accordance with the Rules, the privileged vessel is REQUIRED to maintain course and speed. The burdened vessel is responsible for maneuvering as necessary to avoid collision. The Captain said “Very Well, call me back if he does anything funny, and let me know what the intelligence folks come up with.”

Only moments later I was back on the phone, advising the Captain that we had positive ID on a Russian ELINT (Electronics Intelligence) trawler, and he had indeed done something “funny” – He had reached our intended track at a range of 6,000 yards, and had then executed another 90-degree turn to port; **he was now on the same course as Forrestal, dead ahead, at speed 8 knots. So we had a 12-kt speed advantage, and 3 miles to contact. That meant that in 15 minutes one or the other of us must turn or he, the Russian trawler, would get run over.**

I advised the Captain that in accordance with the International Rules, he was burdened when he came in from our port bow. Now that we are on a course to overtake him, he would like us to believe that Forrestal, as the overtaking vessel, is the newly ordained BURDENED vessel. I reminded the Captain of

another clause in the rules that says once a vessel is burdened, it may not maneuver to shift the burden to the other vessel. He stays burdened until danger of collision is past.

The Captain agreed with my assessment and asked what I recommended we do. I recommended we hold course and speed until "In Extremis" – that sketchy point at which somebody has to do something or there's going to be a crunch, then order up "All Back Emergency Full," "Right Full Rudder," and we would miss him. I had identified that point as 400 yards astern but threw in 100 yards for cushion.

The Captain once more came back with his cheerful "Very Well" and added, "If he's still there at 1,000 yards, give me a call back."

**"AYE AYE, Sir!"**

Now we've eaten up about 1/3 of our cushion and the squawk box came to life.

"Bridge, Flag Bridge - When does Forrestal intend to maneuver to avoid that privileged vessel ahead?" (from the Flag Bridge.) There was no race by other members of the bridge team to answer that one, so I got it myself.

**"Flag Bridge, Bridge -This is the Officer of the Deck speaking. That vessel ahead is not privileged – he approached from our port side, therefore is the burdened vessel, and he can no longer maneuver to shift his burden to Forrestal."**

**"Flag Bridge Aye!"**

I could envision some hot shot flag watch officer digging the Admiral's shoe out of his ass, and smiled inwardly. I didn't hear the Admiral's voice, but I knew he was watching from his favorite perch.

Somewhere about then I had the Signal Gang close up flag "Uniform" on both halyards – "U" is the international signal that says, "You are standing into danger."

Then our Navigator got into it. First, he told me I was going to have to turn the ship and he was working on our new course. Since he was a commander and I was a lieutenant, I explained as tactfully as I could that we were not going to turn, leastways not to a pre-planned course. We were the privileged vessel, and as such, were REQUIRED to hold course and speed.

Next thing I heard from him was, **"Mr. Corbeille, I'm ordering you to turn this ship."**

With no attempt at tact, I advised him;

**"Commander, you cannot order me to turn this ship. If you believe the ship to be sufficiently endangered, you, as Navigator, can summarily relieve me as OOD. Then you can turn left, turn right, or come dead in the water. But you cannot order me to turn. Do you want to relieve me?"**

Rather truculently, he then asked if the Captain knew about all this. I told him yes indeed, and at contact range of 1,000 yards, I was to notify the Captain again.

"You better call him again – right now!"

"No Sir, we still have a few hundred yards to go."

At this stage, I don't recall the exact time, the bridge relief crew was coming on deck, but no one was ready to be relieved. I spied my relief OOD waiting in the wings and he wanted nothing more than to stay out of the way.

Admittedly, I got a bit nervous, and I called the Captain back when the trawler was 1,100 yards ahead. His only response was, "I'm on my way up." He arrived momentarily with the PCO of Independence following in his wake. He hopped up in his chair and said, "Boy, he is pretty close, isn't he?" Then he asked, "And when do you plan to make your big move?" I told him that if it closes to 500 yards, we can order up All Back Emergency Full, Right Full Rudder, and we will miss him.

He asked: "Is that what the book says?"

I told him, "No Sir, The book says 400 yards, but I was leaving in a little cushion."

He said, "**We need only to maneuver in extremis to MINIMIZE DAMAGE.**"

That is a slight departure from international rules, but was our standing order, arrived at specifically to contend with Soviet harassment vessels. This is kind of a delicate point here because International Rules of the Road says the "privileged vessel must maneuver when in extremis to avoid collision." The USSR (Soviet Union) was not signatory to the International Rules of the Road, therefore her vessels were not bound by them. It must be pointed out that Soviet ships, merchantmen and men-of-war alike, followed the international rules of the road anyway, and knew them well enough to "play chicken" with U.S. ships, mostly to our embarrassment. That was a game that our Navy had long since tired of, hence the new guidance to maneuver only in extremis to minimize damage.

Naturally, it behooved one to be absolutely certain that he was absolutely right, if he were going to take a Navy man-of-war down to the wire in a potential collision situation. We quickly reviewed our standing order as well as the International Rules of The Road, to be certain that we were right.

Having thus indicated his intentions, the Captain then asked, "So how close can we take her?" I told him 400 yards would provide a grazing situation, and then ordered the engine room to stand by for Emergency Backing Bells.

We were still closing and had reached the 500-yard mark when the trawler put in left full rudder. His rudder was not the size of a barn door – it had to have looked like the side of the barn itself! That guy turned 90 degrees left in a heartbeat! We never flinched, never wavered, and the trawler passed close aboard to port – so close, in fact, that the hull was not visible alongside our flight deck. All that was visible from the vantage point of our bridge were the two masts as they went rapidly down our port beam. Then we launched a helo for some photo work and a big sigh of relief went up from the bridge.

The Navigator started lobbying for us to file a harassment report, but since we had altered neither course nor speed to accommodate the trawler, it was hard to make a case for harassment. I wanted to make out a harassment report on the Navigator but the CO calmed me down on that score. The Prospective Commanding Officer (PCO) of Independence, bless his soul, took in the whole affair after arriving on the bridge with our Captain, and never interjected one word. When it was all over, he moved directly in front of me and said, loud enough for almost everybody on the bridge to hear, "**No one could have done better.**"

Our CO joined right in and said "**Frenchy, you handled that perfectly.**"

At that point I realized I wasn't going to be a lieutenant forever, my advice to the Captain had been sound, and I knew our Captain appreciated it. My breathing gradually returned to normal.

For his part, Captain Hill, for that, as I recall, was his name, went on to become CO of USS Independence. He assumed command while anchored in some Sardinian Bay, and when Independence stood out to sea "under new management," there was a Russian ELINT trawler, just outside territorial waters, making slight way on Independence's intended track. A friend serving on that fine vessel told me that the new CO's order to CIC was "**Combat, give me a collision course on that trawler at 30 knots!**" I heard the same refrain from several other people, and I believe it to be what happened.

For our part, we spent the remainder of our cruise unhampered in any way by any Russian flagged ship. We continued to see an occasional trawler, but when we came into the wind to launch and recover aircraft, they vanished as if by magic. The word seemed to have leaked out that this carrier has an attitude problem – he'll run right over you! And the Chief Engineer was happy because he got his uninterrupted 4-hour sustained speed run at 20 knots.

Life was not the same for me after that. Our Captain made me "Command Duty Officer Underway." I was already the General Quarters OOD and Sea and Anchor Detail OOD, so I wasn't sure what this new designation would lead to. I soon learned that I was to be on the bridge whenever Forrestal was in formation with other major combatants, (destroyers didn't count, but cruisers did), and that I was to provide training to all prospective Command Duty Officers. Anytime there was underway replenishment, there was a "formation", so I got to spend a lot of valuable time on the bridge, learning all I could absorb. Our great Captain, nameless up to now, was Robert Bemus Baldwin, born in Fargo, North Dakota. He was promoted to RADM upon leaving Forrestal, and the last time I spoke with him he was Vice Admiral

Baldwin, COMNAVAIRPAC. I believe he lives in or near San Diego and remains the most admired man of my 30-plus year Navy career.

**Epilogue:** One year after putting together this bit of prose, we moved from Castle Rock, WA to Brillion, WI. However, during that year I learned that Vice Admiral Baldwin no longer lived in San Diego, but rather in Gig Harbor, WA – a scant 100 miles from my house. During that year we rendezvoused for lunch on several occasions, reliving our shipboard days plus some other adventures.