

Snooping on the Russians

After returning to the U.S. from a year in Vietnam, I took command of the USS Holder (DD-819) home ported in Norfolk, VA. I relieved the old commanding officer on a Saturday and on Tuesday we were enroute to Gitmo for 6 weeks. Following Gitmo, the ship joined a carrier task force group (one carrier, one supply ship, a submarine, and six destroyers) for a 6 month Med deployment. Just before departing Norfolk, the Holder was selected to receive a CONEX full of special electronics for snooping on Russian ships and eight highly trained intelligence personnel.

After about a month in the Med, the Holder was scheduled for five days liberty in Mallorca, Spain. We were "Med moored" (anchor out forward, stern tied to pier) in the inner harbor; the crew was enjoying liberty in Spain. About 3 hours after mooring I got a message from the task group commander to get underway in 3 hours, message to follow. We got about 80 to 90% of the liberty party back onboard and were underway heading south for the north coast of Algeria.

A Russian sub had a fire onboard and could not submerge. The sub was being escorted by a Russian Kresta (cruiser) for repairs in the Black Sea Russian shipyard. The U.S. Navy had been trying to collect intelligence on Russian submarine communications and this seemed like a golden opportunity.

A day and a half later we found them hiding in among some merchant ships heading west toward the Black Sea. The Kresta stayed about 1000 yards on the beam of the sub, so I just snuggled my destroyer between them, all heading west at about 4 kts. The Kresta didn't like this at all. She frequently tried to ram us. But she was much bigger than the Holder and therefore the cruiser had a turning circle that was larger than ours, so when she would turn toward us we would snuggle up to her port or starboard quarter and turn with her. We did this for about four days and nights. The special box and its people collected some good intelligence on Russian communications.

After the fourth day, we got a message from the task group commander that there were three Russian frigates heading our way and we were to back off the surveillance and return to the task force group ASAP..