

Standing Bridge Watches

By Captain Ace Trask, USN, (Ret)

In the Merchant Marine the dog watch has the mate and the helmsman in the area in case a course change is required, at which time the helmsman goes from "Iron Mike" to hand steering. The mate is the lookout, navigator, etc.

The U.S. Navy does it a bit differently. The watch consists of the officer of the deck (OOD), the junior officer of the deck (JOOD), the quartermaster, the sound powered phone operator, and two lookouts (one port and one starboard). The watches are usually 4 hours long and there are three groups of watch standers. The watches are 0000-0400/1200-1600, 0400-0800/1600-2000, and 0800-1200/2000-2400. The 0000-0400 is called the "mid-watch" which I preferred as it usually is a quiet time at sea.

But when one is in a "combat zone" like Vietnam, the watches are 12-hour watches (0000-1200 and 1200-0000). If there is an underway evolution such as underway refueling (which destroyers do every 3 days because their fuel level can't fall below 75% due to the motto "anywhere anytime"), ammo or stores resupply, they require "all hands" on deck. In Vietnam the usual time "on the line" was 30 days with 21 days off the line because it would take a few days to transit to Subic Bay. The crew needed the time "off the line" because sleep was hard to get. When one was "off watch" the guns were still attacking targets along the coast.

Destroyers have three mounts, MT 51 forward, MT 52 amidships and MT 53 aft. Mount 51 was usually used to shell the coastline when the ship was heading to go close along the shore, then as the ship paralleled the coast, all three mounts were firing. Departing the coastline, MT 53 would keep firing until the ship was out of range of the coastal batteries. So, one can easily see how difficult it was to get "off watch" sleep.

The time on the line for the tour was usually 6 months. We shot over 20,000 rounds and went through three sets of gun barrels. The transit to Vietnam and back from our homeport in Norfolk, VA, was about 6 weeks each way.

P.S. My quarters were located just aft of MT 51.