

CVA versus Russian

Submitted by CAPT R. Claude, "Frenchy", Corbeille, USN (Ret)

It was August 1968 and I was Officer of the Deck (OOD) aboard USS Forrestal (CVA-59), somewhere in the Mediterranean Sea. For the benefit of landlubbers, I will point out that on a US Naval vessel, the captain is equivalent to God and OOD is akin to Moses, answerable only to the Captain. All others aboard, regardless of rank, are subordinate to the OOD. We were in the midst of the cold war; we didn't like the Russians and they did not like us.

I was about 2/3 of the way through my 1200 to 1600 deck watch when a Soviet ELINT trawler was approaching from our port side, doing eight knots on a course that would take him across our bow at a range of 6,000 yards (3 nautical miles). International Rules of the Road specify that the vessel approaching from the port side is the burdened vessel and must maneuver as necessary to avoid collision. An additional clause states that a burdened vessel may not maneuver to shift the burden to the privileged vessel.

When the Russian was dead ahead, he changed course to put his vessel on the same course as Forrestal. Problem is he was doing eight knots and we were doing twenty. At a closing rate of twelve knots, we would overtake him in fifteen minutes. He wanted us to believe that as the overtaking vessel, we were the burdened one, but I clung to the clause that he could not shift his burden to us and we would continue as the privileged vessel. I kept the Captain apprised of the developing situation by phone and had orders to call him again if the Russian was still there at 1,000 yards.

At about 1,500 yards, the ship's navigator, a Navy Commander, took it upon himself to work up a new course and he told me to turn to that course. I tried politely to apprise him of the fact that we were the privileged vessel and were required to maintain our present course and speed. That part didn't work and his next words were, "Mr. Corbeille, I'm ordering you to turn this ship, now!" My response was "You cannot order me to turn. If you believe this ship is endangered and you should relieve me as OOD, you can do that, and then you can turn left, turn right, or come dead in the water, but you cannot order me to turn." I submit at this juncture that it takes a good deal of intestinal fortitude for a Navy Lieutenant to tell a Navy Commander that he will not bend to the wishes of that Commander, but that singular moment in my life is one that I believe with certainty made it possible for me to progress onward, eventually to Captain.

Had I bent to the wishes of the Navigator, the Captain would have been furious, with both of us, but mostly with me. I might never have made LCDR, let alone Captain. I did not relate to the Captain all that transpired, but I believe he may have pried it out of one of the other watch standers, because the navigator retired at his current rank, kind of a surprise to some, because the job of Navigator on a CVA is a stepping stone to Captain, for most, but fittingly, not for him.

Freedom Is Not Free

Frenchy Sends With Warm Regards