

Some Remembrances from 1969

by William Steshko

I was aboard COLLETT from Dec 1968 until late Dec 1969 and departed as a LTJG on my way to an in-country assignment in Vietnam (where I bumped into my former shipmate and roommate John Hightower on the USS BENEWA in the middle of the Mekong).

I started off onboard COLLETT in the Ops dept under Bill Kelly and then moved to WEPS under Dennis LeRoy first as a "loose" Weps officer without portfolio then as the DASH div officer relieving either Mike Mullen or Bill Craig (I can't remember which). I also ran the ceremonial Honor Platoon for the brief time we had one during the 1969 deployment.

Also, I recall that we hit a helluva typhoon (I think between Pearl and Subic) that stripped the flag bags off the signal bridge, carried away the life lines forward of the midships break, crushed the motor whaleboat and did other damage - odd that no one has mentioned that - it sure as hell made an impression on me!

My memories include:

- Bill Kelly was one of the kindest, most competent officers I had the privilege of knowing. When I worked briefly for him in OPS, he was a most excellent mentor.

- Dennis Leroy was just plain fun! He taught me how to maneuver the ship with techniques that astonished me - one of his tricks was to work the Mo-board solution and then test it using a stopwatch to time our movement to station - he never missed. The first time I ever brought COLLETT alongside for UNREP, I used LeRoy's training and made a perfect slide into our refueling station as Capt Beck looked on. He was surprised, I think - and I was flat shocked!

- Speaking of Capt Beck - most aboard did not know (hopefully) that one dark night on Yankee Station as I stood the Deck alone (no JOOD) I got cocky and tried to out guess the Coral Maru as she meandered in search of the wind (as frigging aviators were want to do). I wound up in a perfect "T" with the carrier's bow! Collision was imminent! Capt Beck suddenly appeared at my side in his undershorts and calmly talked me through it (emergency flank, hard left rudder -- passing port to port ---contrary to the "standard maneuver" taught later at Destroyer School). After the near collision, he asked me if I was OK, asked if I could handle the rest of my watch and then left me alone on the Deck once I calmed down. He never made mention of it again. What a saint. What courage he had.

- The credit for saving the ship that night goes to a 3rd class Boatswains Mate whose name I cannot recall. He had a slight speech impediment and had been repeatedly busted for infractions ashore, but he was one helluva BM. He was my BMOW and knew before I did that I had screwed up badly. He asked me if I wanted him to call the Captain. I rudely said NO! - confident in my arrogance. Behind my back and contrary to my orders, he called Capt Beck to the bridge. In my book, he saved my life and the lives of at least half the crew who would have been lost if the Coral Sea had hit us (ala the FRANK E. EVANS and MELBOURNE collision earlier). Where ever that Bo's'n is today, I thank him and my children thank him.

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