

Sea Stories – The Med

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Edward L. Burdell

The first time I saw Gibraltar, I was a brand new Ensign. The braid on my ‘cover’ was still shiny, and I had been aboard the USS Neosho [AO-143] for less than three months. The Rock appeared off our starboard bow as we headed home, leaving the Mediterranean Sea behind, preparing to enter the Atlantic, on our way back to Norfolk.

I had joined the ship in December 1964 in Barcelona. One of the wonders of the US Navy’s training system is that they could take a Midwestern city boy, subject him to eighteen weeks of classroom study in Newport, Rhode Island, and then commission him as an officer without ever having set foot aboard a ship. In fact, the only time that I had near the ocean was a weeklong vacation on the Maryland shore when I was a child. My experience on board things that floated included the Island Queen and houseboats on the Ohio.

Nonetheless, the US Navy let me spend another eight weeks in Communications School without getting any closer to the water than the Newport Officer’s Club. Not that the Newport Officer’s Club wasn’t a pleasant experience - the Sunday steamship roast of beef was the finest I’ve ever had.

Finally, it was time to send me off to the Mediterranean to join my ship. Twenty hours in flight on a prop engine military transport delivered me to Rota, Spain with a stop in the Azores for refueling. The next day another military hop to Barcelona, and there I was.



The USS Neosho was the newest class of fleet oilers designed to carry bulk oil, diesel fuel, aviation gasoline and JP-5, fuel for jet aircraft. Longer than two football fields, when fully loaded, the freeboard [distance between the water line and the first deck] was almost twenty feet. With a draft of thirty-six feet, she very seldom pulled along side a

dock except to take on fuel. On a very cold, windy, December afternoon at Barcelona's harbor quay, I climbed aboard an open motorboat [which I learned was called a utility boat, The Captain rode in a launch], and went out into the harbor to go aboard my first ship.

Boarding a ship at anchor was something I had never considered. The small craft was bobbing on the harbor waves. Hanging down the side of the ship was a very long, steep set of steps with a small platform at the bottom. I soon learned that this was not a set of steps but a "ladder." I later learned that the Neosho had just finished a major replenishing of other ships in the Sixth Fleet, which was why the sides looked very, very dirty and somewhat rusty below the normal waterline. To my landlubber eyes, it looked to be one hundred feet up those steps, and I didn't know what awaited me at the top. I later learned that it was probably closer to forty feet as she was drawing only eighteen to twenty feet at the time.

My more immediate concern was trying to figure out how I was going to get from the bobbing boat to the landing at the bottom of the steps with my sea bag. One of the great skills, which very few possess, is the ability of a boatswain's mate to bring a launch along side a ship in any weather, and maintain its position while personnel transfer over. With the assistance of a seaman, who first threw my sea bag on to the landing across this opening and closing gap between the side of the launch and the landing, I managed to make the jump across.

I had never had any serious concerns with heights or vertigo, but climbing "the ladder," holding onto a swinging chain railing while carrying my sea bag, I began to wonder whether I would ever reach the top. I did look down once, but not again. Finally at the top of the ladder, I stepped on board the USS Neosho, and had enough presence of mind to salute the flag flying at the stern. I turned to the Officer of the Deck, and said, "Request permission to come aboard, sir."

A far different version of this coming aboard ship played out some time later in Norfolk when I escorted a lovely young lady to visit the ship that I had told her so much about. Once again in a utility boat, she was clearly the focus of the coxswain and seamen on board the launch. Their interest was on how she would successfully make the transfer given the fashionably short skirt she wore. As we approached the Neosho, I offered her my hand to assist, and she paused a moment, and reached down and grabbing a zipper in the center front of the skirt, pulled it up. This distraction caused the coxswain to miss on his first approach and he had to circle back. It quickly was apparent that her apparel - something called culottes - was indeed designed to convert from skirt to shorts in a touch of a zipper. The lovely young woman, who is now my lovely wife, made the transfer with far greater ease than I had done months before.

The first day at sea brought another new experience. Late in the afternoon, the Communications Officer, Lt.jg. Mazurkiewicz, approached me and said that an encrypted message had come in, and as the Assistant Communication's Officer, I should go decrypt it for the Captain. The windowless Crypto Room, behind a safe-like door, was

about five feet square, and painted a standard Navy seafoam green. The Communication's Officer sat me down in a chair, showed me where the decrypting machine was, and handed me the message. He then backed out of the room and closed the door on me. I mentioned earlier that the ship had pumped out a substantial amount of fuel and was riding high. We were in heavy seas, and the Crypto Room is on the 03 level that put me about another thirty feet above the main deck, and subject to severe motion, both fore and aft, and particularly side to side. In less than fifteen minutes, I had decrypted the message, and become seriously afflicted with nausea. I turned the message over to the Communication's Officer, and turned my attention to the head. Fortunately, this was the only experience I ever had with seasickness.

Life on board a Navy ship develops its own peculiar rhythm. The watch schedule, usually four hours on, and eight hours off, provides an underlying template for the work that has to be done. As the Junior Officer on board, I caught all of the duty nobody else wanted. The crypto experience was only the first. For instance, you might think it unlikely that the same Ensign would catch the mid-watch anchored out in Naples harbor for both Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve. But I can attest that it is possible. As I stood shivering on the quarterdeck, I recalled the parting words of a crusty Chief Petty Officer at Officer's Candidates School. As we were lining up to go to our Commissioning Ceremony, he said to us, "Shit flows down hill. Do you know what's at the bottom of that hill?" And then, he answered his own question, "An Ensign."

The debris, flotsam and jetsam in Naples harbor was unlike anything I had ever encountered. I stood and watched in awe Christmas Eve as a very large, very dead horse or possibly mule, gently floated passed our ladder. In fact, over the course of our many visits to Naples, I developed a theory that every toilet in Italy from Rome south flushes directly into the Naples harbor.

On New Year's Eve before we sent our sailors ashore, each division was mustered, and read a message from the Executive Officer. After the usual language about representing America and the US Navy, we were directed to warn our sailors to stay indoors from 2330 until at least 1 AM. Apparently, Neapolitans have a tradition of welcoming the New Year by throwing out the old. This seemed rather far-fetched, but the next day when I had an opportunity to go ashore, the streets were indeed littered with furniture, clothes, and radios – almost anything you can imagine. That debris, however, was nothing compared to the sight on our next tour when we pulled into port and learned that the Naples Sanitation workers had been on strike for two weeks, and no garbage had been picked up. It had long been a joke that our Navigator, of Italian heritage named Gangemi, could find his way to Naples from 50 miles out by smell. On that occasion, all of us were able to smell Naples long before we saw it.

By the way, it is true that a sailor can smell land. Normally, it is a sweet, welcome scent.

Almost in spite of myself, I found that I was learning a great deal. The Navy teaches through a combination of manuals targeted at a sixth grade reading level, repetition and osmosis. I learned that the Neosho was the first of a new class of high speed, large

capacity fleet oilers. She was the fourth Navy vessel to bear the Indian name of a river that flows from Kansas into Oklahoma. The first was an ironclad in the Civil War, the second was at Pearl Harbor and survived the attack only to be severely damaged in the Battle of the Coral Sea. There were a total of six oilers built in the Neosho class, three home-ported on the Atlantic Coast and three on the Pacific. At almost any time, one of the three on the Atlantic would be in the Mediterranean with the Sixth Fleet, and one of the three Pacific ships would be with the Seventh Fleet in the far Pacific. Her keel was laid in August of 1952 in Quincy, Massachusetts. She was launched fifteen months later, and in September of 1954 was commissioned. She was 655 feet long, and at her beam, she measured 86 feet.

My first impression of her enormous size was confirmed through daily experience. The forward super structure held the bridge, communications and combat information centers, the Captain's cabin, and some officer's quarters. The after super structure contained the engine room, the crew's quarters, the ward room, the mess hall, and on the stern – a helicopter pad. The O1 level [the first level above the main deck] in the center of the ship was a series of steel gratings over the top of the valves and tanks on the main deck that led to the bunkers that contained the cargo which was the reason for our existence. The decks were filled with booms and cranes to carry out the transfer of fuel and supplies. The most prized of the supplies were the movies that were shared among the fleet. The ship was an oiler, not a tanker, because it didn't carry oil from port to port, but rather from port to other naval vessels while they were underway!

The other source of education, of course, was my shipmates. Captain Tully seldom spoke to junior officers except at ceremonial events or at times of a major screw up. The Executive Officer's standard approach was to tell you to go ask someone else. The division heads on our ship were a mix of career officers and mustangs. A mustang is an ex-enlisted man who has been asked to become an officer. With the exception of the chief petty officers, these were the most knowledgeable, although admittedly with some reason, they viewed most junior reserve officers with some disdain. Most of my junior officers were like me – college graduates who thought they would get their military service out of the way and maybe see the world. We had English majors in the engineering department, and history majors [such as myself] in communications. The one exception to this on-the-job learning endeavor was a junior officer who had attended King's Point. That merchant marine academy had taught him well. He may have been the best sailor on the ship.

Consequently, most of the education for junior officers came from the enlisted personnel. One of the trickiest aspects of this dependency upon enlisted men for knowledge was that the Navy at OCS didn't actually try to teach leadership. The one thing we were taught was to trust your chief petty officer. In fact, first and second class petty class officers were particularly good teachers, and recognized that if they had to put up with officers, it would be better if we actually had some sense of what we were supposed to be doing. There was one second class boatswain's mate who would occasionally get frustrated at the actions or ignorance of a junior officer. At such times, he would usually go out onto the wing of the bridge where he could just barely be heard muttering, "Once the Navy

was made up of wooden ships and iron men – then we had iron ships and wooden men – now we have aluminum ships and candy asses.”

The Neosho was the flagship for the Sixth Fleet Service Squadron. The Squadron was made up of the Neosho, a smaller oiler, an ammunition ship and supply vessels. Our job was to maintain the rest of the Sixth Fleet, which usually included one and sometimes two carrier task forces. This story is set in 1964-66. The war in Viet Nam had begun, and the Cold War was far from over. Our task was to maintain a presence in the Mediterranean, and to be prepared to operate for more than a month at a time without ever going into port. Therefore, our major task was to carry out underway replenishments of both our fellow service squadron members, and of course, the destroyers, frigates and carriers. On more than one occasion as we would be steaming along at 12-15 knots with a ship on either side of us no more than 150 feet away, sometimes as close as 60 feet, a Soviet Navy ship would appear and start to move through the refueling formation. Usually this was a simple nuisance, other times, a collision would be narrowly averted. At least once in our tour, a destroyer scrapped along the side of the bad guy. Much like a NASCAR race maneuver.

On other occasions, combat radio would start to crackle, as destroyers out on the perimeter would pick up a sonar reading. Sometimes it was one of our subs as a part of an exercise; but on more than one occasion, it was not. Replenishments took place at any time of the day or night in almost any weather conditions. Only once can I ever recall an “unrep” being shortened due to high winds and 15 to 20 foot waves.

Replenishments were usually preceded by a flurry of radio traffic as the carrier force and service squadron established a list of the necessary fuels and supplies and set the order for ships to come along side. Of course, it was necessary to establish the rendezvous point as well as the steaming direction and speed. On one occasion before I joined the Neosho, through some snafu our ship failed to show up at the rendezvous, and was known thereafter in snide asides as “USS No Show.” As the Neosho came on replenishment station, the crew went to unrep stations. This was our equivalent of ‘battle stations’. Every man had a station and duty. On the bridge, the best helmsman had the wheel. The Captain was ‘on deck’ and the senior operations department officer had the deck and the con. The latter carried the responsibility of giving orders to the helm; the ‘deck’ carried the responsibility of the bridge and could reclaim the ‘con’ if necessary.

On deck, the First Lieutenant, at the time Lt.jg. Nowinsky, was preparing to deploy the bolo throwers and if required, the shot line guns to the proper locations on the approaching ship. Ships approached from the rear, and came along side until they matched out speed exactly. After the first, light lines went across there followed by the heavier lines and then the booms swung out carrying the hoses to the neighboring ship. A similar system was used to send across supplies, parts, personnel, materials and other essentials, including movies of course. Ships complete their replenishment and then move off only to be replaced by another member of the Fleet. Individual replenishments would take as little as 40 minutes or as long as 3 hours. A complete “unrep” could go as long as 12 to 14 hours.

You may wonder why the Navy had a First Lieutenant who was actually a Lieutenant Junior Grade. It shouldn't be that surprising when we had a Commodore who was actually a Captain. Or why is a hat, a cover, or a toilet, the head? I learned that the answer to these and many other puzzling questions was - It's just the Navy's way of naming things.

And thus despite three months of nautical experience underneath my belt, I was awestruck by the sight of the Rock of Gibraltar as it rose straight out of the sea. We pulled into the Gibraltar harbor, and went ashore to take in the sights. One extremely important sidebar to our visit to Gibraltar was that the Supply Officer had entered into an agreement with a local company to purchase a substantial quantity of duty-free alcohol. Although we were not to see it until we reached Norfolk, it was there that I first acquired a bottle of Hague & Hague Dimple, also known as "Pinch" in American liquor stores.

Gibraltar itself is an extraordinary sight. More than a quarter mile high rising straight out of the water, it is over fourteen hundred feet at its highest point. As we approached the West face of the Rock, we could see before us the classic Prudential Life Insurance logo.

The product of geologic forces thousands of years ago, it almost certainly was first an island off the Iberian coast. This Jurassic limestone was originally the bed of the ocean. But as the mighty geologic forces churned to create the earth's surface as we know it today, this portion of the seabed was thrust upward into its present position. Today it is connected to the mainland by a narrow sandy neck formed from silt over the centuries. The neck [or isthmus] combines with the Rock to form the protection that creates the Bay of Gibraltar. It is the last sheltered harbor for Mediterranean adventurers headed into the Atlantic. The limestone has withstood the forces of wind and weather, while yielding in part as caves and fissures developed. It is these caves that provided the first elements of Gibraltar as a fortress. And indeed, what Nature has begun, Man has expanded. One of the most interesting parts of the tour of Gibraltar for a young sailor was a glimpse of the fortifications that the British had developed over centuries. The Rock is literally honeycombed with tunnels and caverns, arsenals and emplacements, barracks and command posts.

In earliest history, Gibraltar was thought to be one of the Pillars of Hercules. Combined with Mt. Ceuta across the Strait to the south on the African Coast, this was seen as either the Gateway to Civilization or the Signpost for the Edge of the World. Gibraltar is almost certainly the subject of the reference in the Iliad to the Styx. St. Michael's Cave in Gibraltar looks very much like it could have been the Gateway to Hades. A related reference in The Odyssey where Hercules tells how he went to Hades to get the Hound of Hell - may well have been a visit to Gibraltar. Some analysts have noted that when Odysseus fled from the wailing of the dead spirits, he and his crew climbed into their boats, and the current carried the vessel down the "River of Ocean." This is consistent with the two knot current that flows along the northern edge of the Strait most of the year from the Atlantic into the Mediterranean.

Although others may have feared what lay beyond Gibraltar, the Phoenicians knew better. The first great sailors, the Phoenicians must have used Gibraltar for navigation purposes as they made their way out into the Atlantic, and up and down the African and European coasts trading with the tribes that they encountered. The Carthaginians and Romans treated the Rock in a similar manner. It was a place to note and pass by. There were no settlements on the barren and inhospitable rock. Many years later, however, in 1848, a discovery was made in one of the caves on the north face. It was an old skull, that of a woman. Almost a decade later, the discovery of a similar man's skull at Neanderthal gave name to our earliest ancestors. It has been suggested that rather than the Neanderthal man, it should have more appropriately have been called "Gibraltar woman." Finally in the 6th Century, the Moors in their continuing process of invading Spain, recognized the strategic importance of this rock that is less than 3 miles long and three-quarters of a mile wide. And in fact, it was this first conqueror, Tariq Ibn Zayyad, who provided the rock its name. In recognition of his victory, the rock was called Jebel Tariq or Tariq's Rock. Through the normal process of time and mispronunciation, it was Anglicized to Gibraltar.

From that time until 1462, the Moors controlled Gibraltar. That year, Spain, in the process of driving out the Muslims, reclaimed Gibraltar and designated it "the Key to Spain." Despite its importance, over time the crown allowed it to fall into disrepair. The Citadel on the Rock did withstand an effort by the Turks in the middle of the 16th Century to take Gibraltar. The population of the town as the base of the rock barely topped 5,000 persons. Therefore, in 1704 when British Admiral Sir George Rooke came ashore with 1,600 Marines, the small garrison of 50 men struck their flag after the first bombardment. From that day to this, Gibraltar has remained in British hands. As a part of the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, both parties signed the Treaty of Peace and Friendship between Spain and England. Title X of that Treaty relates to Gibraltar.

"The Catholic King does hereby, for himself, his heirs and successors, yield to the Crown of Great Britain the full and entire propriety of the town and castle of Gibraltar, together with the port, fortifications, and forts thereunto belonging; and he gives up the said propriety to be held and enjoyed absolutely with all manner of rights for ever, without any exception or impediment whatsoever."

The Spanish have never really been happy with this arrangement. Attempts to retake Gibraltar by force have been unsuccessful, although one siege lasted for three and a half years. Even in modern times, Spain has tried to use the United Nations as a mechanism to achieve the return of the Rock. It is interesting to note that the Spanish were also intimately involved in a similar national ownership dispute Guantanamo Bay.

The last time I saw Gibraltar was more than a year after my first sighting. I was on my second Med tour and it came into view at the end of a very long day. More than twenty four hours earlier at 3:45 AM, I had relieved the Office of the Deck at the conclusion of the mid-watch. It was an uneventful watch with the only maneuver being a course change to begin to get us into position for an underway replenishment scheduled for later in the day. The radar scope was clear and the weather was calm. I was relieved at 7:45 AM and went straight to the Ward Room to grab breakfast before the food disappeared. From

there, the balance of the day developed as usual, checking communications, reviewing and initialing all messages, and shuffling the watch list a little bit to make sure our best radio men were on duty in the period leading up to and including the replenishment.

Shortly after lunch, we went to replenishment stations. Time, experience, and the rotation off of other officers had left me as the Officer of the Deck for replenishment operations. The radar that had been empty of all contacts hours earlier was now filling up. The combat information center was constantly piping in information about contacts, their bearing and their speed while we plotted them on the bridge as well. The engineer confirmed that we were settled in at twelve knots, and everybody on deck was ready to go. Captain Tully came on the bridge and reviewed the situation and nodded his approval. The first ship along side to port was another member of the service squadron to be replenished so it could move into formation to transfer frozen food and other supplies.

Then from the CIC in a slightly shriller tone came a voice announcing a contact eight thousand yards off approaching at thirty knots on a collision course. The starboard lookout picked up the destroyer for that is what it was at about 6,000 or 3 nautical miles as it closed rapidly. The Captain rushed to the starboard wing, called to the lookout for the hull number on the destroyer, and in that mystical knowledge of the pecking order in the Navy, immediately identified the Captain as someone who had been two years behind him at Annapolis. There wasn't anything we could do but watch, since we'd already secured the other ship to our port side, I went out on the wing with the Captain to watch the spectacle of the onrushing destroyer. It is one of the beautiful sights to see a 'tincan' with a bone in its teeth as it plows through the sea at high speeds. Approximately two and a half minutes after what I thought was the last possible minute, the destroyer's CO, for he indeed had the deck and the con, cut his engine, slammed his rudder hard over, and nestled in with barely a whisper of a wake at 12 knots right along side us in position to receive the bolo line from our deck crew. Our Captain waved to his colleague, and turned away muttering underneath his breath "Hot Dog,... Jackass," and walked back into the enclosed bridge.

Ships came and went throughout the afternoon. When my normal 1600 to 2000 watch came around, it didn't matter since I was already there. The Executive Officer had arranged for three different very junior officers to rotate through, but they were not to take on any responsibility. On deck things proceeded apace. There were the usual minor excitements. At one point, we were transferring personnel, and the transferring ship veered into us enough that the doctor going across got a little bit wet. There were minor arguments about the selection of movies being passed back and forth. Other than that, things went smoothly, no spills, no split hoses, and no bad connections. Then at about 2300, the USS Forestall came along side to port. As large as the Neosho was, she could never be more than the second largest ship in the Sixth Fleet. The Forestall class carriers stretch more than another football field in length beyond the Neosho. In normal conditions, our bridge was a good 10 feet below the flight deck. The island, command center, towered high above us. Shortly after she came along side with all lines and hoses secure and connected, she began flight operations.

Photo # 80-G-684504 USS Lake Champlain & USS Purdy refueling from USS Neosho, October 1955



Modern man's life in some ways is a continuing series of interactions with machinery. Whether running an electric can opener or a vacuum cleaner, driving a car or maneuvering a mouse on a computer, we live in constant connection with machinery. We have learned to increase the degree of complexity so that we can run power plants and our astronauts can fly space shuttles. In my experience, I have never been part of a more spectacular interaction of men and machines than occurred that evening. In the words of the song, "Makes the Indy 500 look like a chariot race."

Once again, we had pumped out a considerable amount of our fuel so that the bridge of the Neosho was now just at the level of the flight deck of the Forestall. At night, the jet engines of the fighters and attack aircraft emitted a range of brilliant colors as they fired up first holding in place, and then speeding down what seem to be an impossibly short runway to head off into the dark. As they hit the end of the flight deck, most of the planes immediately dipped below the deck towards the water, and then re-emerged a split second later climbing straight up to get to defensive positions over the task force. Part way through this incredible performance, the carrier called over and asked that we adjust course some five degrees to starboard to gain better wind for the planes. And so as the planes took off, these two giant ships moved in unison to adjust their course.

As we neared the end of the replenishment, the planes returned, the landings were no less spectacular. As the planes slammed to a halt, men leapt from cover to get to the plane, maneuver it by hand into position, so that the next plane in had a clear path. Finally, early in the next morning, the Forestall pulled away, and we had completed our work. The Captain broadcast a "Bravo Zulu" [well done] to the crew, and after reviewing the night orders retired to his cabin. I looked around for my watch relief only to see a very bedraggled engineering officer come on the bridge. He looked at his watch; he looked at me and said, "Who's got the next watch?" I questioned, "Why?" "Because it's 3:30 and I'm outta here in 15 minutes." Unfortunately, I had the next watch.

I made a quick trip back to the Ward Room to see if I could find anything edible. There was nothing in sight, so I went to the coffee pot. Although the Neosho was powered by fuel oil, the men on board the ship were powered by coffee. Navy coffee is unlike any I have ever encountered elsewhere. When it is fresh, it is very good, but as near as I can tell no coffee is ever thrown away. The pot is finished and then refilled. Therefore, the old adage about the coffee being so thick that you could stand your spoon in it applies here. But that morning, the spoon didn't stand up very long because the coffee ate it away. Back on the bridge armed with my cup of coffee and a fresh pack of cigarettes, I relieved the watch just as I had done 24 hours earlier at 3:45 in the morning.

In today's world where so few people smoke, it may seem surprising that on board a vessel carrying explosive and flammable fuels we should be allowed to smoke. But except for certain restricted areas and ship-wide during replenishment operations, the smoking lamp was normally lit. Consequently for most of us, nicotine was the other energy source in addition to the coffee.

For this particular watch, I had stopped by my cabin and grabbed a pack of Kool regulars. Although I was normally a Camel smoker, I had learned in college that if you needed to stay awake, there was nothing that had quite the snap of an unfiltered, mentholated Kool cigarette. Not only could you feel it in your nose and your throat, sometimes it seemed even your eyes began to water and your ears started to tingle.

The Captain's orders for the watch were to proceed westward to the Strait of Gibraltar adjusting speed as necessary to enter the Strait just after first light. Guiding a ship is much like driving in a parking lot. In general, you simply point the nose where you want to go, and turn when that is appropriate. The Strait of Gibraltar is somewhat akin to driving through a very complex six-way intersection without any traffic control devices. So it is better to see what you are doing.

For more than an hour, we steamed westward at about eight knots on a very quiet bridge filled with exhausted men. We had been taught in OCS that to stay awake during training films, you were allowed to get up out of your seat and stand at the back of the room. The equivalent of this on the bridge that morning was to go out and stand on the wing and catch the air in my face to try and stay awake. It was while I was out there trying to keep my eyes opened that the boatswain on watch saying that there was a message from the Radar Room. I went into the bridge by the helm to hear the message from the Radar

Room saying that they were picking up very small contacts ahead of us and to the starboard side. We called up to the lookouts to see if they could see anything. Nothing. Back out on the wing to see if we could pick up anything with the binoculars. Nothing. The contacts were now less than 1,000 yards, and should have been quite visible even at night with their running lights on.

At its narrowest point, the Strait of Gibraltar is 8 miles across. On the northern side where we were, there are a series of small fishing villages in addition to the fleet that sails out from the harbor at Gibraltar. I was tired. I couldn't think what I should do, but I knew it would be a bad thing if I ran over a fishing boat. I sent the watch seaman down to awaken my superior, the Operations Officer, Lt. Black. He came on the bridge in his shorts and T-shirt and flip-flops, and didn't seem very happy that his sleep had been interrupted. I quickly explained the situation – that fishing boats – also apparently holding back from entering the Strait until daylight, were surrounding us. Other larger vessels were appearing on the radar out at a greater distance. Would he please relieve me? Mr. Black had decided earlier in the month that he was going to stay in the Navy and make a career of it. He immediately figured out that relieving me at this moment was not something that would necessarily advance his career. So as he declined my request to be relieved, I asked, "What should I do?" He looked at me and said, "Have you thought about stopping?" I had not. The only time that the ship had ever stopped while at sea was on a sunny day in calm water to allow the deck crew to do some painting over the side. I didn't know that we were allowed to stop the ship. But I did. "All Stop!" I called to the helmsman, and slowly we lost way as the ship gently coasted to a stop.

Within twenty minutes, the first light began to appear, and there was Gibraltar familiar and majestic, exactly where the radar said she would be. And there clustered around the Neosho like baby ducklings around a mother duck were a half dozen small fishing boats with brightly colored sails. The nearest was about 50 feet from us, and quickly headed away. Maybe they had been asleep too.

"All ahead 10 knots!" I called out as the ship began to move forward through the Strait past the extraordinary wonder which is the Rock of Gibraltar. We entered the Atlantic and turned north toward the naval base at Rota.

I've often thought about this experience certain that somewhere in it there was a lesson to be remembered. Could it be, that, *When you can't figure out what to do next, just stop?*

Prepared for the Literary Club, 22 May 2006
Edward Lee Burdell

Material drawn in part from:

Gibraltar, The History of a Fortress, Ernle Bradford, 1971

Gibraltar and the Mediterranean, Geoffrey Garratt, 1939

USS Neosho, Mediterranean Cruise, 1964-65

“In Perpetuum,” Alastair Reid, The New Yorker, July 31, 1965