

THE LAST DAYS OF THE 1013

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When I first became a member of the Literary Club, a common type of paper consisted of reminiscences of the writer's military experiences during World War II. So common were such papers that a chance remark in a paper by Herb Curry gave rise to what was allegedly a Club rule: A member is allowed one war story and no more. The rule was a myth, though widely believed. Myth or not, it no longer has any application because there are now so few members left who participated in any military way in that long ago war; and those few have already told their stories. I am at the tail end of that generation, so near the tail that my participation can be described as minor, if not trivial. Hence, though here is my story, it is not about me, but about a ship.

On the day before my eighteenth birthday and therefore the day before I would fall into the clutches of the draft, I joined the navy, I wanted to escape lying around in the cold mud as an army private. It was a wise move. My greatest suffering came from learning to drink coffee, the awful taste of which I diluted with worse tasting milk. The milk was reconstituted from a primitive form of powdered milk probably made in the powdered milk factory owned by Herb Curry's father. I spent most of my first navy year being taught the vacuum tube electronics of the 1940's. Then, after celebrating VJ day, the surrender of Japan day, in Chicago's loop, it was off to sea as a presumed expert in repairing radios, radars, and sonars. I went by troop ship to Shanghai, China, where I was assigned to the LST 10113. LST stands for Landing Ship Tank. The name indicates the purpose, namely to carry tanks to invasion beaches and land them there. The ship consisted principally of a cavernous tank deck sitting flatly on the waves and running three fourths of the length of the vessel. At the bow end of the tank deck were full height doors designed to open for loading and unloading the tanks. Just inside the doors was a

ramp which was lowered to the beach after the doors were open. By the time I reached the 1013, the bow doors would no longer open, and they leaked water. At the stern fourth of the ship was a two story structure, with an open observation deck on top. The lower story contained the officer's cabins and wardroom. The second story contained all the electronic equipment, the wheel house, and the chart room. That was where I spent my time. It was called the "conn", though the word was also used to refer to the whole two story structure.

The 1013 was moored to a buoy in the Huangpoo River. Though ships get to Shanghai by entering the mouth of the Yangtze River, the city is not on that river but on a tributary named the Huangpoo. In 1946, navy ships tied up to a line of buoys stretching up the river. The nearer a ship was to the front of the line, the more important it was. LSTs were near the end. Close to the front there was a heavy cruiser named the Bremerton. Bruce Petrie was stationed aboard that ship as part of a marine detachment. He wrote about it in his February 2006 paper, "Pink Star Over China". Henry Winkler was at the same time stationed ashore in the city. Of course, I knew nothing of that or of them in that bright morning of my youth.

On the 1013, I became part of what was called by everyone aboard the "new crew". "New" was contrasted with the "old crew" and the "old old crew". The old old crew was the original crew which manned the vessel from its shipyard origin until Japan surrendered. The 1013 was built specifically for the invasion of Okinawa. During the invasion, it sat in the harbor loaded with ammunition. Somewhat miraculously, it was never blown up by a Japanese shell. When the war ended, the old old crew was shipped home for discharge and was replaced by the old crew. The old crew, in turn, gradually departed for the same purpose, with the new crew as its replacement. The last days of the 1013 began on the day the last few members of the old crew were transferred to their homegoing troop ship.

Months later, after I too had been discharged, a member of that crew wrote asking me for an account of what happened after he left the ship. The story here is taken from

my letter of reply, supplemented by bits of information re-reading the letter pulled from my memory. In accord with contemporary changed attitudes and the rise of China as a Great Power, I have used the word “Chinese” in place of the original terms “gooks” and “chinks”.

March 20, 1946, was the day the remnants of the old crew departed. Shortly thereafter, the 1013, along with four other LSTs, was ordered to proceed from Shanghai to Haiphong, French Indo-China (now Vietnam). The purpose of the task force was to pick up Chinese nationalist troops, i.e. troops which, under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek, had fought the Japanese for nearly 10 years. We were to transport the nationalist soldiers to Manchuria to fight the advancing communist army under Mao Tze-tung.

The trip south was through water and weather so calm that we sometimes exceeded our normal speed of 10 to 12 knots. And, for the first and last time, the ship’s cook and I were not incapacitated by seasickness. Normally we were out of it for the first three days every time we left port. I will stop for a footnote. It was common wisdom among navy men that, if you were going to be seasick, it was best to have food in the stomach. That way, there would be something to come up, when the vomiting set in, instead of empty retching. I quickly learned that empty retching was superior. Whenever I had to stand up, I didn’t have to worry about spreading vomit at my feet. I could just retch and retch and move about where I had to. Sitting on the deck and leaning against the wall was, of course, best if I was on watch. Lying in my bunk was best of all.

Now back to the ship. We proceeded through the passage between Formosa (now called Taiwan) and the China coast and past Hong Kong without any interesting incident. But the night after Hong Kong, the convoy head ship flashed his breakout light and everybody scooted off in different directions. When the air cleared, the 1013 was still going in the same direction as the lead ship, but at a great distance to the side. Another LST was traveling as fast as it could in the opposite direction, and the other two were dashing off at right angles on each side. About that time, the watch officer on the head ship looked back and wanted to know what the hell everybody was doing.

When we got to Haiphong, we had to wait around for several days because the convoy that preceded us wasn't completely loaded. We even stayed beyond the time of departure of the convoy to which we were originally assigned and picked up the next. This latter was a group of LSTs that passed right by Haiphong and wasn't heard from for a week.

The city of Haiphong was hot and dirty, somewhat less dirty than the average Chinese city, though. There wasn't much to do, except wander around and look at the ruins. The most interesting afternoon was one in which three of us chanced upon a music store, where one of the fellows bought the place out of player piano rolls. His neighbors back home had a player piano. Most of the street corners were guarded by Chinese and French soldiers on opposite corners behind sand bags. They looked as if they might start shooting at each other at any moment. Groups of Japanese soldiers paraded around doing calisthenics and what-not. They had been deprived of their guns, but otherwise were more or less free. The dock was constantly crowded with people begging for food. Most of them were little kids, and people selling straw sandals or bananas. The sandals were in great demand by the crew because of the heat. We all went around in sandals and shorts and no shirts. The bananas made you break out in little red spots. Once, a bag of rice that the Chinese soldiers were loading as their rations split open on the deck. We teenagers in the crew had a great time scooping up rice and throwing it to the crowd on the dock.

We departed finally, loaded with soldiers, their officers, several gun barrels, and two monkeys. The soldiers were quartered on the tank deck. The officers other than a general had bunks a deck up, and the general was accommodated in one of the ship's officer's cabin. During the trip, the general used to go out and beat a couple of soldiers over the head every day. They wouldn't obey any officer but him.

As we were going through a narrow part of the passage leading out of the harbor, the ship's steering mechanism quit. We almost rammed the shore. It turned out that one

of the engineers turned off the electricity while trying to fix the bow ramp machinery. That was too much for the pilot. He left the conn in a huff and sat in the wardroom reading until the ship was out in open water.

The monkeys were awful. They ran around everywhere defecating. In retrospect, I think that the poor things must have been terrified. We finally tossed them over the side. Then the next day, another one ran across the conn with somebody chasing it. He finally shared a similar fate as his two brothers. I thought nothing of the monkey incidents at the time, but to this day, I have a vivid mental image, which I don't like to have come forth, of the third monkey swimming frantically toward the ship as it pulled away from him.

Meanwhile, the fresh water situation was getting pretty desperate. LSTs had boiler based evaporating systems to turn salt water into fresh water. Unfortunately, the salt water soon turned the systems into useless corroded metal. Hence, the ships had to load up on fresh water whenever they were in port. We started from Shanghai with enough to reach Haiphong, only to find that we couldn't get any there. I don't remember why. Eventually, things reached the point where fresh water was turned on for about 30 minutes a day at noon. The Chinese were limited to a GI can full at first, but this was later increased to two. They still stood around the can all the time, waiting for it to be filled. One soldier went up from the tank deck to the main deck to get a drink late one night, slipped, and was killed. He was thrown overboard before morning.

As we went north, the weather gradually turned colder. The soldiers began to suffer. They were dressed in summer uniforms, including shorts, and were acclimated to tropical heat, having been in the jungles of Indo-China for several years. When we landed them in Manchuria, a blizzard was blowing. Had I been one of them, I would have asked for directions to the nearest communist army unit and rushed to join it. I'll bet many did. Their presence certainly had no effect on the speed of the communist advance. I later read an article in the Shanghai newspaper which stated that the army was well prepared for the rigorous Manchurian winter. Each soldier had shoes!

Before we reached Manchuria, however, -- it was on April 17, , my 20th birthday -- the wind started to blow, the sea began to come alive, and I got deathly seasick. The waves became so high we couldn't see the ship in front of us. Ordinarily waves of whatever height rolled under the ship, lifting it into the air. There it hung until the trough came by and the ship went slamming down onto the water. In this case, there weren't waves, but great walls of water which passed over the ship. Or, alternatively described, the ship plowed into the wall and was briefly under water. We were turned into the wind, so the waves came over the bow and down the length of the ship. Had the waves approached from the side, it would have been barely possible that they might have rolled the ship over. As it was, there was little danger as long as the bow doors held. With their immense inner air cavity provided by the tank deck, LSTs had a small weight to cross section volume ratio, and were said to be the most buoyant ships in the navy. When I first came on watch, a wave taller than the conn came in through the windows and drenched us all. I was too sick to care.

On what might be called the amusing side, we left Haiphong with three portable heads (now called portolets) on the main deck for the Chinese. Two of these were battered to pieces and went over the side, the second while some soldier was sitting in it. He looked bewildered to say the least and crawled back below. That's the only way you could move on the main deck, crawling. He was lucky he didn't go over the side with the head.

As we approached Hlulutao, our Manchurian destination, the rumor somehow got started that there were communists in Hlulutao who were going to oppose our entrance. Consequently, the engineers undertook to get the bow guns working. The guns, like the evaporators, were corroded by salt water, in the guns' case by salt spay and waves breaking over the bow. The repair group managed to get one gun to operate, or at least they believed so, though they declined to test it. Nothing, however, occurred. Except for nearly grounding ourselves on the local breakwater, which was evidently made to accommodate fishing vessels, we got in and out without mishap. We tried to get water

there, but the officer in charge of U.S. operations at the port, declared that in all his 20 years in the navy, he had never had to get water from the dock. He had never heard such an absurd request. Finally, he allowed time for one ship in the convoy to fill up on the supposition that we could exchange water while at sea on the return journey. We did manage to get some that way.

On the way back to Shanghai, we ran into three days of dense fog. We had to travel completely by radar. We could do that because we always stayed near enough to the coast for radar to show us the outline of the shore. The quartermaster on watch periodically compared the radar image with the shape shown on the chart. If he could find a match, we knew where we were. On one of the fog shrouded days, I was the radarman-voice radioman-quartermaster of the watch. (We were short-handed, so the jobs were combined on the watches.) As I was quartermastering in the chart room, the LST on our port side suddenly started yelling frantically, "1013!" , "1013" over the voice radio. Before I could get to the radio transmitter in the wheel house, a Jap destroyer traveling about 25 knots plowed past our bow at a distance of 10 yards. He had missed the other LST by approximately the same distance. We received a nasty message from the Lieutenant in charge of the convoy telling us to keep a sharper watch.

Almost immediately after arriving back in Shanghai, we got orders to go to Hong Kong and pick up some communist troops and take them to Manchuria. The commander of the new convoy was the same Task Force commander who had sent the nasty message. We had to have signaling drills daily all the way down and also what he called maneuvers. These latter imitated the breakout incident earlier. They consisted of a lot of running around at right angles to everybody else. When everybody was going in random directions, that was all for the day.

As we neared Hong Kong, the aforesaid convoy commander asked us how he was supposed to get in there. We gave him the correct course, but by the time he ordered a course change, it was wrong and we headed straight for an encounter with Victoria Mountain. Each LST in the convoy just forgot about the orders from above and made its

own way in. We sat around for about a month while the communists wrangled over the necessary truce. Eventually, the whole thing blew up, leaving us no business. We did get a lot of shore leave to visit the city. I can still see in my mind's eye the bombed out remains of British mansions up the side of Victoria Mountain. No Chinese were allowed to live on the mountain before the war.

One evening, I got drafted for Shore Patrol. A group of us from several LSTs assembled on the dock, were given arm bands, and left on our own. None of us had ever been on Shore Patrol before; and we had no idea what we were supposed to do. After standing around for a while, somebody suggested that we raid a whore house. That sounded like the sort of thing a Shore Patrolman ought to do. None of us were familiar with whore houses, but one fellow said he thought he knew where one was. We proceeded to the building, where the door was open. Summoning up what we supposed were stern, official facial expressions, we went charging up the stairs to the second floor. There we found a large, modestly furnished room with an elderly woman sitting in a rocking chair reading. She seemed not to be at all disturbed by a bunch of sailors with arm bands rushing in. We were confused because the place didn't fit our images of what a whore house should look like on the inside. There was no red velvet anywhere. Besides, we hadn't thought through what we would do if it had looked right. So we quickly turned around and went sheepishly back down the stairs. The rest of the evening was awfully boring.

When I got off Shore Patrol duty and went back aboard ship, I learned that we had received orders to proceed to Shanghai, where the ship was to be decommissioned and turned over to the Chinese. Chiang Kai-shek was accumulating a navy. Before leaving Hong Kong, we traded captains with the LST 614, and got the task force commander of the nasty message and the maneuvers. He was a Regular Navy man, as contrasted with the V12 -produced Naval Reserve officers who were the only kind we knew. He had worked his way up from seaman through Chief Quartermaster to Full Lieutenant. As a Full Lieutenant, he was also the highest ranking officer most of us had ever seen. He was rightfully very proud of himself, but also very arrogant and, by reputation, very strict.

When he came aboard and looked around, his first message to the crew was that the ship was a filthy mess and that he would shortly see that it was cleaned up and painted. That project lasted for nearly four days, at which point the non-cooperation of the crew made him give up. He brought with him a young Ensign, who took over the duty of Communications officer and followed the Captain around like a pet puppy dog. He started giving us orders, but we soon put him in his place. The combination of temporary officers and a crew bound for discharge was not conducive to the exercise of authority. The new captain's name was T. Little. We quickly learned that the T. stood for Tomboy. That didn't help his authority either. Along with T. Little's arrival, the radar and the sonar both quit, never to work again. Had we not been immediately standing out to sea, where watches replaced work, and had we not been about to give up the ship, I would have had a chance to try the job I was trained for, repairing the radar and sonar.

Our convoy to Shanghai consisted of three LSTs and an LSM (Landing Ship Men). On the way, an engine in the LSM broke down; and we limped along until she got it fixed. No sooner had that been accomplished, than an air pocket or something developed in the fuel line to one of our auxiliary engines and they both stopped cold. I should explain parenthetically that the so-called auxiliary engines generated the electricity for the ship, including the electricity needed to keep the so-called main engines running. The main engines drove the propellers. When the auxiliary engines stopped, so did the main engines and everything else on the ship. The ship had batteries which were supposed to be used to start the auxiliary engines again in case of an accidental shut-down as with the fuel line air pocket. But those batteries turned out to be dead. After about a day of wallowing, we sent the two LSTs on and the LSM came along side to loan us her batteries. They had a deuce of a time getting us to give them back after we arrived in Shanghai.

Decommissioning involved a succession of moving up and down the line of buoys in the Huangpoo River. Our moving from buoy to buoy would have been cut down somewhat if we hadn't had to provide power for another LST which had been rammed by a merchant ship in the mouth of the Yangtze. The merchant ship plowed into the port

side just in front of the conn, flooding and destroying the auxiliary engine room and filling the tank deck with junk. A couple of the crew were sitting in the head on the port side, and the ship plowed in between them. Each thought the other had been killed. Fortunately, also, the auxiliary engine room was empty at the time.

The worst two days we had were spent hauling out all the ammunition for transfer to a barge. It had never consciously occurred to me that there was ammunition on board, in spite of the incident of getting a gun to operate as we neared Manchuria. While we were unloading, a body came bumping along the side. We had quite a discussion on whether the bloated thing had a head or not, finally deciding that the head must be under water. As the body reached a point opposite the conn, somebody managed to drop something on it and punctured the stomach. I didn't watch, but I understand it squired pretty high. After unloading our ship, most of the crew got detailed to a working party to transfer the ammunition from the barge to a cargo ship. I managed to escape by pleading my need to dismantle the electronic gear.

We took off about half of the radio equipment, leaving the unworkable stuff. As the rated Electronics Technician on board, I was supposed to remove the radar antennas which were located at the ends of the yardarm of the mast. The very thought of climbing way up there and then out onto a piece of steel sticking into empty space convinced me that I really did not have the time to go after the antennas. I think that the 1013 was the only LST inherited by the Chinese with antennas still in place.

We went through a formal decommissioning ceremony. The highlight of the ceremony came when the two fellows who were supposed to haul down the ensign and raise the Chinese nationalist flag got their signals crossed. We stood at attention, saluting, for about five minutes before they looked out and saw that I had pulled down the jack. We said good-bye to Bagpipe, the harbor radio control, turned off the auxiliary engines, and departed for the shore barracks. Right after the ceremony, a Chinese fellow rushed aboard and into the conn to grab all the stop watches. Tomboy Little rushed in to get the PA control unit to take home with him. I regret now that I didn't take one of the

field glasses which were left lying around the conn. Incidentally, Tomboy got a message near the end saying that he could retire as Lieutenant or continue active service in the regular navy as a Chief Warrant Officer. He chose to retire.

While waiting for the troop ship home, we lived for a number of days in what we considered the luxurious accommodations of the shore barracks, with Chinese servants doing all the work. During that time, I heard that the Chinese had tried to take the 1013 out, but had given up in despair. I saw an article in the Shanghai paper about the great Chinese navy bombarding the communist ports. The ships involved were all LSTs, but not the 1013.

I will end with a sad footnote to the last days of the 1013. When we decommissioned, there was still one member of the old, old original crew left aboard. She was a dog named Guns, who had been brought aboard as a puppy. At the end, she had with her a brood of her own puppies. I don't now how she became pregnant. One of the crew took her and her offspring to the barracks with us. But the navy authorities would not let them stay. They were taken out into the country and given to some Chinese. I have to suppress tears whenever I think of how she must have felt, suddenly jerked from the only life she ever knew and from all the friends who loved and protected her, and not knowing what was going on or why. I suspect the Chinese ate her. I hope it happened soon.

But I must not think of her that way any more. She is now just a shadow like everything else of which I have written. In the evening, even the events of the bright morning turn into shadows.