U.S.S. Warrington (DD-843)
The Last Days – July 16, 1972 to September 30, 1972

July 16 – We were ordered to join operations off North Vietnam and were on station by the end of the day.

July 17 – My day started at midnight with the 00-04 watch. At 0125, we received counterbattery firing from 130 mm guns that formed part of the North Vietnamese coast defense system and received more firing at 0155. We got practical experience taking evasive action and setting random course changes during this night, our first in North Vietnam waters. Other than a little shrapnel on the ship's deck, there was no damage reported (we were running dark and no one was out on deck). We also fired on identified targets at 0245 and ceased firing at 0330. Overall it was a long watch. I was exhausted and left the bridge at 0400, went to my bunk and immediately fell asleep. For me and the ship, the rest of the night and morning was uneventful.

I took over the watch once again at noon and at 1300 we were assigned, along with the USS Robinson, to a course that took us close to the Chinese Frigates that were offloading supplies into Sampans and were ordered to look for targets – Sampans offloading supplies. A few minutes later we started moving, using a random course approach, but one that would get us to our destination. I went out onto the port bridge wing to see both the shore and the sampans that were all around us. When I got onto the port bridge wing and looked out, the sampans in front of us were scattering in all directions – very unusual as they did not normally move much to get out of our way – we had to navigate around them. I turned to the Boatswain's mate and started to point out the strange sampan movements when the ship jumped due to an underwater explosion. My first thought, based on our midwatch experience the night before, was that the coastal guns had us in range and, even with the random course, had zeroed in on us. With this in mind, I asked for hard right rudder to move us out to sea and away from the guns and the North Vietnam Coast. The turn put the end of the ship on top of another explosion (later we learned that the cause of both explosions was identified as mines that were strung across our path creating a very dangerous fence line) that literally lifted the ship out of the water. The USS Robinson told us that they could see the bottom of our screw (which would have meant that, at least the back end of the ship was 40 foot out of water) before we fell back into the water. We immediately set general quarters. Still not realizing the source of the blasts, I asked the navigator, who took over for the helmsman who had gone down, to maintain a course away from the coast continuing to use an evasive random course. Over the next hour or so, we lost a boiler and the number 2 main engine and had reports of flooding, oil leaks, etc. The ship started to slow as the damage took its toll – but we continued to move out to sea. At some point fairly early in this period, I was relieved of the watch and, as the Ship's Damage Control Officer, immediately headed down to Damage Control Central.

To get to Damage Control Central, I had to go down several levels and missed one level as the ship lurched and I missed the ladder. I went down but quickly got back up although I had gained a pretty badly twisted ankle injury that I would not feel until the adrenalin stopped flowing a day or so later.

I still vividly remember getting to Damage Control Central, seeing the damage control board all marked up, and seeing Chief Justusson next to the board waiting to get relieved so that he could personally handle/manage the damages that were being identified by the DC teams. At that moment, identified issues included flooding compartments, non-working pumps, small fires, broken shells on the helicopter deck where we kept ammunition, and a curious case of dizziness, cause unknown, in the forward

sleeping quarters. Along with these big items, the number of smaller issues identified on the damage board provided a colorful, dizzying array of things that needed both attention and immediate action. The needs were overwhelming but were identified in a complete and professional manner.

> ***It is important to note at this point, that both in Gitmo (at ref training) and during the transit from Hawaii to the Philippines, the DC teams trained and trained. All of that training paid off. We knew what needed to be done – first assess damage as well as people issues, then put together teams to work on the issues. There were a lot of heroes that first day. As the ship slowly came apart while we were towed back to Subic Bay over the next week, a lot of people continued to rise to do whatever was required.***

The key issues and areas of focus for me and the DC teams can be summarized fairly easily:

1) The status and condition of the crew - amazingly no one was badly injured and essentially everyone had reported in and to their GQ stations.

2) We needed to understand and stop the flooding, if that was possible. While the ship was operational, we were able to use the bilge pumps to keep flooding under control. Unfortunately this did not last long as the ship rapidly lost boilers and main engines and went dead in the water. Chief Justusson took on management of getting the flooding under control, once relieved at DC Central, and really helped by maximizing the use of bilge and other pumping assets and then getting the P-250 pumps on board operational to take over the load in the main engine room which had the biggest and most obvious flooding problem. As the ship went dead in the water, we started to lose ground and water started to build up in the main engine room along with other compartments. It became clear, early in the afternoon that we were not going to keep ahead of this problem without additional pumps and/or without a way to plug the holes which proved to be impossible from the inside. I remembered having seen the movie "In Harm's Way," watching mattresses, oakum, etc. being used to plug holes and stop leaks – it was not as easy in real life, especially with the location of some of the holes and the amount of water entering the ship. At one point, I remember the Chief coming back to the DC Central totally drenched but proud of the fact that we were pumping water out of the engine room with our P-250 pumps. About this time, we had a real problem with the pumps losing suction due to the ship continuing to move out to sea and get away from the coast. For me, this became one of the defining moments of the day. I was trying to do too much and, based on the extent of the damage, was losing my objectivity. The pump problems tipped me over the top a bit and in a very indelicate manner, I asked the bridge via the 1MC to stop the ship. The Captain immediately returned my 1MC call and asked me, in a very calm but firm voice, to tone it down. This actually woke me up, reestablished a needed level of calm and rational thinking and helped to carry me through that day. The Captain did slow the ship down sufficiently to let the pumping continue in its most efficient manner. Before the day was over, we were given, by a nearby ship, more P-250 pumps and fuel that we really needed to help keep the flooding under control on a 24/7 basis. This fuel and equipment belonged to the marine contingent on board and we were told to take good care of it and give it back when we no longer needed it.

   Although this extra pumping capacity really helped, and our teams became very proficient at both running and fixing P-250 pumps, we did not get the flooding under control until a diver arrived the next day and plugged the biggest holes from the outside of the ship. As mentioned above, in addition to the main engine room flooding, we also had smaller leaks in other

compartments and a very large leak in one of the shaft alleys. A volunteer (I believe that it was HTFN Klinger) climbed into and then dove into the water that was quickly filling up the shaft alley. He located the leak(s) which were in a location that we could not plug. Based on his assessment, we decided to give up this compartment and let it flood. We closed the hatch and tightened down the hatch bolts. It did hold, but not completely, although we were able to eliminate a short term problem and then watched the area over the next several days adjusting as needed to not let it become a threat to the ship's integrity.

3) We needed to get the small fires and potential fires under control and to, more importantly, eliminate the potential issues that were created by phosphorus shells that had broken open on the helicopter deck. A team handled this quickly by throwing the shells in the worst condition overboard and quickly putting out fires. The hanger deck became a location of needing continuous watches to maintain the status quo.

4) We next needed to deal with the DC team report of a sailor that was dizzy in the forward sleeping compartment. The only cause that was possible was a gas leak of some kind and the only gas that could cause this type of problem was Freon which was in the refrigeration units next to this compartment. As the ship's gas free engineer, it was my job to don an oxygen breathing apparatus, take a gas monitor and go into the compartment. Once in the compartment it was obvious that the problem was caused by a Freon line that was broken and most of the Freon in that line was already out and in the compartment. I was able to shut off the main Freon line isolating the system and stopping any further losses of Freon. Unfortunately this also shut down our refrigeration units, which in a few hours did not matter as the ship went dead in the water. Because there was still Freon in the compartment (heavier than air), a properly outfitted team immediately lowered a ventilation hose into the bottom of the compartment and pumped fresh air as long as we had power for the fresh air blower to operate. We closed off access to the compartment, opened all of the hatches we could, and continued to ventilate as long as we could. Fortunately no one was asphyxiated and over a day or so the threat was removed and we were able to reopen the compartment.

By the end of Day one we felt that we had the biggest issues under control (except for the main engine room flooding) or so we thought. I could not sleep during this first night so spent the night in DC Central and monitored issues as they continued to arise.

July 18-July 23 - The trip back to the Philippines took a week and was pretty much a blur. We were towed by first our sister ship, then on July 19 by a salvage ship – the Reclaimer. The tow line broke several times and the seas also got rough at times. Through all of this the ship was slowly coming apart (until we were in drydock, we did not realize that the keel had been bent – one heck of a large piece of steel to ripple, but not surprising with as far out of the water we went with the second blast). The ship started moving in ways that it was not designed to do, causing seams between compartments to start separating.

We did not appreciate the issues associated with the ship coming apart at first, but by the morning of Day two, with small leaks starting to show up in fuel tanks and in places that were not leaking to start with, we set up 24/7 fire and leak watches all across the ship. We did everything we could to keep the emergency generator running but that also ran into both operational and fuel troubles as we were being towed back. We were often forced to find ways to pump out fuel leaks, to transfer liquid loads to keep the ship stable, and to keep people out of harm's way as the fuel and ballast moved into places it should

not have been. There was a lot of creativeness used during this period to keep the ship in one piece and afloat as it was towed in both rough and calm seas.

I finally fell asleep the second night. When I woke up my ankle was so swollen that I could no longer wear my regular shoes. Fortunately I had a pair of tennis shoes which still fit, but only barely on my left ankle. They did not look particularly good with the uniform, but worked and that was all that counted.

As we neared Subic Bay, there were no additional injuries, the ship was still afloat, and we were ready for this long week to be over.

July 24 - We finally arrived in Subic Bay and docked next to another ship. I remember standing on the fantail, finally letting the adrenalin drain out. Only minutes after we had put the gangplank down, a couple of marines came on board, saluted, and immediately asked about their P-250 pumps and fuel tanks. Considering what we had been through over the past week, I laughed and pointed them in the direction of their gear. They picked it all up, said very little and were gone before any of the crew was able to go ashore. After 7 somber and difficult days, we laughed!

August 6 – I finally thought to write my parents a letter and let them know that I was ok. We found the letter I sent in my parents a number of years ago when they passed away. It was short and was handwritten but I have included it below in its entirety. Perspective seems relevant even today (it is worthwhile to note that Pat and I lived in China for five years (2000-2005) and I spent many years working across Asia, so the comment about taking the opportunity to come to the Philippines was a good one which we did not do in 1972 but did 25+ years later).

> *August 6, 1972*
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> *Dear Mom and Dad,*
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> *Well here we are in the Philippines waiting for a decision on what will happen to our ship. I have included a copy of the Warrington Gram on the ship for you to read. We were hit pretty hard by the explosions and had to be towed for 7 days back to here.*
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> *They have started to fix us but still have a long ways to go. We had damage throughout the ship. They are now replacing all of the metal on the portside of the ship that was bent and warped.*
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> *So anyway I am all right. I think that I got a purple heart for my troubles; I really wasn't badly hurt, but bad enough that I had to go see the doctor. I am the damage control assistant (DCA) so the whole affair was mine as we controlled the damage to the ship and brought it safely here safely. The guys really did amazing jobs to save the ship.*
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> *Now we are back in a shipyard overhaul, just like we were when we were at Boston last year. It is really a busy time. I am thinking of bringing Pat out here if things settle down a little, and it is assure that we are staying around for a while. Pat will probably never get another chance like this to see this part of the world. I will see what happens. Take care, folks.*
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> *Love, Jerry*

August 25 - The results of the Insurv inspection were announced and the decision was that the ship would be decommissioned and removed as a US Navy Ship.

September 30 - The ship was officially decommissioned.

Jerry Oliver
July 17, 2012