

Peril on the Sea (Part 3)
A true account by MNC (SW) Michael Gonzales, Jr.

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War Stories Collections, Dr. Ralph R. Chase West Texas Collection, Angelo State University,
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The following document has been reformatted from its original version and partially edited.

The skipper's voice trembled, to the near point of tears, as he sent out the "MAYDAY" distress call over the emergency radio channel. We had never seen our captain so shaken. Seeing him like this only fed the fears that were welling up inside all of us as we witnessed that emotional scene. We were sinking. Not knowing why and not being able to stop the seawater from flooding into the belly of the ship.

Our beam was now at a 20 degree list to starboard and increasing every minute. At the rate we were taking on seawater, we would have to abandon ship within the next two hours. We were DIW (Dead in the Water) and the sun had gone down several hours before. The ship was in total darkness, save for the emergency lighting and our hand-held flashlights. The nearest ship was 70 miles away and was not scheduled to reach us any time soon.

We were scared. Gut-wrenching scared. And the skipper's voice reflected everyone's fear. Due to the major flooding in the Auxiliary Machinery Room (AMR), the generators had been shut down, the main engines were silent and the ship was helplessly adrift in the middle of the Persian Gulf.

Now the ship was immersed into darkness, adding further fears in the minds of the 84 men aboard the *USS Dextrous*. When the ships' power went out and the emergency lights came to life, an eerie moment of silence became apparent throughout the ship. The noise of the chaos below suddenly quieted over my headphones and all remained still on the bridge for what seemed longer than the couple of seconds it actually lasted. It was apparent that the somber reality of the situation had abruptly come to bare in our minds and imaginations. The few

seconds of silence seemed to reflect the unspoken fears of every individual throughout the ship. I found myself contemplating our dire dilemma and began whispering a silent prayer, as I imagined everyone on the ship was also doing, at that moment.

The sudden shift from light to dark had affected everyone's night vision. We were all temporarily blinded now and would remain partially blind until regaining full night vision in the next ten minutes. As our eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, the only means of light, other than the ships' emergency lighting, was our hand-held flashlights. An occasional beam of light from a miss-directed flashlight, scanned across my eyes, adding to the surrealistic feel and confusion of the moment.

After the few seconds of silence, the controlled chaos began once again, with radio communications, loud speakers, and shouts from the repair parties coming through my headphones, all with one purpose of mind; saving the ship.

“Saving the ship.” That truth was now being driven home, with the somber reality that, “Saving the ship” meant, saving our lives.

The *USS Dextrous*, was a 224 ft long and 39 ft wide ship made entirely of solid oak wood. She had become our home and mother for the past 5 months. The 76 enlisted men and 8 officers aboard the *USS Dextrous*, known as “Delta Crew,” worked, ate, slept, and played aboard this floating hunk of wood. And now she was sinking. With the amount of water that the ship had

already taken on, we had approximately two hours remaining before an abandon ship order would have to be given.

The situation was turning from bad to worse now. There had already been a report of one repair team member that had panicked and run away from the flooding casualty. He was reported to have run to the upper most part of the ship, after hastily gathering a handful of personal items from his locker. Two crew members manning the fifty caliber machine guns, located on the top O-3 level, reported that the panicked young man was pacing back and forth while weeping uncontrollably and clutching his last remaining possessions, tightly in his arms. The measure of his actions, obviously weighing heavily on his conscience, as he waited for the certain sinking of the ship. No one wanted to call him a coward yet.

It was now inevitable that if the flooding could not be stopped, each crew member would be floundering in the Persian Gulf waters, within a few hours. All possibilities, as to why we were taking on water, had been calculated. By now, the *USS Kitty Hawk* had sent a helo with divers to inspect our hull, but time was running out. The nearest ship to our location was the *HMS Birmingham*, a British frigate. Upon hearing our MAYDAY transmission, she was fast steaming to our rescue, as the *Kitty Hawk* divers were inspecting the ship for the breach in our hull. Flood waters were now awash over the catwalks in AMR and would soon engulf the generators, sealing our fate.

Reports were now coming in from the MMR room, reporting that the flood water was coming in through cracks at the base of the bulkhead located between the MMR room and AMR room. This

report had the potential of being the turning point of our dilemma. Since AMR had 6 feet of flood water and MMR had 4 feet, it was apparent that the flooding was coming from the AMR room and leaking into the MMR room. The repair parties frantically began searching the flooded bilge under the catwalks in AMR.

Precious time was running out. The *Kitty Hawk*'s divers began their search on the bottom of our hull as our repair teams desperately combed the flooded bilge waters inside the belly of the ship. The mass of pipes and metal framing made it difficult to maneuver under the deck plates of the catwalks. The process of discovering the leak was a dangerous task. Sheer courage was required as crew members began removing their survival gear and plunged into the dark flood waters under the deck plates. While holding their breath, they dangerously negotiated the tangled mass of metal located under the catwalks, in hope that they didn't get wedged between or trapped under the maze of metal snags and drown.

The bravery and persistence of the repair teams was our only hope now.

Suddenly, a report from the ship's First Class HT (Hull Technician) came over my headset. He reported closing all of the 4 inch fire main valves, located in AMR, in hope that the leak was a breach of one of the large outer valves, located under the ship.

Within minutes, the reports of rising water began to cease. Reports were now coming in that the water was receding; indicating that the leak had been stopped and the pumps were gaining on the flood water.

When the first report of the receding water came over my headset, I heard a roar of cheers from the repair crews on all the channels. As I announced to the skipper that the flood water in AMR was now only 5 feet and diminishing, the bridge broke out in cheers as well. The exhaustive battle for our survival was over. The breach had been discovered in the nick of time. A fire main valve had cracked, and exposed our hull to the open sea. If not for the persistence of the repair teams isolating the casualty to the AMR room, and the quick thinking of our First Class HT, the breach would have been a fatal blow to our ship and crew.

As the flood water receded and the ship began to level off, the seriousness of the situation was not diminished by the fact that it was only a cracked valve casing. Whether our casualty was caused by man or nature, war or misfortune, the inevitable end would still have been the total loss of our ship and possibly the loss of lives.

As help finally arrived with the arrival of the British frigate, *HMS Birmingham*, we secured from general quarters and limped to the nearest port for repairs.

We learned one valuable lesson that day. Life is precious and very fragile. I couldn't help but think that each man walked away with a renewed look on life and a revived relationship with his God.

All because, one fine evening in the Persian Gulf, a single mine sweeper, with 84 courageous men onboard, strived against nature, battled through the night for their very survival, and won. The rest is history. But not in the history books.