

Peril on the Sea (Part 2)

A true account by MNC (SW) Michael Gonzales, Jr.

Source:

War Stories Collections, Dr. Ralph R. Chase West Texas Collection, Angelo State University, San Angelo, Texas

The following document has been reformatted from its original version and partially edited.

The reports were coming in hot and heavy now. Everyone on the bridge was scrambling about, tasked with some kind of immediate action, related to finding out why we were taking on water. This was not a drill and the latest damage-control reports were not good and getting worse. The skipper had slowed our speed to bare steerage-way (5 knots) and was on the red phone to the *USS Kitty Hawk* reporting our condition. No one wanted to say the “M” word yet (“MAYDAY”), but the situation was really bad and deteriorating fast. I was the DC (damage-control) plotter and was the “bottle-neck” for all the reports coming in from the repair teams. My heart was thumping hard within my chest, as updated reports became more and more ominous. I couldn’t believe this was happening and I sensed that everyone on the bridge, although they looked calm as they performed their tasks, were as frightened as little children.

The screaming and shouting that I was hearing in my headphones from the repair teams, didn’t help calm my emotions. Since I was the only one wearing a headset, I was the only one on the bridge that could hear the fearful chaos happening below decks. It was my job to continually shout out what I was hearing on my headphones as they screamed: “Repair One reports pump room flooded solid and sealed off!!” “Repair Three reports MMR (Main Machinery Room) flooding with 2 feet of water and rising!!” “Repair Four reporting AMR (Auxiliary Machinery Room) flooding with 3 Feet of water and rising!!” “All fire and water barriers set throughout the ship!!” “Flooding not contained!!”

As I listened and relayed the information that was coming over my headset, I glanced out through the bridge windows and realized for the first time, how dark it had gotten in the few minutes we had been at general quarters. A reality-check can be a fearful thing, the reality being

that we were alone and sinking in darkness, the ship was beginning to tilt to the starboard side, and the nearest ship was 70 miles away.

I have never been afraid of water and I was never afraid of the dark, but both of those “Boogey Men” were about to seize me and question my very survival. If we did not stop the breach in our hull, seawater would eventually reach our generators and main engines. And if that happened, we would be forced to shut them down and be DIW (“Dead-in-the-water”).

Our skipper has always been a staunch example of what a warrior should be. We would follow him into battle and die with pride and faithful courage, if need be. We had trained and re-trained for just this type of emergency, but now the ship was notably listing (tilting) 10 degrees to starboard and the breach in the hull was yet to be secured. The skipper was visibly shaken. And so was everyone else on the bridge.

Reports were now getting worse. The repair teams now reported 4 feet of water in AMR (and rising) and 3 feet (and rising) in MMR. The pump room remained flooded solid without hope of saving it.

The bridge had become a deafening roar of voices as runners came in and out of the bridge shouting new reports from other repair parties, mixed with piercing radio reports, high priority phone cons to and from the *Kitty Hawk* and other ships, and frantic orders shouted out from the skipper and XO over the ship’s speakers.

For a moment, as I watched the pandemonium, everything turned to slow motion and I felt a strange numbness. It was as if I had been knocked unconscious and was still in a daze before waking up, not knowing reality from the dream. All I knew was that I wanted to be somewhere else at that moment. Anywhere, but there!

The headset came alive again and woke me from my surrealism. Reports were now coming in that MMR had 4 feet of seawater and was still rising. AMR now had 5 feet of seawater and rising. The generators were in AMR and the decks were only 6 foot above the bilge. Only one more foot of floodwater and the generators would have to be shut down.

The ship was now listing hard to starboard, 14 degrees. The skipper, by now, had ordered all engines stopped. I remember watching, as one of the Quartermasters laid down his pencil on the chart table, and it quickly rolled off onto the floor. Ordinarily, the casual onlooker would have chuckled at the sight, but at that moment, no one felt like laughing, as they watched the pencil continue to roll until it stopped when it hit the bulkhead, on the other side of the bridge, 20 feet away.

The inevitable report finally came over my headset, but was shocking just the same. Repair Team One reported that seawater, in AMR, had finally reached the machinery deck (6 feet and still rising).

The skipper immediately ordered the generators secured. The ship went into instant darkness. The emergency floodlights came on and everyone was forced to use flashlights to continue their duties, myself included.

The skipper was now forced to call out on the emergency radio “MAYDAY, MAYDAY, all ships in area. US warship in peril! Taking on water! Breach undetermined! Listing hard to starboard, 20 degrees! Dead in the water! All engines stopped. In need of immediate assistance!! MAYDAY, MAYDAY!!”

For the first time, the skipper’s voice was trembling to the point of almost crying. I couldn’t believe what I was witnessing. We were DIW, taking on water and sinking, with no help in sight. The sun had gone down and we were completely helpless in the dark; listing precariously and surrounded by a vast expanse of a merciless sea. As I contemplated our plight, and as my heart was pumping hard in my chest, I began to understand the reality of the frightening situation. My “Boogey Men” had finally arrived.

To be continued