

ACTION OFF

Story by Scot MacDonald

For four years, U.S. Navy guns had been silent off the coast of North Vietnam.

On 6 April 1972, President Nixon announced that North Vietnamese aggression across the demilitarized zone had stepped up. The President ordered Navy ships to strike military targets north of the zone. Nearly every destroyer available in the Pacific Fleet and some from the Atlantic sped to the Gulf of Tonkin to join, if needed, in the fight.

Less than two weeks later, Pacific Fleet headquarters issued this announcement:

"In a brief engagement, USS Sterett (DLG 31) shot down the first MiG ever to attack a U.S. Navy ship in the Tonkin Gulf and took under fire two high-speed surface contacts, believed to have been North Vietnamese torpedo boats, which disappeared from radar and are believed to have been destroyed."

During the action, CAPT Herbert E. Reichert, commanding the *Sterett*, reported that one of his ship's Terrier surface-to-air missiles downed an enemy surface-to-surface (anti-ship or cruise) missile, marking the first time an anti-ship missile had been destroyed in combat.

In the engagement, which historians refer to as the Battle off Dong Hoi, USS *Higbee* (DD 806) suffered a direct hit at the base of her aft 5" twin mount, completely destroying it.

On the day of the action, *Sterett* was in company with a task unit consisting of USS *Oklahoma City* (CLG 5), *Higbee*, and USS *Lloyd Thomas* (DD 764). Recalled CAPT Reichert: "*Oklahoma City*, followed by *Higbee* and *Thomas*, was approximately five miles off shore. *Thomas* was controlling *Sterett's* LAMPS helo in a coordinated shore bombardment/helo spotter effort. *Sterett* was in a holding position 12 miles from the target area, maneuvering on various courses toward the shore in order to keep her missile battery unmasked in anticipation of a possible retaliatory air attack.

"At the onset of the shore bombardment, *Sterett* held positive identification of at least two hostile aircraft flying near the hills and mountain areas of the coast."

Prior to the action, *Sterett's* TAO, LCDR Steve Abrams, cleared the way with Alfa Whiskey (Force AAW coordinator) for permission to fire missiles if the ship got indications of MiG activity in the Dong Hoi area. Weapons Officer LCDR Michael Cornforth was in the Weapons Office the afternoon of the battle catching up on paperwork when word was passed over the 1MC for the weapons officer to lay to CIC on the double. "Now what!" he exclaimed. "When I got up there I found that the MiGs were taking off and were apparently assembling just north of the airfield at Dong Hoi. It was standard for the MiGs to fly along the ridge because I think they



thought our fire control systems were less effective against a land background."

Oklahoma City, *Higbee* and *Lloyd Thomas* had been firing on assigned targets and were in the act of withdrawing in a barrage of enemy counter battery gunfire when the MiGs began their attack.

Sterett was in Condition III, with Condition Zebra set on the second deck and below. CAPT Reichert was fighting his ship from CIC, a major departure from traditional practice in past wars. General Quarters was sounded. A MiG made a run on *Higbee*, dropping a 250-pound bomb near her stern. *Sterett* fired; the missile did not hit the target. The Fire Control Officer CWO-2 Jack Ruth, raced to the bridge to view the action. He ran back to CIC, yelling "You missed! Shoot again."

"We didn't get the second round of the salvo off," said LCDR Cornforth. "Instead, it went dud. The E-9 fire controlman, FTTCM J. F. Brown, did some quick thinking and immediately went to a back-up firing mode."

The MiG, in the meantime, turned for a second run on *Higbee*, this time landing a bomb on target.

"The bomb hit the ship's after gun mount," CAPT Reichert said, "exploded in the mount's upper ammunition