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THE BATTLE OFF DONG HOI

The presence of US Navy ships off the coast of North Vietnam was always a thorn in the side of the North Vietnamese government. On August 2, 1964, two torpedo boats attacked the USS Maddox DD-731 and USS Turner Joy DD-951. This event has been called "The Gulf of Tonkin Incident" and marked the US entry into the Vietnamese War.

The North Vietnamese shore-based gun emplacements were of little use since most ships remained beyond their range. Some of the larger vessels were often paired with smaller and older destroyers to act as their shotguns.

As the air war over Vietnam increased, the Navy posted electronically enhanced DLG and CG class ships on a station in the north part of the gulf called PIRAZ (Positive Identification Radar Advisory Zone). These missile-equipped ships had high-power radars capable of detecting aircraft at a long-range. They acted as guardians for the many US flights into and out of Vietnam. Their active radars and close-knit communications capabilities served as a waypoint and a floating air-traffic control point, sometimes controlling aircraft from 4 different aircraft carriers, long-range bombers as well as search and rescue aircraft simultaneously. The onboard AIC (Air Intercept Controllers) aided US fighter aircraft to engage North Vietnamese MiGs. These larger ships generally carried helicopters to rescue crew members shot down over North Vietnam both inland and in the gulf waters.

In early 1972 the Vietnam People's Air Force (VPAF) in North Vietnam sent 10 of their MiG 17 Pilots from the 923rd fighter regiment to be trained by a Cuban named Ernesto in bombing tactics. The MiG 17 was chosen since it was a slower subsonic plane. This late in the war, it was almost obsolete.



Meanwhile, Truong Khanh Chan, a graduate of the Soviet Zhukovski Aviation Institute, carried out modifications to four MiG 17s, enabling them to carry two 250 Kg (501 lb) bombs instead of two fuel drop tanks. Since the US had targeted most of the known airfields in North Vietnam, the Vietnamese stealthily constructed a dirt runway near Gat and based the modified MiGs there on standby in hopes of being able to stage a strike on the US ships soon.

On April 6, 1972, President Richard Nixon announced that he ordered Navy ships to strike military targets north of the demilitarized zone above the 59th parallel. This action was the result of increased North Vietnamese aggression across the demilitarized zone. Nearly every available gunfire support ship in the Pacific fleet was to join in the fight. Many ships from the Atlantic were also dispatched to the Gulf of Tonkin to participate in the operations.

On April 19, Sterett was at her regular station in the northern part of the Gulf of Tonkin and received orders to head south and provide anti-air support for a gun-line mission near Dong Hoi, just north of the demilitarized zone (DMZ). Dong Hoi was a major industrial port city and home of an airfield and several SAM (Surface to Air Missile) installations. It was also a principal railhead. Before April 19, airstrikes had reportedly softened up the area, and intelligence sources suggested that no viable enemy aircraft remained in the vicinity. The battle group received assurances that all friendly air assets would be kept clear of the area during this engagement.

Sterett rendezvoused with the USS Guadalupe the day before the engagement for refueling.



Sterett rendezvoused to the north with other Seventh Fleet ships to form a strike group that included the light cruiser Oklahoma City (CLG-5) with her 6" guns. The other vessels were the destroyers Higbee (DD-806) and Lloyd Thomas (DD-764), each with 5" guns. The column had Oklahoma City in the van with Higbee and Lloyd Thomas following. Sterett was to remain separated from the group to provide AAW protection (Anti-Air Warfare). The weather that day was mild but with reduced visibility of two miles and hazy at best.

En route to the engagement, Sterett's TAO (Tactical Affairs Officer), LCDR Steve Abrams, requested permission to use missiles if there was any MiG activity during the exercise. Alpha Whiskey, the force AAW (Anti Air Warfare) coordinator, granted its consent to utilize missiles if there were any MiG activity in the area.

Sterett was operating at Condition III - Wartime Cruising, where one third of the crew is on watch, and strategic stations are manned.



USS Sterett DLG-31



USS Oklahoma City CLG-5



USS Lloyd Thomas DD-764



USS Higbee DD-806

That day the designated targets were to be a radar installation, a petroleum storage area, the Dong Hoi airfield, coastal gun emplacements, and an ammunition cache at Cap Lay.

At 16:00 Oklahoma City, Higbee, and Lloyd Thomas began their gun run against targets in the vicinity of Dong Hoi. The first pass was from north to south, parallel to the coast at a range of 5 miles with a return leg back towards the north. Upon commencing their run, all three ships started to receive heavy counter fire from shore batteries. Oklahoma City reported shrapnel damage to her superstructure from some of the near-hits.

The 4 MiG 17s at Gat were ready to attack at 15:00 but, due to inclement weather, waited till just before 16:00 to take off.

Prior to the engagement at 16:10, Sterett went to flight quarters and at 16:24 launched Copywright 005, the Kaman SH-2D LAMPS (Light Airborne Multi-Purpose System) helicopter. It was to operate as an airborne spotter for the gunfire mission and placed under the control of the USS Lloyd Thomas. This concept was a new role for LAMPS. The LAMPS program was new to the Navy, and the Sterett was the Navy's first ship to deploy in the Gulf of Tonkin with this capability operationally. Lamps had previously been used only in limited test scenarios. Sterett's resourceful crew and the LAMPS detachment from HSL-31 out of North Island Naval Station, San Diego, established many of the standard operating procedures still used today.



Shortly after the task group arrived offshore, several air targets were detected amongst the mountains by Sterett's seasoned CIC (Command Information Center) Radarmen. The MiG aircraft used the mountainous terrain where tracking radars had more difficulty detecting them. When the MiG 17s came out of the mountains, crossed over the beach, "went feet-wet," and headed directly for the line of ships. The gun-line ships had finished their first run and began their return leg. Visual observers on the Sterett, the Oklahoma City, and the Higbee spotted and identified the incoming MiGs. One of the low-flying MiGs headed for the USS Higbee, and the other headed towards the Oklahoma City. One passed over the Higbee amidships and dropped a single 250kg bomb. The bomb tumbled towards Higbee and passed between the aft stack and the ASROC launcher, barely missing the railings, and ended up in the water resulting in a very near miss with no damage. This event was the first time naval history that a MiG / jet aircraft had attacked a US Navy ship.

At this point, the close operating confines of the ships placed the MiG inside Sterett's minimum missile range. The Terrier's solid rocket booster would not have separated at that range, and the active homing electronics in the warhead would not have activated and thus armed the warhead. Standard operational parameters suggested a "no-go" on missile launch under these conditions. The magic words "Weapons Free" were heard in CIC, indicating that the operators at the weapon's control stations had permission to fire if the opportunity presented itself. Upon launch of the missiles at 17, the electrifying announcement of "Birds Away" could be heard throughout CIC as the roar of the Terrier's solid-fueled boosters ignited.



Sterett had two Terriers on the rails and attempted to fire a full salvo with both missiles. On this occasion, only one of the two "birds" responded to the firing command. This single Terrier missile left the rail at Mach two towards the turning MiG and narrowly missed its target. CWO-2 Jack Ruth (Fire Control Officer) ran from CIC to the bridge and witnessed the missed missile shot.

Warrant Officer Ruth returned to CIC and reported, "You missed, shoot again!" FTCM J. F. Brown at the Weapons Control console then switched to an alternate firing circuit, and 2 minutes later, the remaining missile left on the rail. By this time, the MiG had circled and had begun another bombing run on the Higbee. The second missile of the salvo scored a direct hit on the MiG right at the base of the wings and body, totally obliterating the target.



Near the end of the gunfire run on Dong Hoi, Higbee, under command by Captain Ronald Zuilkoski, had experienced a hot round in her "Mount 52" after gun mount. This malfunction caused by a faulty projectile that failed to fire and remained in the gun's breach. This hang-fire condition forced the evacuation of the gun mounts as a precautionary measure. The enclosed Mk32 mount contains two 5 " 38 caliber guns operated by a crew of 12 sailors. When the order to evacuate, it did not include four men left in the upper handling just below the main deck or the men in the magazine itself. Problems like this were due to faulty ammunition, much of it as old as WWII.

After the MiG's bomb hit the Higbee, Sterett achieved a missile director lock-on as a prerequisite to a missile launch. Sterett intended to fire two missiles at the MiG.

Only one of the missiles successfully left the rail. CWO Jack Ruth was at one of the CIC Weapons Control consoles and ran to the bridge past the Captain's sea cabin. He observed that the first missile missed the MiG. He ran back into CIC and yelled, "Shoot again, we missed!" The unresponsive dud missile was still on the rail. A backup secondary firing circuit was used at the Weapons Control Console to launch the remaining Terrier missile. By this time, the MiG was 9,500 yards from Sterett and was flying 300-foot above the water but still inside the Terrier's minimum missile range.

It was a great relief to the CIC crew when they heard the Terrier missile's roar as it successfully launched. Again, CWO Ruth rushed to the bridge and observed that the missile had struck the MiG dead center, where the wings join the fuselage, resulting in instant destruction of the aircraft. It was more like a mid-air collision but highly effective nonetheless. The extreme accuracy of the launch systems and target designation hardware enabled this successful but improbable shot. CWO-2 Ruth returned to CIC from the bridge and reported, "Direct hit!" The scene in CIC was one of instant joy.

Much adrenaline was flowing among Sterett's CIC crew. Shouts of excitement erupted immediately upon Jack Ruth's announcement of the direct hit. The cheering quickly quieted because there were still other targets in the area. Moments later, all hands in CIC were back to work at their stations and extremely alert.

Sterett's crew had good reason to celebrate. This event was the first time in its 20-year history that the Terrier missile had shot down an enemy aircraft in combat.

The MiG's bomb hit Higbee's fantail at the base of the vacated 5-inch gun mount. The bomb penetrated the weather deck and exploded in the upper ammunition handling room just below the gun mount. This explosion caused the ready ammunition stored there to explode and destroy the gun mount and endangered the men below. It also damaged the magazine sprinkling systems, the fire-main in the aft section of the ship, and the ship's ability to control her rudders. The explosions also ruptured the aft fuel tanks. Ninety thousand gallons of fuel caught fire, flames engulfed the entire aft section of the Higbee, and plumes of heavy, acrid black smoke spewed from the ship.



Here is an account of that day by Higbee sailor Billy Springs:

"I was on Higbee on April 19, 1972, on duty in the upper handling room of the aft mount when the bomb hit. There were four of us in there when the bomb exploded. Besides myself, there was Rick Rowe, mount Captain, Philip Garduno, and Seaman Apprentice Butz. We were not notified of a hang fire in the mount and had not evacuated yet.

When the bomb hit, everything went into slow motion, and the few minutes trapped in the handling room was like an eternity. I saw a fireball coming at me, then I heard the explosion, and then I felt the concussion. It seemed like minutes between each one, although it was only a split second.

The blast caused the merry-go-round (where we placed the projectiles and powder) to shift, blocking the exit. I attempted to climb into the mount and noticed that my left arm was shattered and unusable. Rick had been cut across the back from shoulder to shoulder and could not climb up into the mount either. Philip's (Flippy) hair was on fire. Rick and I patted it until it was out. As far as I know, Butz did not receive any injuries at this time but was found on aft watch three days later in shock.

A secondary explosion blew a hole in the bulkhead, which enabled us to escape through it. Went up a ladder from below deck, we discovered that the hatch above had latched down. We opened the round portal in the hatch and opened it. As I threw the lid up, Obie (Obrien) swung an ax to finish dogging the hatch down. I was first out, followed by Rick, who informed Obie that the compartment was on fire. I made my way forward, almost making it to the barbershop, which served as a medical station before passing out.

I woke up to find "Doc" Brazelton kissing me, and I remember asking, "what the hell are you doing?" He told me that I had quit breathing, and he was administering mouth to mouth.

After being stabilized, Doc moved me to the wardroom where the rest of the injured were. When he laid me on the carpet, I yelled because it felt like a million needles sticking in my back.

They evacuated us to the USS Tripoli (LPH-10), an Iwo Jima-class amphibious assault ship. They treated us there before being shipped to the 95th EVAC in DaNang.

From DaNang, I was air-lifted to a burn unit at Camp Zama, Japan. Then to the Philippines, and finally, on May 20, I landed at Travis Air Force Base near San Francisco, CA. From there, they moved me to Balboa Naval Hospital in San Diego. There, I was placed on the Temporary Disability Retired List and, in October of 1975, on permanent disability."

The Higbee's damages left her in extreme danger, as there were still 600 rounds of five-inch ammunition remaining in the aft magazine. With the water mains cut, there was no way to flood the magazine. Higbee's Damage Control teams made a heroic effort to restore fire-fighting capability and get the flames under control.

Higbee's boilers operated by fuel drawn from the aft fuel tanks at the time of the attack. When the bomb ruptured this fuel tank, fuel-draw to all four boilers was interrupted, and the ship went DIW (Dead in the water). Her boiler tenders quickly switched fuel supply to one of the other fuel tanks and relit the boilers. While Higbee was DIW, the USS Lloyd Thomas DD-764 circled Higbee while Sterett stood by to provide AAW protection.

The ships also continued to receive counter fire from shore batteries. While repairs to the rudder control commenced, Higbee had to be steered by independent control of her two screws. Despite the gravity of the situation, Higbee experienced only four injuries and no loss of life. Higbee's valiant crew eventually brought the fires under control and exited the area as rapidly as possible.

A second MiG exited the mountainous area north of Dong Hoi near Tho Ngoa. Sterett had been tracking this target for quite some time and immediately locked onto it by the fire control radar. Several Sterett sailors topside also observed this aircraft. This second MiG must have witnessed his wingman's demise. He executed a 180-degree turn and headed back to the safety of the mountains. After killing the first MiG, Sterett immediately reloaded her twin missile rails in record time. Two Terrier missiles were launched at the second MiG as it entered the hills next to the shore. Sterett's missiles went active just as the MiG crossed the beach (went "feet dry") and headed into the mountains. Sterett's missile fire control radar observed the missiles going through the gate, which is the point in space where the Terrier and the intended target's radar echos coincide. Radar operators on the SPG-55 target acquisition radar saw the missile going through the "gate" and the target and the missile simultaneously disappearing from their radar screens. This "kill" was later listed as a "probable kill" since there was no visual observation of

the kill due to the hazy and broken clouds. As a result, Sterett did not get official credit for the kill.

Unknown to Sterett and the whole task group and Alpha Whiskey (force Anti-Air Warfare) coordinators, there were indeed two Air Force F-4 aircraft in the mountainous terrain around Dong Hoi that afternoon. These fighter aircraft had been using stealth techniques and were operating with their transponder and radar equipment turned off. They were probably stalking MiGs. The SPS48 radar tagged the tracks as hostile. The information was routed via the NTDS (Naval Tactical Data System) to the Weapons system via signal converters that converted digital signals to analog signals. The NTDS is digital, where the weapons control systems are analog. The two SPG55 radars received the coordinates and locked onto the targets in preparation for a missile launch. US aircraft and our opponents have alert systems that set off a loud alarm in their cockpits.

At 17:26, Sterett went to General Quarters. One crewman aboard Sterett reportedly saw the F4's come out of the mountains following the second MiG's destruction. As per standard operation procedure, Sterett did check with "Monkey Mountain" (Vietnam) to verify that there were no "friendlies" in the area. Having that verified, Sterett's CIC crew locked onto the incognito Air Force planes and designated them as hostile. And upon lock-on, the F4's immediately turned on their IFF gear and loudly proclaimed their "friendly" status. At about this time, Navy BARCAP (Barrier Combat Air Patrol) aircraft under the control of Sterett's AIC's (Air Intercept Controllers) began to arrive in the area from Yankee Station aircraft carriers. BARCAP also locked onto the F4's at about the same time that Sterett locked on. In the month following the battle, one of the Air Force pilots unofficially told a Sterett crewman that they had seen an airplane go down. They could not make the report official as they were not "officially" in the area. No official explanation for the missions of these planes has ever been made public.

Higbee, with her rudder control working again, continued exiting the area on a north-northeast course. Oklahoma City was also making a hasty retreat to the northeast, accompanied by the Lloyd Thomas. Oklahoma City's message to Sterett was "proceeding to open to minimum missile range." Their minimum missile range was far longer the long-range Talos than those of the Sterett's Terriers. Talos missiles are generally not suitable for close-in combat. With Oklahoma City's departure, only Sterett and Lloyd Thomas remained to assist the Higbee. Oklahoma City dispatched a medical team via helicopter. Sterett and Lloyd Thomas stood by Higbee as she fought her fires and attempted to restore rudder control.

Sterett was roughly paralleling Higbee's northeasterly course and making oblique course changes as they headed away from the battle area. This tactic was necessary because Sterett's main battery, her Terriers, was mounted forward. A run directly away from the threat would mask her fire control directors and her missiles.

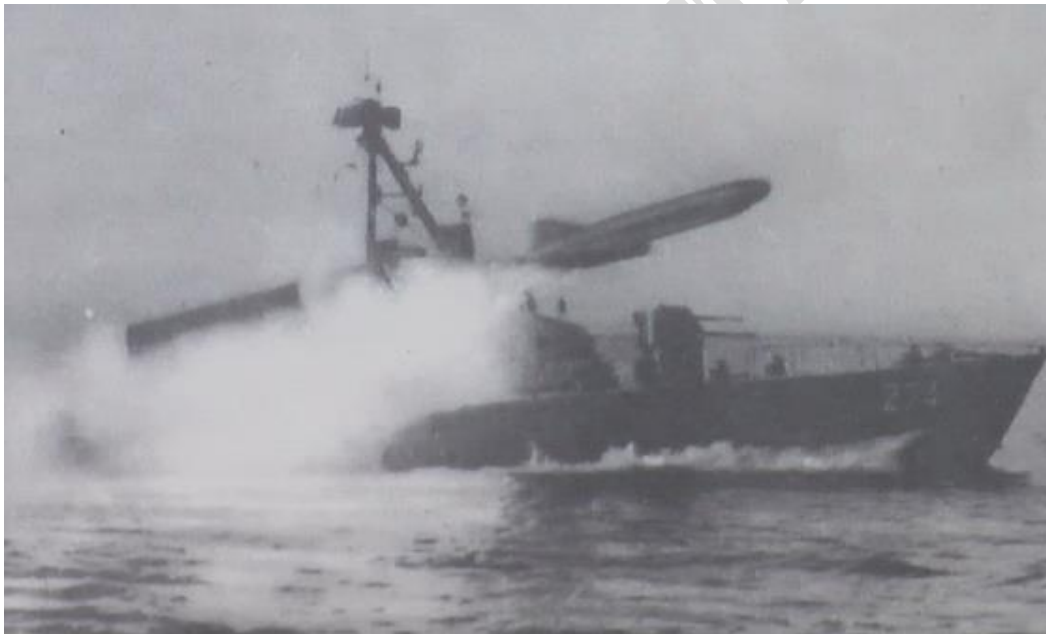
Sterett, throughout the afternoon, had also been tracking several high-speed surface craft all up and down the coastline north of Dong Hoi. Many began making course changes to intercept Higbee and Sterett. Sterett designated these targets as hostile within the NTDS system. Official

accounts discount the existence of these craft as the Tonkin Gulf was prone to generate radar ghosts such as those the Turner Joy experienced in 1964.

As Sterett began to exit the area, escorting Higbee out, Sterett's fire control radar operators locked onto a couple of these surface tracks in CBT mode (Continuous Boat Track) on the SPG55 radars. As they were observing one of the tracks, the operators detected vertical video separation. The SPG-55 radar automatically maintained its lock onto the video that separated from the surface target as programmed. At the same time, Sterett's Electronic Counter Measures (ECM) crew in CIC received a T-1 electronic signature of an ASCM (Anti Ship Cruise Missile) and the fire control radar associated with a missile launch. This identification corresponded to a Russian SS-N-2 Styx missile acquisition and launch.

Sterett, during her last yard period, received an electronics suite called ASMD (Anti-Ship Missile Defense). It comprised electronic sensors and a library of known threat signatures. ASMD allowed automatic threat evaluation in just this scenario and allowed positive and immediate identification of an incoming missile.

The incoming missile was a STYX anti-ship cruise missile, a 5,000-pound Mach 0.9 package of pure destruction heading directly towards Sterett. The 1,000 pounds in its High Explosives in its warhead and its active homing system ranked by the Navy as having an 85% kill probability.



Sterett had an aluminum superstructure and no armor plating. The only scenario for defense against a missile attack of this variety was passive decoy systems which on Sterett were non-operational. Sterett's decoy systems consisted of overhead blooming chaff and Chaffroc launchers. Chaffroc consisted of decoy firing rockets to put a cloud of radar reflective material out some distance from the ship and confuse the incoming missile's homing system. The ASMD system initial design allowed it to launch these decoy measures automatically. This capability was somewhat unstable. This decoy portion of ASMD was one of the reasons the civilian tech-

reps were aboard. The ASMD system did not encompass any active method to shoot down an incoming missile. It was purely passive.

A hit by the Styx would most assuredly be fatal to Sterett and her aluminum superstructure. This was the first time a guided missile had attacked a Navy ship in a combat situation. The early positive lock by the SPG-55 fire control radar allowed Sterett to immediately fire a salvo of two Terrier missiles immediately following the Styx launch. Typically, Sterett would have had to acquire the Styx with her air search radars, plot the course via several paints (radar sweeps) and identify it as hostile. Then, NTDS would hand over the tracking to the SPS55 radars and then hand it over to the missile fire control radars. Under this scenario, Sterett could never have fired missiles in time to intercept the Styx missile. Sterett's bridge lookouts reported seeing Sterett's Terriers enter a cloudbank and explode. The Styx was never visually spotted. Following the detonation of our Terrier, the missile target disappeared from radar, and the ECM signature signal ceased. Since there was no visual "confirmation" of the existence of either the patrol boats or the Styx missile, the official "kill" status remained unconfirmed and not accredited to Sterett.

Sterett's gun crews had so far been mere spectators during the action that day. They were begging to show their stuff and received permission to fire. The gun crew really wanted to use white phosphorous round but the weapons officer order them to use fragmentation rounds instead. The two surface targets were paralleling Sterett's course and speed. The five-inch 54 gun crew was hoping to use "Willie Peter" (White Phosphorous) shells. Instead, they received orders to load high explosive fragmentation shells. The Sterett's aft-mounted 5" 54 mount received the (knick-named "One-shot Annie") due to its unreliable ability to do continuous fire. The 5" inch rounds made short work of the surface targets, and they quickly disappeared from radar. Sterett surmised that the boats might have been Russian-designed Osa or Komar class missile boats. The existence of these boats had been suspected but never confirmed in North Vietnamese waters. With no confirmed visual sightings that day. To their records, it officially did not exist.

After the engagement, Higbee initially headed for DaNang since DaNang was the closest friendly port with repair facilities. Sterett was to accompany Higbee to DaNang. Once Higbee had her rudder situation under control, Higbee's orders were to head for DaNang unaccompanied. Following the battle group's departure from the Dong Hoi area, the skies over Dong Hoi filled with Navy and Airforce planes that rushed to the scene from aircraft carriers of the Seventh Fleet on Yanked Station and bases in Thailand. Sterett stayed a couple of days to guide retaliatory airstrikes headed to Dong Hoi.

Higbee berthed in DaNang alongside the repair ship USS Hector AR-7. Also berthed nearby was the damaged USS Buchanan DDG-14, damaged by shore fire in another engagement. Following emergency repairs in DaNang, Higbee sailed for Subic Bay in the Philippines for more permanent repairs. Higbee was raised out of the water by the floating dry-dock AFDM-6. The shipyard workers rebuilt Higbee's entire aft section, including a new mounting base. No replacement mount was immediately available. Pieces of heavy anchor chain compensated for the lost weight of the missing gun mount. Thirty-five days later, Higbee set sail, minus her aft 5-inch mount.



During the whole engagement, Captain Herbert E. Reichart had commanded the Sterett entirely from CIC. The Battle Off DongHoi is the first battle in Naval history where a ship's Captain did not fight from the bridge. Central to this was utilizing the ship's electronics suite centered around the computerized NTDS (Naval Tactical Data System). Its integration with the ship's weapon systems allowed the ship's Captain a broader view of the battle situation without relying on visual viewing and a set of binoculars. The extensive electronic sensors gave Captain Reichert a better picture of a battle scene than any of his predecessors had ever imagined possible. In tribute, the CIC crew cut out the white circle of rubber floor mat labeled "Captain," where he stood during the battle. This same rubber mat was given to Captain Reichert and remained a valued memento of his service.

After Higbee had made a safe exit out of the area and on her way south to Da Nang, Sterett resumed her Gulf of Tonkin duties until May 16, 1972, when the USS Biddle (DLG-34) relieved her, and Sterett headed for Subic Bay. When Sterett reached Subic Bay, Higbee was in the dry dock in Subic's SRF (Ship Repair Facility). Higbee sailors welcomed Sterett sailors with open arms. Any Sterett sailor was a hero anytime a Higbee sailor was around. On one occasion, a Sterett sailor had been paired with a Higbee sailor on Shore Patrol Duty in Olongapo City. Several Higbee sailors voluntarily went along to ensure that their Sterett buddy didn't get in harm's way.

Following the Battle Off Dong Hoi, Sterett crewmen painted the red "kill" symbols on the bridge wing and any equipment contributing to the kills. Red MiGs, patrol boats, and missiles were everywhere. The crew was debriefed onboard Sterett and ordered to remove all signs of the missile downing and downplay the engagement.



Starboard bridge wing of USS Sterett - Gulf of Tonkin - 1972 with "kill" symbols

To this day, several of Sterett's crew who were not in CIC do not have much knowledge of the brief battle that Sterett fought that day. Anyone who did not have a "need to know" was virtually kept in the dark. These orders from higher command came as a shock to the CIC, missile, and gun crews. It was as if it was Sterett's destiny of being robbed of the credit she so rightly deserved. The ship did receive the Naval Unit Commendation but not the coveted Presidential Citation.

THE FALLOUT AND AFTERMATH

After the battle, Sterett crew members were advised that the whole engagement was

classified and not for public discussion. I first released a brief description of the Battle Off Dong Hoi in 1998 on the USS Sterett website that I managed. Over the years, several documents had been declassified. There were many newspaper accounts of the Dong Hoi action in news articles published during the War. One of these was the Navy's own Stars and Stripes.

Following my publication on the website, many authors picked up on the story and subsequently used it in their publications. Sometimes they were not even bothering to rewrite it or give proper credits to the source.

Several think-tank analysts also picked up the story and engaged in lively discussions of the accuracies of what happened during the battle. Some analysis got very deep into the technical aspects. Several claimed that Sterett did not shoot down any MiGs or encounter a cruise missile or boat attack. Many commentators were very skeptical of Sterett's electronic countermeasure capabilities. Atmospheric radar anomalies raised further a discussion that Sterett was battling non-existent targets. As for the cruise missile attack, it is claimed that the electronic operators jumped to the wrong conclusions and misinterpreted the equipment indications.

I was not surprised that Vietnamese sources twisted the facts of the event. As time goes on and Vietnam is more receptive to foreign visitors, more info is slowly emerging. There is a MiG 17, "Red 6058," on display at the Vietnam People's Air Force Museum in Hanoi. The inscription states that this is Nguyen Van Bay's MiG-17F number 2047, which was used to bomb USS Oklahoma City on April 19, 1972.



The people's history of the North Vietnamese airforce also mentions the battle and that all pilots returned home safely, even the one Sterett directly saw as being destroyed in flight. Nguyen Van Bay died in 2019. His wingman, Le Xuan Di, supposedly also returned to Gat but is not listed anywhere subsequently in the historical records after the Dong Hoi battle. It can be presumed that it was Le Xuan Di who was the pilot of the MiG that Sterett shot down and died in the attack.

I have made use of the book "MIGS OVER NORTH VIETNAM" By Roger Boniface and give him credit for his work. I am unaware of Mr. Boniface's sources or their validation. He stated in his book that the aircraft belonged to the 923rd fighter regiment. The first two MiGs were piloted by the flight leader, Nguyen Van Bay (the younger), and Le Xuan Di. The second flight was soon to follow. The two flights flew at a low level towards the hills inland. They rendezvoused along the coast near Ly Hoa. They then accelerated as they banked toward the ships, which were at that point 5 miles away.

Van Bay chose the USS Higbee as his target, while Xuan Di chose the USS Oklahoma City. This is where the author's rendition became problematic. Supposedly Xuan Di scored a 550 lb bomb hit on the stern of the Oklahoma City. Due to the rooky nature of the pilots, ship identification was not correct. Higbee was the ship that suffered a direct hit to its fantail and aft gun mount. According to Mr. Boniface, Xuan Di was able to return to Gat but crashed his "Red 2047" but upon landing, overshooting the runway. He was shot down months later by an American A6. It also stated that Van Bay did return to Gat and was the last of the sortie to land. In final analysis it had to have been Xuan Di who Sterett shot down and it was Van Bay who escaped.

The airfield at Gat was later attacked by a sortie of thirty-three aircraft, destroying one MiG on the ground and damaging one other. Three aircraft were later evacuated from Gat to Gia Lam.

In all this retrospective analysis, there is still room to make educated guesses on the full story of the Battle Off Dong Hoi.

After the battle, General Dynamics, the maker of the Terrier missile presented this award to all crew men aboard Sterett during the engagement.

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Written by Elden Miller DS2. Who was in CIC on the day of the battle, manning the Height-Size console tracking the inbound aircraft.