
1 Commence Firing

The role USS Endurance (MSO 435) played in the destruction of the enemy infiltration trawler was of a nature reminiscent of an earlier time in the U.S. Navy's history when "iron men and wooden ships" were the rule of the day.

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Late on the night of 22 November 1970, in the combat zone off South Vietnam, a 172-foot wooden U.S. Navy vessel proceeded at "darken ship" (all except navigation lights extinguished) through coastal waters off the mouth of the Mekong River to challenge a large heavily armed steel-hulled vessel making for the coast of South Vietnam. Devoid of running lights, it was violating the rules of the road, something a ship might do when fearful of being detected. A U.S. Navy P3 patrol aircraft had initially spotted the suspect vessel in international waters well off the coast and classified it as a possible Vietcong type SL-3 infiltration trawler. At the time, Navy maritime patrol aircraft routinely searched at considerable distances offshore for mother ships that might be supplying coastal smugglers. When it appeared that trailing the enemy ship would be a long-term effort, the responsibility for radar surveillance was passed to a U.S. Coast Guard high endurance cutter (WHEC). She, with other Coast Guard vessels and a large number of Navy ships and patrol craft, was assigned to Task Force 115 in support of Operation MARKET TIME, all stationed in a picket line along a thousand-mile coastline from the 17th parallel to the Cambodian border to search for Vietcong seaborne infiltrators trying to move enemy troops, munitions, and miscellaneous war materials into South Vietnam.¹

USS *Endurance* (MSO 435) had entered Vung Tau, South Vietnam (see map 1-1), earlier in the day in the hopes that technicians aboard a

repair barge could fabricate a part needed to return one of its main engines to service. Due to a previous commitment to rendezvous at sea with a service ship for an underway replenishment, the ocean minesweeper had then departed port, leaving its chief engineer behind to expedite repair work. Informed that the trawler was apparently making a move toward the coast, Navy planners vectored *Endurance* for the area projected to be the trawler's goal. However, the suspect vessel's intentions were not at all clear, and in previous incidents suspected infiltration trawlers had transited the South China Sea as far as Cambodia only to return to North Vietnam without entering the contiguous waters of South Vietnam. The outer boundary of this area marked entry into international waters twelve miles from shore.²

Through use of information provided by the cutter, the minesweeper was able to gain a position ahead of the projected track of the trawler. Because of communications difficulties, little information was exchanged among the U.S. components involved except via secure teletype. *Endurance* provided tracking and contact information to Commander Task Force 115 using a single-sideband circuit, but since it was an "uncovered net," all reports had to be hand encrypted and transmitted to provide some degree of operational security. To avoid alerting the trawler prior to its entering South Vietnamese waters, where it could be engaged in combat, CTF 115 directed *Endurance* to clear the area. She responded that she would clear to the north, which would place her in an ideal position to close the trawler when it entered the contiguous zone.³

When it appeared that the trailing ships, the Coast Guard cutters *Rush* (WHEC 723) and *Sherman* (WHEC 720), would be too far seaward and thus unable to close the trawler before it transited an area of shoal water and small concentrations of fishing boats, *Endurance* requested permission from the on-scene commander to proceed and challenge the vessel. Permission was immediately granted, whereupon the minesweeper maneuvered to close and challenge the vessel, using existing rules of engagement (ROE). Drawing about nine feet less than the much larger 378-foot cutters, the minesweeper could follow the trawler through waters they could not and maintain contact should it try to lose itself amongst fishing boats as she held it both visually and on radar. *Endurance's* commanding officer recalls the ensuing sequence of events:

The initial challenge was by flashing signal light sending the international AA (what ship) and the VNN challenge codes. The trawler made no reply to these challenges but did turn on its navigation lights. When no reply was forthcoming, we illuminated the trawler with the 24-inch searchlight and identified it as a SL-3 type suspected infiltration trawler, with a green hull and white superstructure. The trawler reversed course and headed out to sea. Since we were still within the 12-mile limit and the ROE permitted more aggressive action, we fired across the trawler's bow, then into the bow area, and followed with destructive fire to the bridge and their firing positions when they returned fire.⁴

The above brief summary of the sea battle between *Endurance* and the enemy trawler may not convey to readers the novel and courageous action of the minesweeper in engaging in battle at close range a larger and more heavily armed ship constructed of steel. Ocean minesweepers were but lightly armed, provided only with the capability to destroy floating mines with gunfire and to permit some means of self-defense. Because MSO guns had little penetrating power, while enemy large-caliber gunfire could inflict great damage, loss of life, or total destruction, Navy commanders normally assigned cruisers, destroyers, frigates, or, occasionally, battleships to provide force protection if they thought danger was imminent. Usually, minesweepers were at greatest risk while conducting clearance operations off a hostile shore, within range of enemy aircraft, ships, patrol craft, or shore-based missile or gun batteries. However, like other lightly armed ships, such as the intelligence-gathering vessels USS *Pueblo* (AGER 2) and USS *Liberty* (AGTR 5), they sometimes unexpectedly found themselves in harm's way. Of course, the reason minesweepers were assigned to patrol duties during the Vietnam War was because there were simply not enough "steel-hulls" to meet all existing requirements.

At one time in the U.S. Navy's history, before the advent of steam-propelled vessels, fighting ships were constructed of wood. USS *Constitution*, the famous three-masted frigate, was launched and christened at Edmond Hartt's Shipyard in Boston on 21 October 1797. As a point of interest, let's compare her to *Endurance*. Although only slightly larger, 175 feet long at the waterline with a 45-foot beam, the frigate was more massively built and more heavily armed. Designed to both give and receive damage, she was fitted with thirty-two 24-pounder long guns, twenty 32-pounder carronades, and two 24-pounder bow

chasers. Commonly referred to as “Old Ironsides” because cannonballs bounced off her, *Constitution* was built of resilient live oak planks seven inches thick in places, contributing, with the heavy armament, to her displacement of 2,200 tons. Somewhat smaller with an overall length of 172 feet and a 35-foot beam, *Endurance*, with a 755-ton maximum displacement, was much lighter, and her hull was designed to keep out the sea, not gun rounds. Armed with a single 20mm gun mount on her foc’sle, two .50-caliber machine guns on her port and starboard bridge wings, and a single .30-caliber machine gun on her fantail, *Endurance* was unlikely to cripple or destroy the trawler. However, by exposing herself to enemy fire she might delay the trawler trying to make the Mekong River long enough to allow more formidable U.S. assets to arrive on scene.

Uncloaked from darkness by *Endurance’s* searchlight, the trawler responded by directing 75mm rounds at the minesweeper’s signal bridge in an attempt to extinguish the bright light blinding its gunners and bridge watch team, followed by 75mm recoilless rifle and 12.75mm machine gun fire to other locations, visible by their respective red and brilliant green tracer. During the battle, gun flashes from the engaged combatants were visible on the dark clear night to crewmen aboard the cutter *Sherman* a few miles to the east. Taking fire, *Endurance* engaged the enemy vessel with her small gun mount and three machine guns. The action of *Endurance’s* signalman in keeping the searchlight directed at the enemy ship throughout the engagement probably saved the lives of some of his shipmates, as it blinded the enemy gunners. The bravery of all crewmembers manning topside General Quarters stations was highlighted in *Endurance’s* After Action Report:

SM3 Hyatt stood completely exposed on the 04-level, fully aware that it was an obviously well-defined target above the bridge; SM3 Hyatt remained at his post and effectively carried out his duties despite tracers and 75mm recoilless rifle rounds passing directly overhead. All gunners, loaders, and other mount personnel also displayed a high degree of heroism and disregard for their own personal safety while returning the enemy’s fire from their completely unprotected mounts.⁵

Leading seaman Michael Wark, the battle phone talker stationed on the foc’sle to relay orders to the 20mm gun, remembers the intensity of the engagement:

We hit them with all our firepower. Although the night was very dark, it soon lit up when the action started. Gunfire seemed to be coming from everywhere and tracers lit up the night. They seemed to have us outgunned. I am not sure, but don't think they could have seen us very well, since they were blinded by our searchlight. We were really tearing them up.⁶

The trawler, located off *Endurance's* starboard bow, steering roughly a parallel course and getting the worse of it, then turned to port and tried to ram the minesweeper. *Endurance's* commanding officer had not wanted to allow the enemy vessel an opportunity to close his ship, because he believed, based on intelligence reports received, that Vietcong arms carriers in danger of being seized might try to blow up not only their cargo and themselves but also their interdictors. (One such report provided pictures and layout for the explosive devices and hypothesized that an enemy vessel would conceivably try to get alongside to self-destruct. Of course, enemy intent to try to take out their U.S. opponents was at best speculation. It is more realistic to conclude that the crew would have destroyed the vessel once it had been offloaded.) However, this may have been the trawler's intention when it suddenly made a sharp turn to port and tried to ram the MSO's starboard side, or it may have been trying to disable and disengage from *Endurance* in an effort to make shallow waters off the Mekong River mouth before the more heavily armed cutters could close her.⁷

Wark remembers his view of the action from the foc'sle:

When they saw they weren't doing any good, they attempted to ram us. I remember I saw tracers coming from the 20mm going in the portholes in their pilothouse and bouncing out their port and starboard side doors. Anyway, they barely missed colliding with us. As they passed close by, they hit us with some type of rocket. It hit the port quarter at deck level.⁸

The commanding officer of *Endurance* had to maneuver quickly to avoid collision while keeping his gun batteries unmasked and firing into the trawler. He also elected to turn to port because *Endurance's* 20mm gun had jammed and by this maneuver the MSO could continue to engage the enemy vessel with the .30- and port .50-caliber machine guns as she came about. *Endurance's* timely maneuver prevented the trawler from ramming, but the enemy vessel was able to close to within 300 yards. Additionally, the turn to port exposed the minesweeper's

port quarter and a 75mm round fired by the trawler struck her hull on the portside fantail area just below the deck edge, fortunately not penetrating the skin of the ship. The tailfin of the round was embedded in the hull and later recovered to identify the round. A second 75mm round was evaluated as a near miss on the port side, amidships.⁹

As *Endurance* was turning hard to port, Wark walked aft to see where the trawler was so that he could inform the 20mm gunner when it was going to clear the pilothouse and he could fire on it. He was knocked off his feet by the detonation of the round, which was fortuitous as shrapnel hit the deckhouse near where he had been standing. Meanwhile, GMG3 Cotton, the port .50-caliber machine gunner, had come to the foc'sle and changed out the 20mm gun barrel, even though there was a chance the round might "cook off" (detonate in the barrel and propel shrapnel in all directions) before he could get it over the side. The gun had jammed from a "misfire," perhaps due to the age of the ammunition it was firing, part of a lot that had been manufactured during World War II. By the time Cotton had replaced the gun barrel, the trawler had broken away, although *Endurance* still got off a few more rounds.¹⁰

Escaping after the mêlée, the trawler set course north-northwest for shallow water and cover of a cluster of fishing boats in the area. However, the actions of *Endurance* had delayed the trawler, enabling the more heavily armed Coast Guard cutters to close her position. With the Vietcong vessel disengaged from *Endurance*, *Rush* fired 5-inch rounds without scoring any hits. *Rush* then directed *Sherman* to engage the enemy, and she hit it repeatedly with 5-inch 38-caliber rounds from her forward mount. As each point-detonating round struck the trawler, there was an accompanying explosion and bright illumination of the enemy vessel until it stopped, exploded, and sank. *Endurance* meanwhile had been sending contact range and bearing reports to *Sherman* via flashing light (reliable voice radio communications were not available) to ensure that the cutter engaged the correct target since there were a number of VN fishing boats in the area of the trawler. Before *Sherman* commenced firing point-detonating rounds, she fired three star shells to illuminate the target and to ensure identification.¹¹

Wark remembers viewing the trawler's final death throes, and recalls with obvious pride *Endurance's* significant role in both denying the enemy the cargo and in subsequently attempting to recover it:

The trawler had made its pass and fired its rocket [exploding 75mm round] in one last attempt to sink us. We just kept firing our guns. The trawler got clear of us, and a few minutes later as I saw fire consuming its superstructure it exploded into bits. The fire got to some of the ammunition she was carrying. She went to the bottom.

I know we saved a lot of soldiers' lives by denying the enemy the ammunition that was put on the bottom. We stayed on station where we sank the trawler for about ten days, assisting the Navy UDTs [Underwater Demolition Team divers] in the recovery of the ammo from that ship. Because it was in very shallow water, not more than 5 to 7 fathoms deep, Charley would have recovered it if we hadn't. I picked up a piece of wood from the sunken ship that was floating on the surface and brought it back as a souvenir. It was painted the color of the ocean and may have been part of the deckhouse. The trawler appeared to be approximately 190 feet long.¹²

Endurance's commanding officer, Lieutenant Commander Charles R. Schlegelmilch, later received the Silver Star medal and members of his crew a total of seven Bronze Stars, seven Navy Commendation medals and nine Navy Achievement medals. All hands received Combat Action Ribbons and Navy Unit Commendations. In total, the ocean minesweeper had expended during the sea battle one hundred thirty 20mm rounds, eight hundred fifty .50-caliber rounds, and three hundred .30-caliber rounds while suffering no casualties to crewmembers.¹³

The morning after the engagement, Vice Adm. King and the VNN Chief of Naval Operations visited *Endurance*. Following their departure, the MSO was directed to attempt to locate the sunken trawler by use of her sonar so that divers could investigate the site. *Endurance* immediately located the trawler on sonar and, after arriving at the plotted location, visually sighted a mast protruding above the water. Embarked Navy UDT divers from Harbor Clearance Unit 1 dove on the site and confirmed the presence of the trawler, noting that its superstructure had been demolished by explosions. Initial diving efforts were directed toward obtaining codebooks, charts, radio settings, and selections of weapons and ammunition that would provide intelligence concerning trawler infiltration operations. From 22–25 November U.S. and South Vietnamese Navy divers participated in the operation, which required the use of a YHLC (non-self-propelled heavy salvage lift craft) to surface munitions recovered from cargo holds, while *Endurance* remained on-station to provide support services. When a tropical storm moved

through the area, the minesweeper left for open seas and the divers returned to base.¹⁴

Endurance and the salvage ship USS *Conserver* (ARS 39) later completed salvage operations on the sunken infiltration trawler. Following a conference on 30 November aboard the salvage ship at Vung Tau, *Conserver* relieved *Endurance* as on-scene commander. Diving operations began on 2 December when *Endurance* arrived at the site of the wreck at first light and, using her sonar, began vectoring *Conserver's* workboat over the trawler. She located the trawler immediately and “buoyed off” the area above it. The Republic of South Vietnam craft YLLC1 (a former USN non-self-propelled light salvage lift craft transferred less than a month earlier by the United States to the Vietnamese Navy as part of its “Accelerated Turn Over to Vietnam” Program), with VNN divers aboard, anchored near the wreck, passed a bowline to the stern of the trawler, and began diving operations. These were extremely hazardous due to zero visibility, strong currents, and jagged metal edges protruding from the vessel’s hull. When the currents were at maximum ebb or flood, the divers could not descend to the wreck, and slack water occurred for only about fifteen minutes, usually once per day. Although diving efforts were suspended on 2 December due to deteriorating weather, the divers had been able to become familiar with the trawler and associated working conditions and to recover a drum magazine with a carrying case for a type 56 light machine gun as well as a light canvas cover. *Endurance* moved two miles seaward of the site for night anchorage, while the VNN YLLC1 proceeded up river to seek shelter from bad weather. Slightly improved weather conditions the following day allowed a more thorough investigation and recovery of the following armaments:

- Four birdcage underwater pressure actuating devices plus carrying case
- Thirty-one boxes of 82mm mortar rounds (2 per box) with accessories
- One case (968 rounds) TSPE 53, 7.62mm ammunition
- Approximately 20,000 rounds of AK-47 ammunition in 16–20 round packages.¹⁵

Relieved of her MARKET TIME duties by ocean minesweeper USS *Dynamic* (MSO 432), *Endurance* proceeded to Subic Bay, Republic of the Philippines, for a change of command and upkeep before commencing her return voyage with the other units of Mine Division 73 to Long Beach, California.¹⁶