

# 17

## Vietnam

---

### *Battle of Haiphong Harbor*

In spite of the furious barrage of salvos from her 8-inch main battery, the *USS Newport News* (CA-148), flying the flag of commander, Seventh Fleet, appeared to be trapped in the approaches to Haiphong Harbor. It was almost midnight on 27 August 1972, and three North Vietnamese torpedo boats had used the cover of darkness and the karst islands of the Dao Cat Ba archipelago to ambush the heavy cruiser. The Russian-built P-6 fast attack craft were moving at top speed to close off the only escape route.

The *Newport News* had been radically maneuvering on easterly courses and would soon run out of sea room. To the east was the île de Norwaga archipelago, to the northeast the coast of Cat Ba, and to the north the shoals and minefields of Haiphong. It wasn't known if the P-6s had torpedoes or missiles or both. Torpedoes could be trouble enough as the North Vietnamese craft continued to track along a course that would intercept the cruiser's retirement path. The situation could become messy.

Then CIC reported a fourth fast attack craft had been detected. How had we gotten ourselves into such a fix?

## LION'S DEN

Back in mid-August, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had directed me to plan for a naval gunfire strike, to be identified as Lion's Den, against military facilities in the Haiphong-Cat Ba area. The targets would include the Cat Ba Airfield, military barracks, coastal defense guns, ammunition dumps, and radars. This operation would be more than the ordinary Linebacker gun strike. Haiphong was about three hundred miles north of the front lines, and as the major North Vietnamese port, it had always been heavily defended. The Seventh Fleet had laid extensive minefields in the channels and approaches to the port of Haiphong on 8 May 1972. Since the mining, the North Vietnamese had considerably strengthened the defenses in the Haiphong area, which now included search and detection radars, coast watcher networks, coastal defense guns, gun-control radar, surface-to-air missile sites, and fire-control direction centers.

The Seventh Fleet staff intelligence officer, in briefing the enemy defensive capabilities for Lion's Den, advised that there would be no air threat. The Vietnamese aircraft in the area were day fighters with no ability to attack ship targets at night. All intelligence sources seemed to agree that torpedo- or missile-equipped high-speed patrol craft would not be a factor. No fast patrol boats had been sighted or detected in the Haiphong area from overhead photography or communication intercept in several months. Coastal defense artillery would constitute the only real threat to the bombardment group.

As commander, Seventh Fleet, I had some special concerns about Operation Lion's Den. My personal experience with naval gunfire operations was not lacking. In World War II, as gunnery officer of the destroyer *Bennion* (DD-662), I had directed heavy preparatory bombardments as well as direct gunfire support for troops ashore at Saipan, Tinian, Guam, Palau, and in the Philippines. At Palau, the *Bennion* had emptied her magazines three times in one week during the assault on Peleliu. The *Bennion* had suffered casualties from shore battery fire at Samar and had been next to the *Ross* (DD-563) when that destroyer had been put out of action by mines during the shore bombardment phase of the battle for Leyte. Most of the guns and ammunition being used for

shore bombardment in Vietnam in 1972 were the same as those the Navy had employed in World War II: the 5-inch/38, 6-inch/47, and 8-inch/55.

At that time in Vietnam, all gun-armed major combatants were taking their turns on the gun line. Even the Seventh Fleet's flagship, the Oklahoma City (CLG-5), a missile cruiser, was being called upon to provide shore fire support with her 6-inch battery every three or four days. There had been no disabling hits and only minor casualties from enemy counter battery fire to the Seventh Fleet cruisers or destroyers so far in Vietnam, although many hostile rounds had been fired.

The Seventh Fleet cruisers and destroyers were conducting gunfire support on a daily basis and generally had a low regard for the danger posed by the North Vietnamese shore batteries. When the fall of shot came close, the ship simply moved or changed course and speed, and the shore battery gunners had to recompute their fire-control problem. The North Vietnamese guns being used for coastal defense were field artillery pieces and not designed to track moving targets. Against fixed targets, though, they had proved to be deadly. The bombardment of the Marine base during the siege of Khe Sanh was convincing evidence. The technique of field artillery is to fire a few rounds at a fixed point, observe the fall of shot, and then adjust the fire in range and azimuth until the rounds consistently hit the desired point. The battery is then said to be registered on the target. When the guns fire again, the initial rounds are on target and the area can be saturated with a devastating effect.

I continued to harbor the nagging worry that if one of our ships were to become immobilized within range of a shore battery, it would take only a few minutes before the artillery would be hitting it consistently. This was the heart of my concern. To reach the targets at Haiphong and Cat Ba, the bombardment group would have to close the shoreline to well within range of the enemy's coastal artillery emplacements. Although their rounds might lack accuracy against the moving ships, the sheer volume of fire from the large number of coastal defense sites, identified in our intelligence photos, would increase the chances of a "lucky" hit on a bombarding ship. If the projectile were to penetrate a vital area such as a magazine or an engineering space, the ship could lose power and become dead in the water. Then it would become a sitting duck for coast artillery.

In World War II, when this did occur, tow lines would be passed to the stricken vessel from another warship or a fleet tug (fleet tugs were

always on hand during the bombardment and landing phases of World War II amphibious operations), and the damaged ship would be towed out of range. To pass a towline in Haiphong Harbor, at night, under an intense artillery barrage, with no air cover, would be messy at best. The chances of losing the towing ship were good, too. Other than the bombardment group, the rest of the fleet would be at least a hundred miles away.

A military commander has to be prepared to accept losses during combat in wartime, but not to expose his forces to unnecessary losses. The possible gains should outweigh the probable losses. This brought up a less evident but more sensitive factor. In the worst case, if a U.S. destroyer were sunk in Haiphong Harbor within range of shore batteries, the survivors in the crew could probably be evacuated in the minutes after sinking, but even then at considerable risk to the rescuing vessel. We would not be able to salvage the stricken warship, however. The bombardment force would be making its firing run on a seven-mile leg in a water depth of forty to fifty feet. A destroyer sunk in this depth would be salvageable but, unfortunately in this location, not by friendly forces. It would just not be possible to conduct a salvage operation, difficult at best, under the barrels of the enemy's heavy guns. Even establishing local air superiority in the salvage area would probably be impossible, being within effective range of a host of surface-to-air missile sites. On the other hand, the wreck would be susceptible to exploitation by enemy divers who could retrieve sensitive equipment. Classified material could fall into the hands of the North Vietnamese and then migrate to their Communist allies, the Chinese and Soviets. The compromise of electronics, code machines, and secret documents would be very damaging.

My paramount worry was nuclear weapons. At that time, U.S. national policy was to neither confirm nor deny that U.S. Navy warships carried nuclear weapons. The effectiveness of this policy was essential to our nuclear deterrent posture. It allowed our nuclear-capable warships—submarines, cruisers, and carriers—to enter foreign ports, both neutrals and those of our Cold War allies. At the same time, our actual level of nuclear readiness remained uncertain to the Soviets. If an enemy were able to examine the internal spaces of one of our deployed warships, the "neither confirm nor deny" policy would be weakened regardless of what was—or was not—found in the ship's magazines.

This concern for the possibility of damage or loss to our bombardment force in a Haiphong strike was expressed in secure phone discussions between our staff and their counterparts at CinCPacFlt. The response was that the Pentagon was very keen on this operation and the threat from shore batteries was judged to be minimal, considering the record of the North Vietnamese coastal defenses. The mission planning would go ahead.

On August 25, C7F received a message from the JCS, via CinCPac and CinCPacFlt, directing that surface combatants attack selected targets from the CinCPac/JCS target list in the Haiphong-Cat Ba Airfield complex with naval gunfire on 27 August 1972.

The directive was immediately passed down to Task Group 77.1, Seventh Fleet Surface Warfare Group, for action. Several of the Seventh Fleet staff officers wanted our staff to run the operation and simply ask CTG 77.1 for inputs, but I demurred. I had always been an advocate of delegating authority down the line as far as the capabilities of the subordinate commanders would permit, and in this case, CTG 77.1 was an experienced destroyer officer with a competent staff group, and the Seventh Fleet surface operations had been well run. The only guidance to be passed to CTG 77.1 was to include the USS Newport News (CA 148), our only 8-inch gun cruiser, in the strike force, and not to use the Oklahoma City. There was no point in risking the flagship's sophisticated but fragile command and control electronics suit to a stray shard of shrapnel. Some of this one-of-a-kind equipment was so delicate that the shock and blast of the cruiser's own gunfire could put it out of commission. Commander, Seventh Fleet would embark in the Newport News by helicopter on the afternoon of the twenty-seventh to lead the operation but would not exercise local tactical command.

I had decided to go along for two reasons. First, after expressing the view that the result might not justify the risks, it was important to reaffirm my confidence in my superiors' overriding judgment. Second, an evening of fireworks up north would be a chance to observe North Vietnamese capabilities.

Four ships were selected for Lion's Den, and the force was designated Task Unit 77.1.2. The officer in tactical command for the operation (CTU 77.1.2) would be Capt John Renn, commander of Destroyer Squadron 25, riding in the Robison (DDG-12), a guided-missile destroyer. The

Robison would team with the Providence, a 6-inch gun and missile cruiser, as one task element, and the World War II Gearing-class destroyer Rowan (DD-782) would join the heavy cruiser Newport News as a second task element. The Rowan had been selected for the mission because of a one-of-a-kind field modification that had converted the Weapon Alfa ASW rocket launcher to a Shrike antiradiation missile launcher. Shrike had been designed as an air-to-ground missile and was being widely used by Task Force 77 carrier aircraft against the North Vietnamese gun and missile control radars. The Shrike homed on electronic signals emanating from the active hostile radar. The Rowan installation was experimental and would be getting its first test as a surface ship weapon against coastal-defense and fire-control radars in Operation Lion's Den.

The elements of Task Unit 77.1.2 were pulled from the gun line off Quang Tri Province and dispatched immediately to the URG in the Gulf of Tonkin to top off magazines and bunkers from the fleet oilers and ammunition ships. The Newport News loaded more than one thousand rounds of 8-inch ammunition from the Mount Katmai (AE-16), a record replenishment for the cruiser. Then all ships began to steam north independently at twenty-five knots to rendezvous about seventy miles southeast of Haiphong.

Chuck Packer was a young third-class electrician's mate on board the Rowan that night, and he has recorded his experience and the recollections of several of his shipmates in a reminiscence titled "A Dicey Night up North." Packer remembers 27 August 1972 as

the night we went all the way up North. In midafternoon of that day, the skipper, Cdr. Robert Comer, came on the intercom telling us that the Rowan was awaiting word from commander, Seventh Fleet, Vice Adm. James Holloway III in the USS Newport News (CA-148), concerning a possible raid on the main North Vietnamese harbor of Haiphong. That announcement lit a brushfire of discussion, apprehension, and, of course, scuttlebutt. Succinctly: What did this mean for us? We had less than two hours to ponder this thunder-stroke when the skipper came on the intercom again confirming that the Rowan was, indeed, going to raid Haiphong in a matter of hours, along with the Newport News, Providence (CLG-6), and Robison. While I'm sure he added words concerning his confidence in our abilities and in his intention to bring us through safely, they were

drowned in the cacophony of fear and panic that were beginning to invade my thoughts. However, I still vividly remember five more or less instantaneous, distinct thoughts and occurrences. I remember standing on the starboard weather deck just forward of amidships when the announcement was made. Then the Rowan changed course north and put on twenty-five knots while starting to light off the third and fourth boilers and bring them on line. I thought of the confused night surface battles of the Solomons campaign in 1942, where destroyers took tremendous punishment resulting in much loss of life, and the severely injured sailors that were left fighting for their lives in the choking fuel-oil fumes and flames, having abandoned their sinking ships. The Preston, Monssen, Gwin, Barton, and too many other cans went down with their dead and trapped crews during these types of night battles—the sort for which the Rowan was now headed at her best speed. I remember thinking that I had to get a grip on my emotions because the green boots on board would be looking to us "old salts" for cues and examples. Perhaps "leadership" would be too strong a word. Lastly, I remember the peace I experienced when I accepted that I could quite possibly die that night.

During the night of 26 August, the Oklahoma City also left the gun line off Quang Tri Province and headed north to join the four carriers in Task Force 77, the carrier striking force of the Seventh Fleet, which was engaged in around-the-clock aircraft strike operations into North Vietnam as part of the Linebacker I operation. The surface combatants were regularly rotated between the gun line and escort duties with the other Seventh Fleet task units as a matter of operating routine. The steady gunfire was wearing out their gun barrels, requiring the replacement of the barrel liners, which had to be accomplished in a shipyard. So equalizing gun barrel wear was an important consideration in scheduling for the gun line.

At about 1400 on 27 August, with little more than a toothbrush and a change of underwear, I climbed in a helicopter on the Oklahoma City's fantail and was launched for the USS Newport News, some hundred miles to the north. After landing us on board the Newport News at 1505, our helicopter was refueled and sent off to spend the night on board the Kitty Hawk (CVA-63). Capt. Walter F. Zartman, skipper of the Newport

News, did not want any fragile and fuel-loaded aircraft on his exposed weather decks for the evening's activity. Among his concerns was damage to the helicopter from the blast of the cruiser's own 8-inch guns.

Zartman and I went over the pertinent message traffic and he briefed me on the plans for the operation. The four ships would arrive individually in the rendezvous area and maneuver independently on random courses until after dark, when they would be unobservable by any local fishing craft that might be in the area. Then, at 2000, the four ships would form up in a column with Rowan in the van as guide and proceed at twenty-five knots on a course that headed for the Point Do Son light, some seventy miles away, which marks the entrance to the Haiphong Channel.

It was a remarkable anomaly that the Do Son light had remained operational as a navigational aid for the duration of the war. Its obvious purpose had been to guide the munitions-laden cargo ships from China, the Soviet Union, and other Communist bloc countries to the wharves of Haiphong. Because of their neutral flags, there they could lie, untouched by U.S. bombs, and be unloaded between the air raids on Haiphong. When the mining of the port occurred on 8 May 1972, the flow of war material by Communist bloc shipping through Haiphong ceased. Yet the light remained on, flashing its identifying signal beacon by which the carrier planes could double check their on-board navigation and which would prove to be an important asset to Task Unit 77.1.2 as it maneuvered around the shallows, shoals, and mined areas in the approaches to Haiphong.

About ten miles off the coast, the two task elements would separate, with the Providence and Robison peeling off to close their assigned targets, which were generally southwest of Cat Ba. The Rowan and Newport News would continue on a north-northeast course to the entrance of the Haiphong Channel and conduct a firing run on an easterly course just outside of the five-fathom curve.

The Newport News, as the heavy hitter of the force, had the most important targets, nine in total, which included the fuel dump and vehicle storage at Cat Ba Airfield, the Do San radar, Haiphong SAM sites, the Cat Ba military supply dump, fire-control radars and coastal gun batteries. Several of these targets were at the extreme range other 8-inch guns, however, and this required the cruiser to penetrate the Haiphong Harbor approaches as far as her twenty-seven-foot draft would allow.

The Rowans primary mission was to screen the Newport News, but it had two preassigned targets for her 5-inch guns, both coastal defense sites. Hopefully the presence of a significant force of U.S. warships in such close proximity to Haiphong would stimulate the coastal defense radar network to provide targets for the Rowans Shrike ARMs. The designated targets were from the CinCPac-JCS target list, but all of the ships were authorized to respond to active coastal defense artillery with counterbattery fire without constraints. The ammunition allocation for the Newport News preplanned targets was 285 8-inch high-capacity rounds and 191 5-inch rounds. Once within detection range of the coastal radars during the approach, the column would make random changes in course and speed to avoid presenting the enemy with a clear picture of intentions while still making good the scheduled arrival time.

The rendezvous of the four warships was accomplished on schedule, and the approach to the objective area was as planned with no evidence of detection by local fishing or commercial craft. At 2200 the Newport News went to general quarters in preparation for the night's mission. This was a prudent move, providing plenty of time to check out all gunnery and engineering systems and to conduct emergency drills.

For my battle station, I joined the captain on the bridge and reassured him that I would stay out of his hair. As captain of the carrier Enterprise five years earlier, I knew how annoying it could be to have a flag officer on your bridge offering gratuitous advice and comments. In general, Navy regulations and customs of the service do well in making it clear that a captain remains in command while maneuvering his ship regardless of the senior officers aboard. In World War II, I had seen Cdr. Joshua Cooper, skipper of the destroyer USS Bennion, order the embarked squadron commander off his bridge when the commodore gave orders directly to the officer of the deck, who happened to be Lieutenant Holloway. The commodore immediately left the bridge, and the skipper eventually went on to become an admiral.

The Do Son light appeared on schedule, in its proper place and emitting its prescribed signal. As we raced north at twenty-six knots to approach the turn point for the firing leg, the ship's speed suddenly slowed to twenty-five knots without any change in power settings, and her longitudinal pitch rocked forward several degrees. The ship had crossed the ten-fathom curve and, at a depth of less than fifty feet, was

reacting to the bottom effect. This only served to further remind me that only five miles to the north was an extensive minefield that had been laid by our carrier aircraft nearly four months earlier. But it was too late to have any concerns about a stray mine that might have broken loose from its moorings. That possibility was infinitesimally small, or so we had been told.

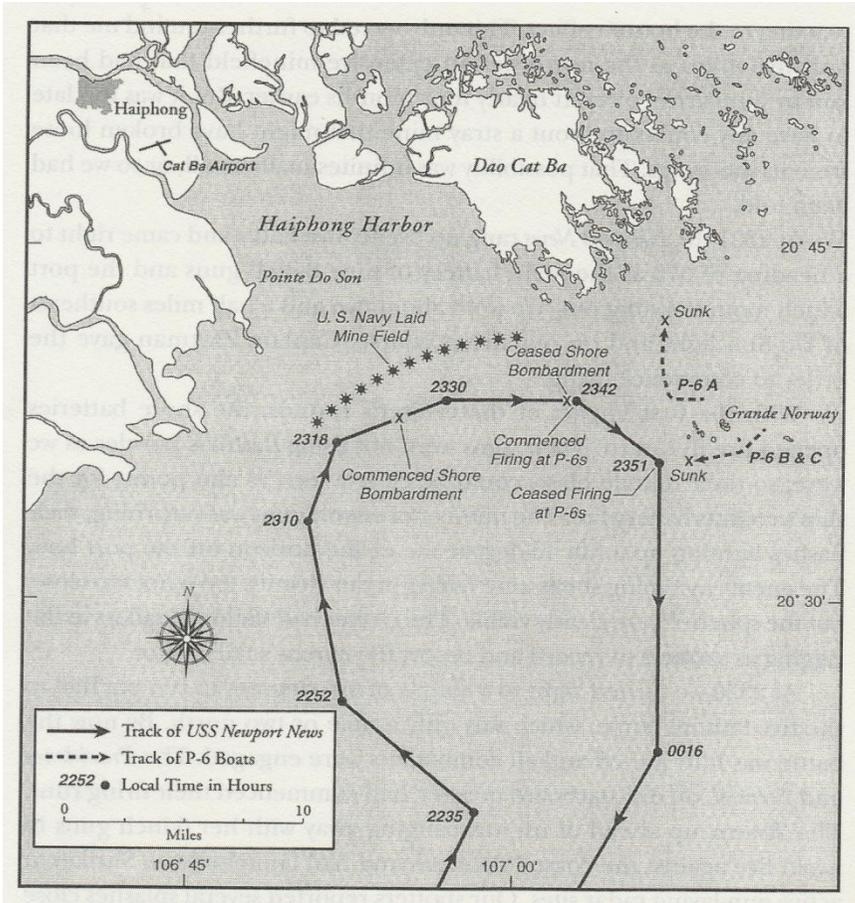
At 2321 the Newport News rang up twenty-five knots and came right to a heading of 070 as the main battery of nine 8-inch guns and the port 5-inch mounts swung out. We were about two and a half miles southeast of Do Son light and on our Firing course. Captain Zartman gave the order to commence firing.

With the first impact of the cruiser's rounds, the shore batteries opened fire in return. Their guns were not using flashless powder as we were, so their muzzle blasts could be clearly seen as aim points for the ship's counterbattery fire. The number of enemy guns was surprising, their flashes lighting up a full 45-degree arc of the horizon off the port bow. The enemy incoming shells were falling in our vicinity, too—not too close, but the splashes were clearly-visible. The cruiser had stationed sailors in the rigging as spotters to record and report the enemy's fall of shot.

At 2330 we turned right to a course of 091 degrees to run parallel to the five-fathom curve, which was only a mile or two north. By now the battle was fully joined and all combatants were engaged. The Providence and Robison, on our starboard quarter, had commenced their firing runs. The Rowan, up ahead of us, was banging away with her 5-inch guns in rapid fire against the coastal defenses and had launched two Shrikes at active gun-laying radar sites. Our spotters reported several splashes close aboard, scattering shrapnel fragments on the weather decks. The cruiser increased speed to thirty knots.

Equipped with a steel helmet and earplugs, I stepped outside of the pilothouse to the port wing of the bridge. From this open area the full range of sensations and the panorama of the battle could be experienced—the rush of the wind, the hot blast of the guns, and the acrid smell of gun smoke. The open vista of the wing of the bridge afforded a clear view of the North Vietnamese coast with the muzzle flashes from the shore batteries and the explosions of our projectiles.

What really captured my attention were the incredible towering cones of brilliant tracers rising ten thousand feet into the sky. They were



Battle of Haiphong Harbor, 27 August 1972. Prepared by author.

coming from the antiaircraft batteries at Cat Ba, Haiphong, and Hanoi, firing at Navy planes in the area. At the apex of each cone of tracers was a Navy plane attacking its assigned target or transiting the Haiphong-Hanoi area for an armed reconnaissance of one of the main supply routes from China, northwest of Hanoi. With the volume of this AA fire, it seemed inconceivable that an aircraft could penetrate those curtains of fiery tracers and survive. In spite of the torrent of gunfire, the pilots did not consider these defenses very effective against night attackers. The tracers were from automatic weapons, which are relatively small:

.50-caliber, 20mm, and 37mm guns. These weapons have a limited range and are normally not radar controlled. The gunner aims at where he thinks the enemy plane must be, based upon the engine's noise and the airbursts of the larger, radar-controlled AAA.

At 2333 the Newport News abruptly stopped firing. I could hear the klaxon's blare and the loudspeakers in the mounts call out, "Cease fire, cease fire." The shore-gunfire phase of Lion's Den had been completed. The Rowan had fired her preplanned missions and launched her Shrikes five minutes ago and had been detached and cleared to depart the objective area. The Providence and Robison had also finished up and were retiring to the south.

I stepped back inside the sound-proofed air-conditioned pilothouse. Captain Zartman came up to tell me that all the Newport News assigned targets had been covered and that several secondary explosions had been noted at Cat Ba Airfield and the ammunition dump. As he was speaking, a dungaree-clad sailor with the outsized steel helmet of a battle telephone talker was tugging at the captain's sleeve. "Captain," he said in an even, clear voice, "Combat [CIC] reports a surface target, designated Skunk Alfa, at ten thousand yards bearing 088, heading for us at high speed."

It took no time at all for this to sink in. Without hesitating, the captain issued a stream of orders and the bridge reacted with an efficiency and a coolness that belied the sudden and ominous change in the tactical situation. Skunk Alfa was designated a hostile threat, all gun batteries were to take the target under fire, CTU 77.1.2 was informed, and the Rowan was directed to rejoin the Newport News.

I took a look at the navigation chart on the plotting table. Ten thousand yards at 088 degrees put Skunk Alfa, now visually identified with night observation devices (NOD) as a P-6 class Soviet-made fast attack craft, in the vicinity of lie de Norway, near a collection of small karst islands extending south of Cat Ba. This little archipelago was well suited for an ambush site. The rocks and pinnacles were already making it difficult for the fire-control radars to lock on to the patrol boat.

For what seemed an interminable time after the captain had given the order, the cruiser's guns were still not firing. Then the gunnery officer reported that the target's relative bearing was virtually dead ahead and the firing circuits for the 8-inch guns cut out at low angles of fire over the bow because of an electronics antenna that had recently been

installed on the forecastle. The ship's heading was brought hard right to unmask the battery, and all of the cruiser's port-side guns opened up, firing as rapidly as they could be loaded.

Within minutes, the gunnery officer reported Skunk Alfa appeared to be on fire and seemed to be turning to escape on a northerly course. At almost that same instant, the intercom from CIC rang out with a report of two more skunks with the same characteristics as Alfa, sixteen thousand yards dead ahead, moving from left to right. They were apparently heading to cut across Newport News' southerly retirement route. As the cruiser's guns swung around to take this new threat under fire, again there was the problem of not being able to fire dead ahead. The quickest maneuver to unmask the batteries was a turn back to port, and this would put the Newport News again on an easterly course, headed for the shoals of He de Norway rather than toward the retirement track to the south.

There was little choice. The P-6s were crossing the cruiser's bow with the bearing drifting to the right. Only a left turn would quickly bring the 8-inch guns to bear. As the ship came left in a tight heeling turn, the cruiser's guns swung out to the right giving the starboard 5- and 3-inch batteries their first crack at the enemy. Again the cruiser's guns banged in rapid continuous fire, and the twenty-one-thousand-ton hull was again shuddering from the recoil and concussion.

In spite of the hail of projectiles, the P-6s continued to come. Their zigzagging approach through the many ship-sized karst islands had confused the cruiser's radars. Tracking by optics was being hampered by the darkness of the night and the many islets. Worst of all, though, was the confusing effect of our own fire.

In the process of rejoining, the Rowan had been remanning battle stations and there was some confusion in the magazines. Several star shells had been fired by her 5-inch guns and had detonated prematurely, so that the flares hung at a low altitude between our ships and the enemy. Instead of silhouetting the P-6s, the patrol craft became effectively screened from us behind the glare.

There was one among the Rowans crew that night who possibly had the best vantage point. Dana Perkins, a third-class signalman at the time, was manning his GQ station on the exposed signal bridge. Perkins relates:

I remember the night of the Haiphong Harbor pretty well. I don't think they passed the word of our objective until shortly before general quarters, as I'm sure the mission was of utmost importance and secret. Also I think that they didn't want us to have much time to think about what was about to unfold. As a signalman I was on the highest point on the ship and had a clear view of all the action. Myself and three other signalmen were manning the Redeye shoulder-fired missiles, loaded, armed, and ready to squeeze the trigger in the event the time should come. When we started to see the lit shoreline and lighted buoys of the harbor, make no mistake about it, the tension was high. All of a sudden the whole shoreline lit up with counterbattery, spewing bright fireballs as each round was fired at us. The North Vietnamese weren't using flashless powder like we had.

At one time I remember counting about twenty-two shore batteries rapid firing at the squadron. The shells were dropping all around us, leaving thunderous columns of white spray as they splashed into the ocean. Some of the shells were proximity and burst in the air. I remember one shell passed over the Rowan and burst in the air, causing the shrapnel to hit the side of the ship. I think it put some heavy-duty dents on the starboard side of the ship along the upper outer passageway. Luckily no one was hit! The whole time the ships in the squadron were firing on their intended targets with gun mounts and Shrike missiles. It was like the most intense Fourth of July display I'd ever seen. The Newport News was off our port side at about 270 relative position, rapid firing her 8-inch guns as fast as they could. All of a sudden the word came over the sound-powered phone that we had 2 torpedo boats (Russian Osha class, I believe), about eighty feet long, coming out to attack. The guys in the magazine were jamming whatever shells they could get their hands on into the hoist. The first round that we hit one of those boats with was actually a practice starburst round, and it tore right through it. The second round did explode.

To keep Skunks Bravo and Charlie under continuous fire with all batteries, the Newport News had been maneuvering on easterly and southeasterly courses and would soon run out of sea room. When a report was received from another ship, the Providence, that a fourth fast

patrol boat had been detected, it became increasingly evident we needed to clear up the tactical situation as quickly as possible.

I told Captain Zartman I was going to call for some help from tactical air. The pillars of AA fire had reminded me of the presence of carrier planes in the area, and that they would be loaded with flares and weapons for targets in Route Package Six. Commander, Task Unit 77.1.2 would not have been aware of their presence or capabilities. It was not an asset he would normally deal with. On the other hand, at the Seventh Fleet level I was informed on a daily basis of the operations of all fleet units.

The UHF radio handset was on the bulkhead of the Newport News' pilothouse. I pulled it from its cradle, punched the power button, and hit the guard channel switch. Now every operational Navy unit within a twenty-mile radius would hear my transmission in the blind: "Attention any Seventh Fleet Aircraft in the vicinity of Haiphong. This is Blackbeard [Commander, Seventh Fleet's personal call sign] on board Newport News with a shore bombardment force in Haiphong Harbor. We are engaged with several enemy surface units and need illumination to sort things out. Any aircraft in the area give me a call on guard. What we really need are high-power flares. Blackbeard out."

Almost immediately an answering voice came up loud and clear on the guard channel: "Blackboard, this is Raven Four Four, inbound with a flight of two Corsairs [Corsair Us, Chance Vought A-7s] for an armed recce in Package Six [the sector north of Hanoi]. We have flares and Rockeye on board. I can see all the shooting down there. I wondered what was going on. I am overhead and ready to help."

Staying on the guard channel so all friendly forces in the area would be aware of the tactical situation—and also to avoid any chance of losing communications—I instructed the flight leader, Raven 44, to light up the area with flares, report on what he could see, and stand by for further orders.

In less than thirty seconds, the entire seascape of the Haiphong Harbor approaches and the He de Norway islands was suddenly, and almost blindingly, lit by a million-candlepower flare. Raven 44 reported he had the Newport News in sight with an accompanying destroyer and could see a cruiser—the Providence—and a destroyer to the east. He had also spotted two North Vietnamese fast attack boats closing the Newport News from the direction of tie de Norway. With a warning not to get too

low because of friendly gunfire, Raven 44 was cleared to attack the hostile surface targets with Rockeye, a weapon that distributed a cluster of lethal bomblets in an oblong pattern over a large area.

The Newport News guns increased their rate of fire to the maximum. The gunners could clearly see their targets now. While one Corsair dropped a flare, the other attacked with Rockeye. It was almost impossible to miss a ship with Rockeye, even a small craft moving at high speed, and a single bomblet could cause fatal damage to a P-6-sized boat. Under the continuing flare illumination, the Rockeye and ships' gunfire finished off three of the skunks (hostile surface contact), but not until the closest one had approached to within three thousand yards.

At 2342 the Newport News and Rowan ceased fire. There was nothing left to shoot at. The battle was over. The action had been intense while it lasted. In the seventeen-minute firelight, the two warships had fired 294 major-caliber rounds at the P-6s. Skunks Bravo, Charlie, and Delta had been sunk. Alfa was out of range, on fire, and limping north, about to be eliminated by the two Corsairs. The night was dark again as the last flare hit the ocean. The Newport News, only three miles southwest of He of Norway, shaped a southerly course and increased speed to thirty knots to retire from the objective area and head for Yankee Station.

The Corsairs were from Attack Squadron 93 (VA-93). Lt. (j.g.) William W. Pickavance was the flight leader, and Lt. (j.g.) Pat MoneyMaker was the wingman. (Both pilots retired from the Navy with flag rank.) Once Skunk Alfa was on the bottom, they were cleared to return to their carrier, the Midway (CVA-41), the evening's work done. With all flares and Rockeye expended on the patrol boats, their armed recce mission into Package Six was cancelled. For them the Battle of Haiphong Harbor had been far more productive.

Commander, Task Unit 77.1.2's after-action report submitted to CinCPac and the JCS was professionally brief and properly modest: All preplanned targets had been fully covered with the allotted rounds, three secondaries had been observed, and Shrikes had been fired at radiating radars but apparently with no permanent results. Counterbattery fire had been effective in silencing some coastal defense positions, but the Vietnamese gunfire had been heavy. The Newport News reported 75 rounds of very accurate hostile fire; the Rowan reported 50 rounds of accurate fire as close as twenty yards and straddling the ship. The Robison

reported 140 rounds of very accurate fire, the closest being fifteen yards off the port beam. The Providence had counted incoming 60 rounds. Commander, TU 77.1.2 almost laconically went on to report, "While retiring, task unit was approached by several fast moving surface contacts. . . . Newport News and Rowan took contacts under fire resulting in their catching fire and breaking up. Aircraft took others under attack and appeared to sink same."

How successful was the operation? No photographic gun-damage assessment (GDA) was possible. Only three secondary explosions were observed. Yet the pumping of 710 rounds of 5-inch, 6-inch, and 8-inch high-explosive projectiles into a crowded area of lucrative military and logistics installations, all in a period of seventeen minutes, must have done psychological as well as military damage to the North Vietnamese war effort. All of this was accomplished with no friendly casualties, just shrapnel on the weather decks of two ships. Lion's Den was, as a front-page New York Times article reported, "a daring raid into strongly defended enemy territory.... The enemy has once again been reminded of the mobility of the fleet."

The next morning my helo arrived on board the Newport News from the Kitty Hawk to pick me up for the one-hour ride back to our flagship. Task Unit 77.1.2 was disestablished, and the Newport News, Rowan, Providence and Robison continued south to rendezvous with the ammo ships of the URG in the Gulf of Tonkin to top off powder and projectiles. The Newport News alone had expended 433 8-inch rounds, 556 5-inch rounds, and 33 3-inch rounds during the thirty-three-minute operation.