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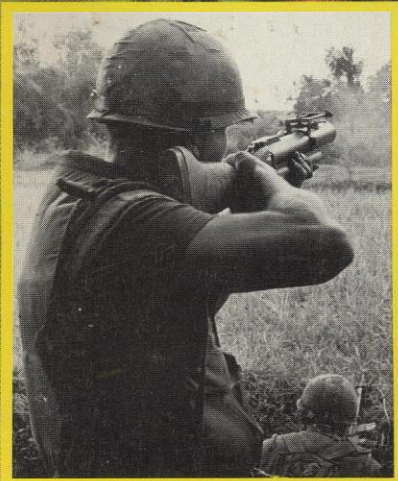
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Known as the "Grey Ghost of the East Coast," the 8-inch guns of the USS Newport News could put out the fire.

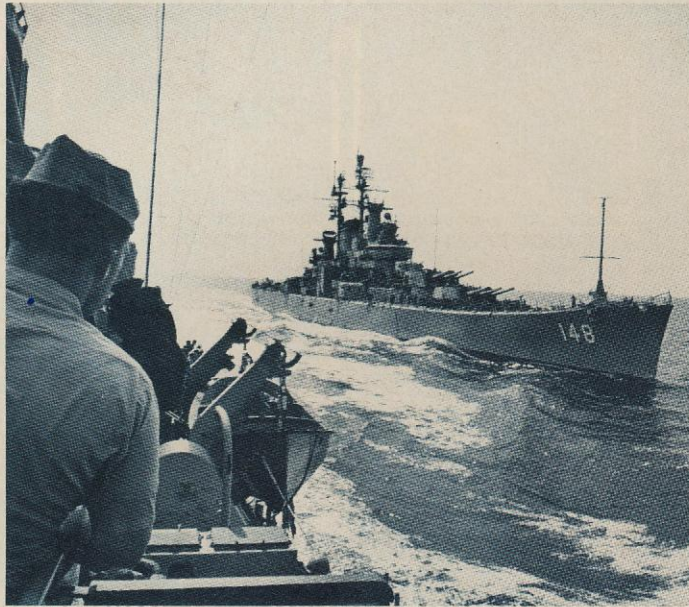
By Lawrence M. Greenberg

President Lyndon Johnson's buildup in Vietnam was in full swing when Pentagon planners raised the need for longer range artillery to supplement existing land- and sea-based assets. Longer range guns, they argued, would provide better coverage for targets in the south and enable strategic strikes farther into the north without risking additional air crews. Naval destroyer and light cruiser task groups already plied the Gulf of Tonkin, providing ground support and shelling Communist targets, but their effectiveness was limited by their 5- and 6-inch guns.

Washington searched its inventory for suitable candidates and found a single all-gun heavy cruiser serving as flagship for Second Fleet. The warship was the *Newport News* (CA-148), the world's largest remaining cruiser and the only all-gun cruiser on active duty fitted with rapid-firing 8-inch guns. With these guns she could reach more than half the DMZ and a great portion of North Vietnam, even from international waters.

Besides firing 18 percent farther than ground artillery, the gun cruiser could place a great amount of ordnance on a target. A battery of eight 8-inch artillery tubes can fire 12 rounds per minute for the first three minutes, and then maintain a sustained rate of fire of four rounds per minute. *Newport News*, by comparison, could fire 90 rounds per minute forever. Since she carried 1,450 8-inch rounds, forever would last 16 minutes. During the same "forever," the 8-inch Army artillery battery could fire 88 rounds. This was exactly what the planners needed, and in 1967 the 20-year-old ship received her orders to war.

Newport Naval Shipyard and Dry Dock Company laid the keel for its 17th cruiser, CA-148, *Newport News*, November 1, 1945, at its yard in Newport News, Virginia.



Task group flagship Newport News seen from the destroyer Turner Joy. Firing a record number of rounds for a single deployment, the big cruiser left the North Vietnamese-held areas of the Demilitarized Zone "much the worst for wear."

Newport News was 716 feet 6 inches long (700 feet at the waterline), had a beam of 76 feet 4 inches, and drew 26 feet of water at her full displacement of 21,500 tons. Last-minute design changes added six inches to her original length and made her the world's largest cruiser. Designed to survive a fight with all but the largest battleships, she had belt armor that tapered from six to four inches, a 3½-inch-thick armored deck, and 5-inch-thick bulkheads. The conning tower surrounding the ship's nerve center was 6½ inches thick near the top and 4 inches belowdecks.

Her four 120,000-horsepower General Electric geared turbine engines pushed her at 32 knots. Fully fueled, *Newport News* could cruise 10,500 nautical miles at a sustained speed of 15 knots while providing for her crew of 109 officers and 1,690 men.

Like all Des Moines class cruisers she carried nine 8-inch rapid-fire guns in three triple turrets. Each automated 8-inch, .55-caliber gun fired ten 335-pound armor-piercing or 260-pound high-explosive rounds a minute—more than four

times faster than previous 8-inch naval guns. At maximum ranges, the cruiser could put 90 rounds into the air before the first hit the target. This gave the ship the offensive punch of 8-inch naval gunfire combined with rapid-fire capability.

In January 1949, after 22 months of outfitting, *Newport News* was commissioned and taken to her first home port in Boston by Captain Roland N. Smoot. Seven years later, the secretary of the Navy changed the ship's home port to Norfolk.

When *Newport News* finally set sail, the world had changed in both complexion and threat. The air menace that was so important in the mid-1940s was replaced with the menace from submarines and long-range guided missiles. Although

she was not designed to counter these dangers, her seakeeping ability, speed, shore-support capability and potential as a flagship preserved her value to the fleet. It was in the last category that *Newport News* and her sister ships found their niche.

After a series of shakedown cruises in the Atlantic and Caribbean, *Newport News* was deployed to the Mediterranean to join the Sixth Fleet for the first of many annual excursions. It was in the Med that she first served as a flagship, receiving Vice Adm. John Ballentine in January 1950.

In late summer 1957, she took station in the eastern Med as part of a contingency operation during the Syrian crisis. Two and one-half years later she steamed 1,225 miles at an average speed of 31 knots from Sicily to Agadir, Morocco, where her crew rendered medical and material assistance after a devastating earthquake.

Between contingency operations and disaster relief, she narrowly escaped decommissioning. Shortly after President

Continued on page 61

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Continued from page 10

Dwight Eisenhower ordered Captain Andrew J. Hill and his ship to join Operation Blue Bat in Lebanon in 1958, the Navy made an eleventh-hour decision to retire *Salem* instead of *Newport News*.

Newport News became a fleet flagship when her sister ship *Des Moines* was decommissioned in 1961. The commander of the Atlantic Fleet, Admiral R.L. Dennison, insisted on *Newport News* and sent her to dry dock for conversion to his flagship. Her original deckhouse was replaced with a larger one suitable for additional electronics and command personnel. After her midships medium-caliber gun turrets were removed to make room for 12 new radio transmitters and 15 new receivers, she assumed duties as the command center for the fleet.

In June 1961, after the assassination of the Dominican Republic's military dictator, General Rafael Trujillo, *Newport News* cut short a training cruise to command a task force off Santo Domingo. The threat of intervention from the fleet that sat visible from the Dominican capital helped resolve the precarious situation and convinced several potential troublemakers to leave the island.

Following the show of force, the cruiser returned to Norfolk for upgrades in berthing and communications. The refitting prepared *Newport News* to become the flagship for Vice Adm. Alfred G. Ward, Commander, Second Fleet and Strike Force Atlantic, his NATO role. Her follow-on cruise through northern Europe was cut short so she could join the naval blockade of Cuba in October. After a month in the Caribbean, Captain Richard H. Bower brought her back to Norfolk.

Newport News returned to normal operations until the Dominican Republic erupted in civil war in April 1965. When President Lyndon B. Johnson announced the Dominican Republic would not become another Cuba, the cruiser sortied for the troubled island from Norfolk. Meanwhile, at Fort Bragg, two battalions of paratroopers from the 3rd Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division, prepared to fly to an airfield east of Santo Domingo.

On arrival outside Santo Domingo, *Newport News* became the flagship for Joint Task Force 122 and remained on station until command of the U.S. expeditionary force shifted to the Army ashore on May 7. Her services no longer needed, she returned to Norfolk to complete alterations to her combat systems.

Two years later, *Newport News* received her first orders to go to war. After plac-

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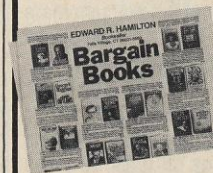
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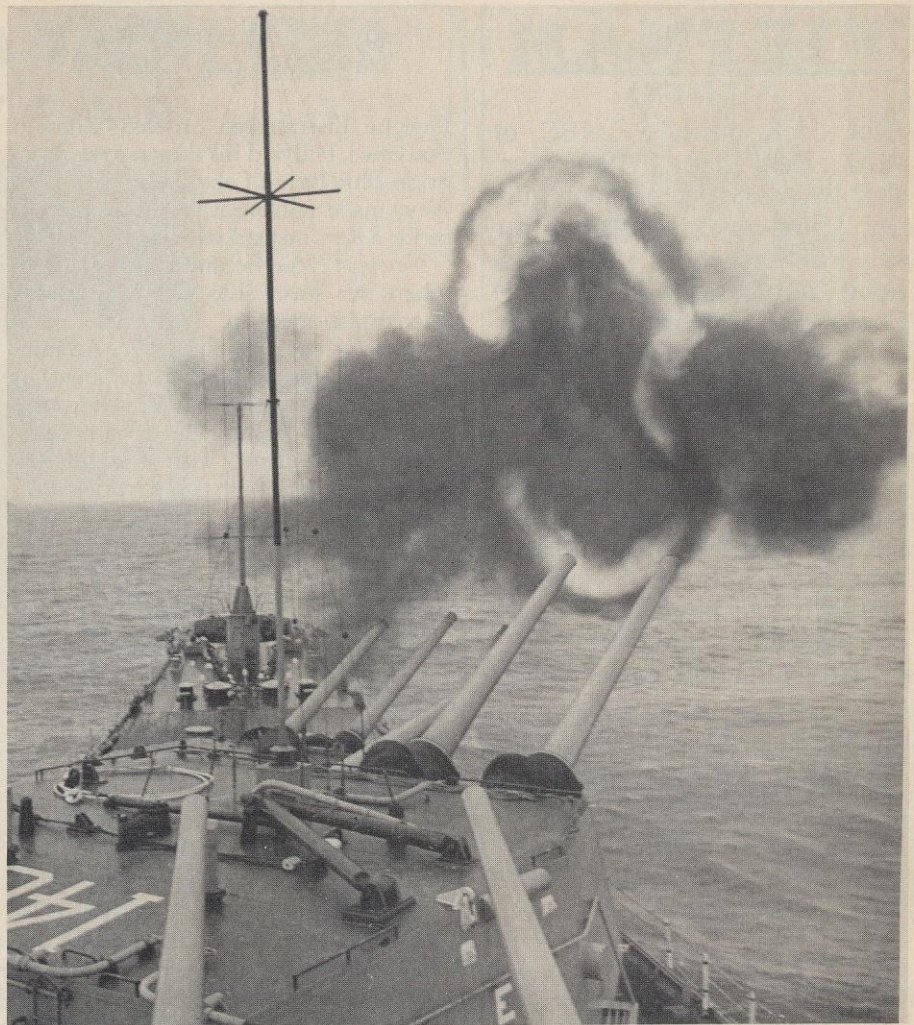
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Newport News' Number One turret, decorated with an "E" for outstanding efficiency, cuts loose off the coast of North Vietnam in December 1967.

ing 5-inch Zuni chaff rockets in her empty gun tubs, on September 5 Captain Lindsay C. McCarty ordered her lines cast off and she headed for a six-month tour in the Gulf of Tonkin with her crew of 1,184 officers and seamen.

Again she served as a flagship, this time for Rear Adm. Walter V. Coombs, Commander, Seventh Fleet's Cruiser-Destroyer Fleet (CTG 70.8), and later for Rear Adm. Sheldon H. Kinney. Within hours of her arrival on the gun line on October 9, *Newport News* opened fire on North Vietnam—the first and only Des Moines class heavy cruiser to fire her guns in combat.

During her first 50-day tour on the gun line she established several records while supporting Operation Sea Dragon, a naval offensive to stem the flow of war materials south. In the first three weeks, *Newport News* fired 250 tons of explosives at bridges, radar and coastal gun emplacements, transportation choke points, and supply ships. This established a new, single-ship strike record, but not a surprising one since she was also the largest and most powerful warship in theater—41½ feet longer than her nearest rival,

St. Paul. Her record for being the largest warship in theater stood unchallenged until the battleship *New Jersey* arrived off Vietnam in September 1968.

Throughout Sea Dragon, *Newport News* participated in 156 seaborne strikes, firing 7,411 rounds against 325 North Vietnamese coastal defense targets, sinking 17 ships, numerous barges, and halting rebuilding efforts on the transportation network. Her high-explosive rounds, fitted with .010-second delay fuzes, proved particularly effective against bunkers and hardened targets. The small delay, combined with the projectiles' terminal speed and tough construction, allowed them to penetrate 13-20 feet of earth before detonating.

While on the gun line, *Newport News*, as well as many other ships, received shore-based fire. Fortunately she was never hit, and received the nickname the "Grey Ghost from the East Coast."

Whatever opposition may have existed to heavy naval gunfire support for ground operations quickly disappeared. Not only was her accuracy and throw weight impressive, but *Newport News* proved she could respond to requests for

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fire support much faster than other alternatives. Defense Department studies showed that the heavy cruiser averaged a response time of only two minutes, compared to six minutes for ground artillery, 30 minutes for tactical air, and up to three weeks for a B-52 arc light strike.

Newport News' biggest operation came during the Tet Offensive in the spring of 1968. From her station near the DMZ (demilitarized zone), she fired 1,777 rounds under the direction of her new skipper, Captain E.K. Snyder, in support of the Marines during the battle of Hue on March 17 and 18. Here, as in several other encounters in 1968, the accuracy of her guns allowed her to fire within 600 meters of friendly lines. Two weeks later, on April 2, *Newport News* fired her 50,000th projectile, setting yet another record for naval gunfire support.

Two and one-half weeks later she departed Subic Bay for the United States, taking with her the Navy record for the number of rounds fired during a single deployment—59,421. When she left, the 3rd Marines' naval gunfire liaison officer sent Captain Lindsay C. McCarty a message that read: "Your stay has been outstanding. Your shooting was professional and accurate. You will never be forgotten. Smooth sailing. Hurry back. The DMZ is much the worse for wear. The great thunder has spoken." She arrived home at Norfolk on May 13.

After only six months in home port, *Newport News* steamed back to the gun line, arriving in December 1968. Most of her six-month tour was spent providing naval gun fire support to U.S. and allied forces in the south.

Under normal conditions, preplanned fire missions passed from division or corps headquarters to the naval gunfire liaison officer about 48 hours before needed. The delay allowed Seventh Fleet time to allocate the mission according to priority and available ships near the target area. For emergency support, requests could come from any level, but only after an American representative at MACV declared the situation critical. Then, any ship capable of providing the necessary support responded without the normal requirement for observed fire. In either event, once coordinates for fire missions reached the ship, two fire control teams checked them—usually in the command control center and on the bridge—using separate charts. Both sections' firing solutions were compared for accuracy before the first round left the ship.

Newport News, as well as other cruisers and some destroyers, used a remote-control aerial surveillance drone called "Snoopy" to locate targets and observe/adjust naval gunfire. These small, QH-50 drones flew inland as far as 25 kilometers at 3,500 feet before hovering

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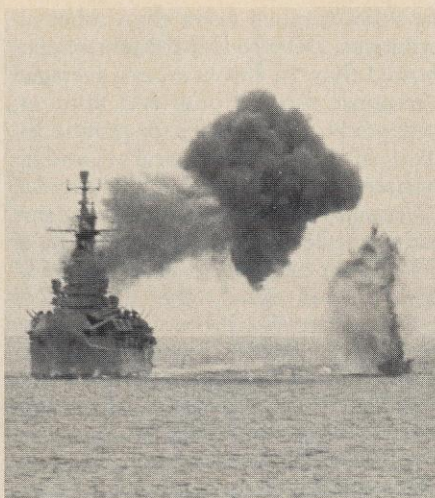
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While bombarding the Cong Phu railroad yard on Aug. 4, 1967, the cruiser St. Paul comes under return fire.

and sending television pictures back to shipboard operators. The remote sensors proved highly valuable locating targets and reducing friendly casualties.

In January and February she supported the 3rd Marine Division during Operation Bold Mariner, the 1st and 7th Marines, the Army's Americal Division, and the Second ARVN Division. In March and April she fired for the 1st Marines in Operation Oklahoma Hills, 3rd Marines, the 101st Airborne Division's Operation Sheridan, and the Korean 30th Infantry Regiment and Marine Brigade. In May and June she supported the 1st and 3rd Marines before leaving the line in July, having expended 18,000 rounds. Once out of theater, *Newport News* resumed duties as Second Fleet's flagship.

Newport News returned to Vietnam for the third and final time in April 1972 for her longest wartime deployment. While on the gun line she participated in two cruiser-destroyer surface attacks on Haiphong Harbor, the first such action of the war. In each case the ships met at a predetermined point offshore and dashed headlong toward the harbor firing at shore batteries and vessels.

While supporting Marines from her position 13 miles north-northeast of Quang Tri City on October 1, 1972, *Newport News* suffered her only major shipboard disaster. Just before 0100, a defective projectile in the center gun of No. 2 turret detonated prematurely, explosively igniting 700 pounds of powder in the hoists. The detonation and subsequent fires killed 20 turret crewmen and injured another 36. The ship withdrew from the gun line and sailed to Subic Bay for repairs.

Except for damage to the No. 2 gun, whose barrel was nearly blown free from the turret, the ship suffered surprisingly little damage—a tribute to her design and workmanship. After repairs, *Newport*

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News returned twice more to the gun line. Later, a proposal to replace her damaged turret with one from the decommissioned *Des Moines* was scrapped due to costs. Eventually the damaged gun was removed, the turret face plated over, and the entire turret locked in place, never to fire again.

Before she left the line, *Newport News* fired more than 50,000 major-caliber rounds on 525 missions against nearly 4,000 targets. Some of the targets she destroyed during her final deployment included 157 military structures, 97 bunker complexes, 11 artillery and 24 mortar batteries, 13 tanks, several fuel and ammunition dumps, and helped repulse no fewer than seven ground attacks on friendly positions. To accomplish this, she took on ammunition 46 times and fuel 24 times, all at sea.

The ship's luck in avoiding shore fire continued as well. By the time she departed the theater, she had avoided at least 1,924 enemy rounds in 46 separate incidents. On December 24, 1972, she set course for Norfolk.

Back in Norfolk, *Newport News* rejoined Second Fleet, again as the flagship. Despite her battle honors—six battle stars from Vietnam, two Navy Unit Commendations, one Meritorious Unit Citation and the Republic of Vietnam's Gallantry Cross—the mighty warship was scheduled to join the mothball fleet.

Captain R.T. Kelly took *Newport News* on her final cruise to Europe in September 1974. There she participated in NATO exercise Northern Merger in the North Atlantic and Danish waters before making a series of port calls. After a December change of command, Captain Robert R. Briner brought her back to Norfolk in January 1975 for deactivation. On June 27, 1975, *Newport News*, the last of the *Des Moines* class heavy cruisers, was decommissioned at Norfolk's St. Helena Annex and joined her sister ships *Salem* and *Des Moines* in the inactive fleet.

Three years later the secretary of the Navy approved striking the cruisers *Newport News*, *Canberra* and *St. Paul*. On July 31, 1978, she was dropped from the rolls but retained for parts and possible future use as a flagship. Today, *Newport News* rides at anchor at Bremerton, Wash., awaiting transfer to the Historic Naval Ships Association of Superior, Wis. The application for Superior to acquire the cruiser is complete, but as of this writing the organization lacks sufficient funds to complete the transfer. With luck, in the next few years the largest and most powerful all-gun cruiser ever built by any navy will move to a new berth to become a living museum and a reminder of the grandeur that was once the all-gun Navy. □

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