

Recollections from Service on USS John King: Westpac 1973 John Gilmer Jr.  
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USS John King (DDG-3) was one of several ships in the same squadron designated to go to West Pacific in the fall, 1972. This was unusual; East coast ships generally went to the Med and not Westpac. I recall learning about this assignment as we were crossing the Atlantic returning from Europe, our last port call having been Kristiansand, Norway. I think it was October. Interestingly, the squadron flagship, USS Conyngham DDG-17, was not one of the ships going. I recall O'Hare and Correy being among the ships of the squadron sent to Westpac, but I don't recall the others. There were some exercises off the North Carolina coast to test out a flamethrower device intended to divert heat seeking anti-ship missiles. (There was concern that the Chinese or North Vietnamese might have used a heat-seeking Styx (SSN2) missile or its equivalent.) A photographer temporarily aboard John King to take photos for the tests was killed when he opened a watertight door to the weather deck and a wave hit. (A message had been repeatedly passed on the IMC to stay off the weather decks, given the rough weather.) That was the only personnel casualty we had while I was aboard. For the Westpac deployment, the ship was given some Redeye missiles, some night vision devices, and if I recall correctly, some machine guns. There was also a visit to Yorktown, probably to leave behind certain special weapons we wouldn't expect to need in Westpac.

Departing December 1, 1972, I understand that the squadron stopped in Manzanillo, Mexico on the way out, because the tanker support was diverted (secretly) to fuel the USS Newport News, on her way back home to Norfolk. The Navy did not want the North Vietnamese to know that the Newport News (our last active heavy cruiser) had left and was no longer available, while we had agreed not to strike North Vietnam during the negotiations in Paris. That's what I had heard. More recently I learned from Tom Wilburn, who was aboard at the time, that the John King stopped at Hawaii on Christmas, and later Guam, on the way out.

I met the ship, USS John King (DDG-3) in Subic Bay in early January, 1973. I'd been in the hospital, so I missed the deployment trip. We steamed to the Gulf of Tonkin where we fired gunfire support at Point Allison, the name given to a particular coordinate up near the (so called) DMZ. Point Allison was the northernmost of these reference points off the South Vietnam coast. Several other ships were there also, since most of the action was gunfire against targets North of Quang Tri in South Vietnam. The ships were lined up a few nautical miles apart, maybe three miles offshore. We steamed at very slow speed to reduce chances of a collision, and because there really wasn't much reason to do otherwise in the absence of any counter fire. It seems to me the Captain prescribed a "box" for us to stay in. The CIC crew and quartermasters referred to it as "The Ponderosa."

The ship maintained "port and starboard" watches while on the "gun line." Half of the crew was "on watch" at battle stations, while the other half slept, ate, and tried to get some of the other things that needed doing done. Both gun mounts were fully manned, as was the director. I don't recall the extent to which the sonar/ASW team and missile systems were manned; I expect the missiles were manned and ready. If I recall correctly, only one repair party was manned at all, fairly minimally. I was navigator, and swapped off with the Chief Quartermaster. For gunfire support missions, we would plot the target on the chart on the bridge, and report the range and

bearing to the fire control people who would crank in the information to the fire control system. Combat (CIC) was doing the same. I have to say that 6 hours straight standing up on that aluminum deck made my feet hurt quite a bit. There was no help for it; everybody stands on the bridge except the Captain, who was usually up perched on his starboard chair, often reading the fleet broadcast radio traffic.

Fighting on "port and starboard" was a bit surreal. I'd "fight the war" on my 6 hour watch, then go down to the wardroom for a nice, sit-down meal. The steward would give me my napkin ring and I'd take the napkin out, and use the good wardroom silver to enjoy a nice, pleasant meal. Then perhaps a shower, and four hours of sleep in a reasonably comfortable bunk, before it was time to get up, get dressed, and go fight the war again. During the day, seeing to routine responsibilities might substitute for sleep. Most of the ship's company maintained this kind of routine. (You might think the guns going off would keep you awake. They didn't; one got used to it.)

All of the missions I recall firing were under the control of a "spotter" who was flying above the target area in a small helicopter, or perhaps an OV-10 Bronco. He would call for missions by reference to UTM grid positions, and correct fire. He called fire for all of the ships on the gun line. The radio circuit was broadcast on the bridge. As coordinates were given, I'd plot them on the chart using a grease pencil on acetate overlay. We never, or very seldom, knew what we were firing at. Nor did we know where friendly forces were. We'd just be given the coordinates, corrections as needed, then orders to fire some number of rounds for effect.

Most of the other ships on the gun line were older "Fram I" (updated Gearing class) ships with manually loaded 5" / 38 caliber guns in twin mounts: very reliable World War 2 era weapons. John King instead had 5" / 54 automatically loaded mounts. At the time, I understood these to be capable of firing a round every two seconds. We fired at four second intervals to reduce stresses. (I don't know how much difference that might have made.) Because of the complexity of these gun mounts, maintenance and repair was a constant issue. I recall that the machinist, a 3<sup>rd</sup> class petty officer I believe, was the most irreplaceable man on the ship. His efforts were critical in keeping those guns firing. The high rate of fire would have been very important in an AA context. Since then, I've come to understand that the maximum rate of fire as designed was faster than a round per two seconds. However, our fire control system, using mechanical analog computers, would not have been able to track supersonic targets. I don't recall the maximum speed it was designed to handle, about 600 knots, I think. For gunfire support, all this wasn't very important. I'd guess we fired well over 100 rounds per day at Point Allison. Fire missions were typically a few spotting rounds and then maybe ten rounds or so for effect.

One of the interesting aspects of our guns was that the automatic loading made switching ammunition difficult. I recall one night that the spotter would call for "Willie Peter" (WP, or White Phosphorus) for spotting. That meant having to unload all the ammunition in the ammo train down to the magazine and then loading up the WP round. We wouldn't know when he would want "AA common" for effect. So ammunition swapping out was much more difficult than for the manually loaded 5" / 38's. The spotter apparently didn't understand this. Finally the Captain (CDR Spadoni) had us fire star shells on point detonate instead of WP. The guns had

special facilities for handling star shells separately without having to unload the ammunition train. I recall the spotter being rather surprised at that.

The “VT” (Variable Timed) or “AA common” ammunition that we shot most of the time had a proximity fuse that would set it off at some distance well above the ground, or in an AA context, when the radar in the fuse detected an airframe nearby. The “VT” contrasts with “fixed time delay” as used for star shells. (I do recall our firing star shells to provide illumination on some occasions at Point Allison.)

Often, especially at night, the spotter would give a long list of coordinates, maybe 20 or so, and prescribe two to four rounds to each. This was harassment and interdiction fire. We shot them in any order sometime during the night. From the ship, we almost never saw anything at all of the action going on ashore. On one occasion we saw a truck driving Northward along the beach – friendlies apparently. On another occasion we saw a B-52 strike go in – lots of flashes and booming, but no way to tell anything more.

The most tense moment at Point Allison that I recall was one night when someone started shooting SAM-7 missiles at the spotter. These are shoulder fired, heat seeking missiles. The spotter had to dodge them. He would be trying to communicate, but you’d hear on the radio, “wait, mmmph ,“ or something like that, as he audibly reacted to the missiles, probably maneuvering radically to make them miss. I think there were seven missiles or so fired at him. Finally he was able to pass the coordinates of where the missiles were coming from to the USS Correy (call sign Misgive), another ship from our squadron. He called in “100 rounds, fire for effect.” The 100 rounds must have been enough; nobody shot at him anymore that night. That was the largest fire mission I ever heard called. We all understood what the target was that time!

While at Point Allison there was an occasion when the director reported shell splashes close to us. I was on the bridge, but didn’t hear or see it. It may have been a mortar round. It seemed we were being taken under fire by the North Vietnamese artillery at the DMZ. During the negotiations we had promised not to bombard North Vietnam, so they apparently felt free to bring their heavy stuff South. The junior officer who had the con ordered “All ahead full,” and we shot forward with a spurt. I believe it was the Captain who then had us reduce speed greatly, and we eventually found our way back to the Ponderosa and returned to slow maneuvering. No additional splashes were seen on that occasion, I believe. The other time when we took some fire I was below asleep. I found out about it when I came up for my watch period. After we left Point Allison, we heard that the USS Preble (DLG-15) had been hit there by shore batteries (not seriously damaged though). So, the peril was indeed present. But we were probably in more danger from our own ammunition, hot gun cook-off, or defective shells, than from enemy action.

At Point Alison we had at least a few misfires. In each case the crew would extract the powder, substitute a percussion fired short charge (in a brass case), then discharge the round through the barrel on a safe azimuth. Meanwhile, the other mount was available to support missions.

I understood that on one occasion the crew of Mount 52 left the gun mount briefly in order to "moon" the enemy. I didn't see this; Mount 52 would not have been visible from the bridge.

After several days we left Point Allison to replenish ammunition. Probably refueled and got mail too. We went to three watches, a more normal rotation, off the gun line. Eventually we took station off Phan Thiet, which is in Military Region III, East of Saigon on the coast. The town is on a bay, and we were usually South of the town several nautical miles, a few miles from shore. We were the only ship stationed there. The "box" we tried to stay inside was nicknamed "Pandora's Box." We were there until after the so-called treaty, or cease fire, went into effect. Most of the time our calls for fire came from a spotter, but we also took some calls for fire from people on the ground, especially the last night when the enemy were coming out of the hills.

["Combat Charts" H.O. 17,472-44 (stamped N.O. 93E21) and H.O. 17,472-43 (stamped N.O. 93E22) show the area around Phan Thiet. I believe parts of both of these charts were spliced together to show the area from about 10° 40' to about 11°, the region where we were firing gunfire support. "Pandora's Box" was around 10° 48'N 108° 04'E, fairly close at a couple nautical miles from shore, but just outside the 6 fathom line. The "combat charts" are marked in UTM as well as latitude and longitude. Our fire assignments were always in UTM. I recall our chart on the bridge being aligned with North at the top, although the charts as supplied are aligned with 60° T towards the top.

Looking at the chart now, I see there is one very prominent high hill about 22km due West of where we typically cruised, and others to the North and West of that one. It may be that the distances to the further hills, some 30km NW and others much as 40km to the West, was why we received that Army special ammunition. I know we used that ammunition at targets that would not otherwise have been within range.]

To the West of where we usually maintained station was a prominent hill very apparent on the topographical chart. The whole area of the hill was wooded, and that was where we fired at for some of our support missions. On one occasion the spotter saw a man in "black pajamas" on that hill. We must have fired three or so missions plus some additional spotting rounds trying to hit him. The Captain was rather disgusted at spending ammo like that trying to hit one man. (I suppose the spotter likely thought that there were probably more where he saw that one.) That was the only occasion I recall when the spotter said what he was targeting. I think it was his apparent enthusiasm that led to that revelation.

One of the most dangerous events we had on the whole cruise was a "hot gun" problem with Mount 51, the forward gun mount. We had fired, I'd guess, a hundred rounds out of that gun, so it was pretty hot. One round misfired. Normally you open the breech, extract the powder, substitute a brass "short charge" that can be fired by percussion, and "discharge the round through the barrel." On this occasion, though, the powder case wouldn't come out. It stuck part way, I recall hearing. This was very dangerous. The explosive in the shell or the propellant charge can "cook off" after absorbing heat from the barrel, and it was plenty hot. The damage control team sprayed down the gun with fire hoses in an attempt to lower the temperature. There is a certain amount of time when it is "safe" to do so, at least several minutes, before the round will cook off. Well, that time came and went. Then it was time to evacuate. A fire hose (with an extension sprayer nozzle) was left down the barrel to continue cooling it, and all hands who were "non-essential" were ordered to the aft half of the ship. The secondary conning station was manned. There was some concern that the propellant cooking off could even allow the

conflagration to reach the magazine. (I rationalized to myself that it couldn't happen, and the gun mount door was left opened to allow venting, but one wonders.) One of the quartermasters who was on duty wrote down and put in the log the names of the people on the bridge and in CIC, those last ones in the forward part of the ship, in case something should happen. Ultimately, fortunately, nothing happened. We must have waited in that condition for perhaps 20 or more minutes, and finally the crew returned, and was able to return the gun to service. I don't recall those details, just the relief. (I don't recall any calls for fire coming in while all this was happening. If there had been calls for fire, we could have fired mount 52, but we did not shoot during this whole incident.) To put this into perspective, when we next went to Subic Bay there was a ship of our class, I don't recall which, with the Mount 51 gun split open and peeled back like a banana peel from a "premature" round that had gone off a few feet from the end of the barrel. Two or three people were wounded, we heard. A bad batch of ammunition was responsible. (Someone had to check our stocks of ammunition.)

One of the incongruous aspects of Phan Thiet was that while we were there, firing away at various targets, the bay was full of small boats, fishing. They fished at night, each with a white lantern, and if I recall correctly nets, perhaps to catch the fish that would rise to investigate the lights. We were concerned that the Viet Cong would use such a boat to attack us by surprise. We had night vision scopes, and there were machine guns manned and I believe some sailors with small arms ready, just in case. There was no way to plot and track all of these little boats. We were moving slow, so I suppose they were able to stay out of our way. We did have to check to make sure none were immediately downrange when we fired a mission, especially with the special Army ammunition.

I don't know when we picked up that special ammunition. Likely when we replenished after our stay at Point Allison. It was "Improved Conventional Munition" that was supposed to be more effective than our normal AA common. The shells were sub-caliber, about 4 inches, inside a discarding sabot. The powder was also special. With this ammunition, shells could reach as far as about 38,000 yards, if I recall correctly. However, fire control had to use special tables to do the gunlaying, so it took more time to respond to fire missions. When firing this stuff we had to make sure that no small boats were downrange within several thousand yards of the ship, since they would be at risk of being hit by the discarding sabot fragments. The ICM powder produced a brilliant white flash, quite a contrast to the dull reddish subdued flash from firing Navy flashless powder. When we returned to Subic Bay soon after the treaty, tests were made on at least one of the gun tubes to determine if any fissures had formed as a result of using the special ammunition. (The paint was removed just outside the mount and a "dye" used, and I assume X-rays taken, to check the barrel.)

On the last night of the war before the cease fire went into effect, we did a lot of shooting. At first we were using a lot of the special ammunition. We were getting targets not only southwest of Phan Thiet, but also more directly West of Phan Thiet in what on the chart seemed to be agricultural areas. As usual, we had no idea what we were firing at, but we did a lot of shooting. Eventually, we switched back to our AA common so that we could service calls for fire more rapidly. Targets were close enough that its range was sufficient. It seemed that the enemy "were coming out of the hills," making an effort to capture Phan Thiet before the cease fire went into

effect that night. The next day the local head official invited the Captain (and some of his men) to come ashore to celebrate. He politely turned down the invitation.

After the treaty, USS John King stayed in the West Pacific for several months. Some of that time we escorted the minesweeping forces off North Vietnam. I recall seeing a small North Vietnamese (enemy!) patrol boat on one occasion. I don't recall any sense of being threatened. The minesweeping was done with helicopters, based on a large amphibious ship, rather than the wooden hulled minesweeper ships. We also spent some time escorting carriers. I don't recall which ones.

As navigator, one of the most interesting events was taking a "Sun fix." Normally the navigator takes three or so Sun lines of position during the morning. Maybe even a Moon line if that body is available. The earlier lines are advanced on the chart (actually a smaller worksheet) to form a "running fix" for the noon estimated position that the ship reported every day. On this particular day, the sun passed almost directly overhead. I was able to plot the track of the Sun's "geographic position" on the chart. The geographic position moves 15 nautical miles per minute, pretty much directly East to West. It took only a few minutes to take several sun lines a minute or less apart, as I followed the sun around the rear of the forward superstructure and around to the opposite bridge wing. After converting the very large angles to miles to geographic position, I was able to construct a sun fix. Yes, a technical trick I suppose unappreciated by most people, but a unique opportunity. I never had the chance to do this but this one occasion.

At low latitudes, the Sun rises and sets almost vertically. There was only a brief period to shoot stars when both the horizon and the stars were clearly visible. I found that I had trouble seeing the stars pop out. While on cruise, my eyesight seems to have deteriorated, and I became somewhat nearsighted, from focusing at close distances so much of the time. After returning to the U.S. and being outdoors more, and driving, my vision returned to normal. On one occasion I saw a bit of "green flash" as the sun set, a rare and interesting visual phenomenon. We got down to latitudes as low as 6° North, as I recall. It seems to me we saw at least some stars of the Southern Cross. But we never crossed the Equator. (USS Correy did cross the equator when making a port visit to Singapore. Correy also grounded on that trip, damaging their sonar dome, I heard. As Navigator, I would not have wanted to trade places!)

During the rest of our time in Westpac we visited Hong Kong, Sasebo Japan, and Kee Lung, Taiwan. And, of course, Subic Bay (and Olongapo City). Not much need to say anything about Olongapo City; plenty of other writers have covered that subject. One popular purchase at the exchange for a number of colleagues was a ceramic elephant figure, maybe a couple of feet high, called a "BUFE" for "bloody useless .... elephant" (pronounced "buffy"). The unoccupied commodore's cabin was used to store these and other similar bulky items purchased on the cruise.

There were some other Navy ships in Hong Kong at the same time we were there. I was assigned shore patrol duty for one night. I was very apprehensive about that, but I was reassured that I would only need to get involved if the problem was with some officer. I need not have worried. My three man patrol didn't have any trouble at all. I recall picking up a "sleeper" from the Pusycat bar as the extent of our excitement. There was a very nice Exchange in Hong Kong

where one could obtain all sorts of interesting things, and I purchased some ivory objects and a pearl necklace for Cindy, as well as a landscape painting signed by someone named Smith. I also had a nice suit tailored for me.

Sasebo was interesting for being a major Japanese naval base during World War 2, and also close to some early sites worth visiting. A contingent from the crew was able to go on a tour to Hirado Island, on the West coast of Kyushu, where early trading missions (Dutch?) did business, and also saw a Japanese castle. We were there for perhaps a week, long enough that the wives of the C.O. X.O., and at least one other officer flew over from the United States to visit. (Unlike the Med, it was impractical for wives to follow the ship from port to port in Westpac. We were in port much less often, and from one to another air flight was necessary.) While in Sasebo I visited a Japanese department store where I purchased a game of "Go." There must have been also some sort of exchange (military store) where I purchased some electronics, a receiver, some tapes, and two Pachinko machines.

Kee Lung was remarkable primarily due to a bookstore right at the waterfront that sold "unauthorized" copies of books. I must have bought 10 or so books, including several electronics books, of which I still have the Motorola Semiconductor Manual. I purchased Michener's "The Drifters" there as well. There was some concern that we would get into trouble bringing these books back into the United States.

In one memorable passage we steamed between Formosa and China. Such "freedom of navigation" exercises were occasionally done just to make sure the Chinese knew that we did not honor these waters as territorial seas, as they claimed. We tried to be very careful to stay at least 12 miles from any point of land. This was not easy because there were some very small coastal islands, and we had to use radar ranges to sometimes uncertain mountains to obtain fixes. I know we must have come fairly close to that 12 mile limit. (We did not have "GPS" then. We did have "Omega," a navigation system that we had received the previous fall, but not all broadcast stations were up, and Omega navigation was regarded as less than fully reliable. There were Loran stations, but precision was not all we would have liked; too often we were in "base line" regions.)

We eventually returned to the United States by way of Japan (Yokuska), Pearl Harbor, and the Panama Canal. As we approached Japan, there was an incident maybe 50 miles from the nearest land when it was announced that "a BIRD" was spotted off to port (or something like that). It was actually a small sparrow sized bird that had found our ship as a resting spot far out from where a bird of that sort should be. The bird stayed with us for a while, staying on the bridge wing for part of that time, maybe an hour or so.

I also recall that on our way as we approached Japan, on one occasion or the other, we experienced intensely phosphorescent waters – as our ship moved through the relatively calm seas at night, the waves would glow. (It seems to me that this occurred near dusk.)

While in Yokosuka, I recall seeing the Japanese battleship Mikasa, Togo's flagship at Tsushima, berthed to the south a few miles away. That's the only surviving "pre-dreadnought" battleship

surviving anywhere in the world, a contemporary of the USS Olympia, Dewey's flagship from 1898, in Philadelphia.

Off Kauai we did a missile shoot on the way to Hawaii. We were in Pearl Harbor overnight for fueling. Our berth was across from Ford Island, about where Helena was torpedoed during the 1941 attack. I recall being surprised at how small the harbor seemed. (Of course, I was used to Hampton Roads.) The Arizona memorial and some of the remains of that ship still visible could be easily seen on the other side of the channel.

One of the most remarkable sights I recall was seeing Skylab fly over as we approached Panama. It was very bright, perhaps brighter than Venus, and of course very fast, much faster in apparent motion than a high airliner appears to fly. It was visible when crossing near sunset and sunrise, when illuminated by sunlight, but when the sky was dark enough to see bright celestial bodies. (Skylab had just been launched, which is why we had not seen it when we were in Westpac when we were also at low latitudes. I imagine that the current space station is an even more spectacular sight for folks at lower latitudes.)

We traversed the Panama Canal at night, so aside from the locks there was not that much to see. Seems to me we fueled there as well. I do recall seeing San Salvador, Columbus's first New World landfall as we passed it on our way back to Norfolk. There was a prominent spire or lighthouse that was easily visible above the flat sandy island.

I don't now recall whether we were in company with other ships of the squadron for the trip back across the Pacific. I think so. I recall our laying out our track across the Pacific without reference to other ships' movements. Our reason for stopping at Pearl Harbor was to refuel, so perhaps we were alone, perhaps not. I do not recall any refueling at sea on the return trip, or other ships participating in the missile shoot. But by the time we returned to Norfolk, the squadron was reunited and came in together. The families were very happy to have us return, and were a bit impatient while we moored.