

SAILOR'S NIGHT OUT ON THE BEACH

by Stan Levin

On one more freezing-cold winter night, our small high-speed transport vessel had again arrived on a familiar sea, about five or six miles off the beach. She began a slow “360” turn at that location, as had been done on previous nights, and would be continued on future nights. Seas were in a gentle swell, otherwise calm.

One of the ship's four small landing crafts was lowered to the water. I was aboard as a radioman, my primary duty – to maintain contact with the ship through the night, and to help defend the boat. A shipmate was the skipper, and in command was an officer, doubtless a reservist called back for duty after having served in World War II, who was also in charge of the Scotch. The remainder of the company consisted of six or eight commandos under the auspices of the “UN Command”: Brits, Aussies, South Koreans and sometimes USN UDT's. All were specialists in explosives.

We made for the beach, zigzagging en route. At about a mile or so off the surf line, our skipper slowed the boat down to minimize the engine's noise, and to steer her to the landing point as directed by radio from the ship. Then, the boat was run up on the beach, the ramp was let down, and the commandos made their exit – fast.

We were to remain on spot, no matter what, until the commandos returned, and all were accounted for. There was always the anticipated fire fight between our boat crew and any North Korean security forces nearby where we had landed, just as soon as we were discovered to be in the area. It was just a matter of time. All lighting on the scene came from small-arm weapons and explosives as they detonated on the tracks. And sometimes from the moon!

The objective of the raid(s) was to interrupt or halt the flow of combatants and materiel coming south by train, on railroad tracks that ran parallel to the beach, not too many yards from the surf line. Trains ran on random schedules, preventing us from trapping and destroying one--a secondary objective of our operations. The commandos planted and set off explosives on the tracks, usually under fire by an unseen enemy.

Once our mission was accomplished, all those alive plus the wounded would haul-ass back to the landing boat. We never knew for sure, until we were face-to-face, that everyone scrambling to get aboard was “one of ours”. Up ramp and we got the hell out of there without delay. Daylight would arrive as we were making our way back to the ship, which by then was wearing a thick cloak of ice, accumulated during the night. With strong binoculars you could watch a frenzied reconstruction of the tracks. Usual and expected--Every time.

It was part of the “Operation Strangle,” I later learned.

The transport ship was the USS Horace A. Bass, APD 124 (Reduced to scrap August, 1975).

The actions took place in 1951 and 1953.

Location, the Korean Peninsula...north, north, north, cold, and walking distance to China, a bit more to the north, as I recollect.

(Stan is a member of VFP and served in the U.S. Navy, 1950-54)