

The Commodore's *fateful* Command

BY R. L. TAYLOR

A high-seas collision between 45,000 tons of steel moving at 15 knots and 2,900 tons travelling at 27 knots can't be good. A witness provides a first-person look at the event and its aftermath.



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USS EATON ASSOCIATION

Crewmen on board the Wisconsin and Eaton inspect the damaged destroyer. Thick fog, a contributing factor in the ships' collision, still obscures their upper levels and the horizon.

The plan for Sunday, 6 May 1956 began simply enough. The Navy was to parade a small task group for politicians during a routine weekend cruise 50 miles off the Virginia Capes. What was not planned was the day's chaos, confusion, and destruction.

The heart of the formation consisted of the aircraft carrier *Coral Sea* (CVA-43), battleship *Wisconsin* (BB-63), and heavy cruiser *Des Moines* (CA-134). They were ringed by four *Fletcher*-class destroyers from Escort Destroyer Division 22 refitted for antisubmarine warfare: the *Eaton* (DDE-510), *Bache* (DDE-470), *Beale* (DDE-471), and *Murray* (DDE-576). The *Eaton* was flagship for the division commander, Captain Terrell H. W. Conner, who was called commodore by custom and courtesy. I was the *Eaton*'s gunnery officer.

Unfortunately, the politicians could not see much through the heavy, patchy fog that dogged the formation all morning. The fog was especially bad for the *Eaton* because our surface-search radar had been out of order for about four days. Slaving over the equipment 18 hours a day without making progress was the ship's senior electronics technician, a teenage seaman just out of school. Because of budget cuts, the Navy did not have enough Sailors with the requisite training and experience.

The politicians, however, might have something better to see in the afternoon. The *Eaton* was scheduled to fire at a target sleeve towed by an airplane and had broken out ammunition for the two 5-inch/38-caliber mounts.

Waiting impatiently for the fog to clear, the formation steamed up and down its operating area, north for a while and then south. At 1336 the admiral on board the *Coral Sea* set a course of 180 degrees at a comfortable 15 knots but did not change the screen axis. The *Murray*, which had been the lead ship, was now bringing up the rear as plane guard, 1,200 yards behind the carrier. The *Eaton* was on the *Coral Sea*'s starboard beam, 5,600 yards away, with the *Beale* on the port beam at the same distance. The *Bache* was 4,700 yards out front.

At 1501, the formation reversed course to 000. The *Murray* was once again leading, with the *Bache* now trailing, and the *Eaton* and *Beale* off either beam of the carrier. We were now to her port, but somewhere out in that fog the *Wisconsin* was between the carrier and us.

At 1510, a lookout on board the carrier reported a man overboard. Normally, destroyers fished wet seamen and pilots out of the ocean.

A noise so loud it made a 5-inch gun sound like a .22 ripped through the space.



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The Wisconsin makes her way into port with the results of her collision with the Eaton very evident. Her damaged bow was later replaced with a like portion from the uncompleted battleship Kentucky.

The commodore, who was on the bridge, then made an incredible decision. Although the *Bache* was a half-mile astern of the *Coral Sea* in a prime position to recover the lost seaman, Commodore Conner picked up the primary tactical radiophone and declared, "Sea Dog (the *Eaton*'s voice call) is on the way." He turned to the officer of the deck, Lieutenant (junior grade) Peter Schoeffel and said: "All right, let's go. Twenty-seven knots."

Schoeffel obeyed instantly, yelling: "Right full rudder. All ahead full." We could only make 27 knots on the two boilers then in use.

The ship's captain, Commander Richard Varley, then arrived from the right wing of the bridge and asked what was happening. After Schoeffel explained, the captain declared, "I've got the conn," and Schoeffel called for the rescue detail to man its boat. The OOD still remembers his impatience while waiting for the boat crew to swing out the motor whaleboat. The captain and the commodore, meanwhile, took turns looking at the radar repeater on the bridge. The World War II-

vintage equipment revealed only the sea return from our air-search radar. A little less than four minutes had elapsed since the man-overboard message was received.

Suddenly, a mountain of gray steel loomed out of the fog close aboard.

I was on my way to relieve Schoeffel and had stopped to have a cup of coffee in the wardroom with our new supply officer-to-be. We were alone when I heard the fog whistle blast. I started to stand up when a noise so loud it made a

5-inch gun sound like a .22 ripped through the space and I was thrown onto the couch on the port side of the wardroom. I got up and, following the supply officer, raced to the main deck. There we saw the *Wisconsin* towering above our starboard side, both ships dead in the water, the roar of escaping steam through popping safety valves mounted high on the forward stack sounding like a 40-mm rapid-fire mount.

As gunnery officer, my station was at the MK 37 gun director above the bridge where I had phone connections with the petty officers in the three gunnery divisions. After arriving



R. L. TAYLOR/USS EATON

The Wisconsin's knife-like bow slashed nearly half-way through the Eaton's hull, ripping off a portion of the weather deck and forward deckhouse and flattening the forward gun mount. Despite the extensive damage, no one was seriously injured.

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there, I was ready to start counting the dead and injured. Instead, the divisions reported all men present and accounted for. Looking at the incredible damage to the forecastle, I insisted on an eyeball, nose-to-nose count. Minutes later, the reports came back with the same good news and not a man injured. I was close enough to the bridge to hear similar reports there. The battleship's bow had ripped through our chiefs' quarters, and I fully expected all of them to be dead.

The crew did a remarkable job of damage control. All the damage was confined to the spaces forward of the No.1 fire room, where there was considerable flooding, but the propulsion machinery was unharmed. The forward 5-inch gun mount had been ripped from the main deck and knocked over the side, and ammunition prepared for the firing exercise was rolling around on deck. It was simply tossed overboard.

The mess decks were suddenly open to the sea. At the instant of the collision, the master-at-arms and a mess cook were breaking out food through a scuttle when the ocean began pouring in. As the seawater flooded the spaces, the master-at-arms grabbed the seaman by his hair and pulled him up through the scuttle. They waded to safety, dogging down hatches as they went.

Another *Eaton* Sailor, Fireman Apprentice G. W. Wikham, was hit in the face by an orange crate and later treated in the *Wisconsin's* sick bay. The captain's next-door neighbor, a weekend guest on the cruise, had a minor injury and was transferred to the battleship.

Many on board the *Wisconsin*, thinking the *Eaton* would sink, tossed us new orange life jackets. Going under never occurred to us. The destroyer was down ten feet by the bow but the situation was not getting any worse. We gingerly backed the ship out of her tangled mess of steel, away from the *Wisconsin*.

Gently, the *Eaton* turned toward Norfolk, some 50 miles away, and set off at dead-slow speed. The keel was obviously broken below the forward gun mount because the bow had a sickly wobble. Working well into the night, two boatswain's mates, Jack Kerns and Jackie Fleming, rigged a cable to stabilize the bow but soon realized it was not up to the task. They replaced the cable with the anchor chain. Our first lieutenant, Lieutenant (junior grade) Bob Sposito, worked with them into the night. The wobble ceased, and our draft remained steady.

Soon after the collision, the commodore had huddled a long time with his flag lieutenant on the signal bridge and then retired to his cabin. He did not emerge until we arrived in Norfolk. There was nothing he could do.

Later that evening, a fleet tug arrived and, after connecting a hawser to the stern, towed the *Eaton* stern first to the Norfolk Naval Base. She was a mess and arrived with jagged shards of twisted steel, as well as laundry and machinery, hanging out of the gash on her starboard side. The captain never left the bridge and refused any offer of coffee or conversation. He was a proud, efficient, and splendid commanding officer, and to a man, our officers believed he had done nothing wrong. We also knew—and he knew—his career was probably over.

We received a stunning surprise in dry dock several days later. As the water drained from the ship, I was waiting at the scuttle that led down to the rocket magazine two decks below the wardroom. I lifted the scuttle and discovered the magazine was flooded. Floating at its top was a three-inch-thick layer of yellow granulated explosive. The warheads, each loaded with 700 pounds of HBX, had been ripped open like cans of biscuits. Big hunks of the explosive, mixed with aluminum powder to increase underwater shock, resembled gray concrete. There was enough exposed HBX to blow both the *Eaton* and *Wisconsin* out of the water.

We carefully removed all ammunition from the ship and cleaned up the rocket magazine as best we could. But when

the yard workers finally lit their acetylene torches to cut out the wreckage, they ignited a stray piece of “concrete.” It sounded like a cherry bomb as it went off. The workers walked off the job demanding safer conditions.

The Navy wasted no time convening a board of investigation, which led to Commander Varley’s court-martial. His defense was based on common sense and logic: The commodore put the *Eaton* into harm’s way, and he had no authority to give the OOD a direct order to change the ship’s course and increase her speed. He could order the captain to maneuver, but no one else. Varley’s defense attorney also claimed that the *Wisconsin* was not on station where she was supposed to be.

Varley, nevertheless, was convicted of hazarding his ship, and lost 150 promotion numbers. This was later reduced to 50 on appeal, but his career was finished. Schoeffel and Ensign Ted Tarka, who had the Combat Information Center watch but because he had no usable radar could not keep a plot of the ships in formation, received letters of reprimand.

Schoeffel, a 1954 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, persevered in his career, never letting the specter of the collision get in his way. He volunteered for two years of sea duty followed by flight training at Pensacola, and he earned his wings. He went on to fly A4 Skyhawk attack aircraft.

We corresponded for a time but eventually lost contact. Years later, I caught an early-morning newscast about POW pilots who had been released by the Vietnamese. As the picture from Clark Field came into focus, the announcer named the pilot shown getting off the plane—Commander Peter Schoeffel, who had served nearly seven years in the Hanoi Hilton prison. (He remembers six years and five months.) Damn! No wonder he didn’t write.

To the *Wisconsin*’s crew we must have looked like a bunch of green college boys unfamiliar with the basic rules of the road. In fact, we were some of the best-trained and most-experienced ship handlers in the Fleet. We specialized in high-speed night operations, with darkened ship and radio silence, working with *Essex*-class carriers to perfect antisubmarine tactics. We had the best equipment—our radar notwithstanding—and the best weapons. What we did not have was adequate manning and supply support. Before that disastrous Sunday, we had never come close to having an accident.

As antisubmarine warfare officer of the deck I was often on the bridge for 18 hours at a stretch with the captain and commodore and got to see both in action. Breaking off a submarine contact and racing into inky darkness to re-

form a protective screen for a carrier is not child’s play, and Captain Varley almost always let the OODs conn the ship in those situations. And many times Commodore Conner would congratulate the OOD for some smart ship handling that got us to the right place—not on time, but early.

I served under three commodores in my 37 months on the *Eaton*. Among them, Captain “Terry” Conner was the warrior. He was gregarious, a bit of an extrovert with some hot dog in him, and was appointed to his command over

several senior officers. At times, on a quiet midwatch, he would amble up to the bridge and chat. I had no idea how he and the captain got along. There was never a sign of hostility and only one disagreement that I witnessed.

On that occasion, an unidentified submarine was shadowing the task group so closely it seemed the sub had our operation plans. Commodore Conner wanted to darken ship, go to general quarters, put live hedgehogs on the mounts, and load some rockets. Captain Varley disagreed. We were in international waters, he said, and that sub had as much right to be there as we did. Steaming around the ocean with an active gun mount could be viewed as a hostile act, he added. Besides, the task force commander, an admiral on the carrier, had not ordered us to battle stations.

Because I was not on the bridge that Sunday afternoon, I don’t have first-hand knowledge of how they were interacting. From witnesses who were there, it appears Conner was responsible for the collision. His order to Schoeffel to increase speed to 27 knots was as improper as slapping an admiral.

Had I been OOD, I would have done the same thing—right full rudder, all ahead full, turns for 27 knots. Right now, with no hesitation. That is the way it is supposed to work. When a four-striper tells a j.g. to go, he damn well goes.

Why did Conner make his call? Why did he send us through heavy fog across a formation when the *Bache* was much nearer the man overboard? Why didn’t the magazine explode?

We will never know.

It is bitter irony that this never should have happened. There was no man overboard from the *Coral Sea*. A Sailor had lost his hat, and an overzealous lookout thought someone went over the side. ⚓

After serving in the Naval Reserves, Mr. Taylor retired from journalism in 1992 after a 36-year award-winning career in newspapers, which ran the gamut from reporting to ownership and publishing. After retirement, he helped emerging newspapers in Slovakia, Romania, and Russia survive in their new free-market economies.



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Captain Terrell H. W. Conner was the destroyer division commander on board the *Eaton* who gave the fateful order.