

Why U.S. Warships have Small Arms Aboard

By Robert Porter Lynch

The carrying of small arms aboard Naval vessels goes back hundreds of years. At the founding of our Navy in the Revolution, all Frigates (like the Constitution in Boston Naval Shipyard) carried a contingent of Marines aboard that were stationed in the tops firing on the enemy's gun crews. In the event of the need for a landing party on unfriendly territory, such as hunting pirates (which we did in earnest between 1821-25), the landing party was appropriately armed.

Now for the juicy part (at least for me). In 1971 I was an officer aboard the newly commissioned DE/FF-1075. We were in Guantanamo Bay (GITMO) for our shakedown cruise (working out the thousands of "bugs" of every piece of gear). We were on Operational Readiness trials off the coast of Cuba when a Very High Priority Top Secret, Captain's Eyes Only encrypted message was received in the radio shack. I was the Top Secret Encryption Officer (among a myriad of other duties). I went to the crypto vault, took out the appropriate encryption codes for that day, raced to the Captain's Quarters with the message, and he then asked me to leave and called in the Executive Officer.

A minute or two later, the ship wheeled around abruptly and we rooster-tailed it back to GITMO. On the pier were crates of supplies and ammunition. All hands (including Officers, which was highly unusual) were ordered to bear a hand loading all the crates on the double.

All the GITMO Operational Readiness inspectors were ordered to stay on board. As the last crate was put on the fantail, the brow (gangplank) was taken in, all lines cast off, and we high-tailed it out of GITMO at flank speed bound to patrol the Windward Passage, the strait between Cuba and Haiti. No one but the Captain and the XO and the Gunnery Officer knew what was going on at that time. Why all the commotion? What could the Top Secret message have ordered?

As soon as we had cleared GITMO harbor, all Officers and Chief Petty Officers were called to the Wardroom. Laid out on the wardroom table were sufficient Colt Semi-Automatic 45s (know as 1911s) to arm us all. The Captain told us that Dictator Duvalier of Haiti (Popa Doc) had just died, and the CIA received information that Cuba was potentially preparing to cross the Windward Passage and invade Haiti (island of Hispaniola). We were the only ship in the immediate vicinity to fill the gap between Cuba and Hispaniola. (we took the southern station, and the Voge, DE-1044 took northern station.)

Worse, our main battery, a newly-designed 5" 54 gun mount (which was designed to fire a 5" shell at the rate of 1 shell per second) was CasRep'd (meaning it had been placed on the Casualty Report) -- it was inoperable due to some design flaws. Machine guns had not yet been mounted topside (that happened the next year in Subic Bay). Yikes, we had no other weapons to fight a Cuban invasion other than small arms!

Our Captain, Alan Higginbotham, a very good senior officer, explained grimly that our ship was not going to suffer the fate of the *U.S.S. Pueblo* under Captain Lloyd Bucher in 1968. That ship held the ignominious distinction of being captured without a fight (by the North Koreans only three years earlier). If we couldn't use our main battery, we'd have to engage in small arms. It would be a fight to the death - we weren't going to give up the ship (like Bucher and his crew who were tortured as prisoners of war.) The rest of the Gunner's Mates were issued the limited numbers of BARs and M-14s we had on board.

Then Chief Gunner's Mate Gerry Russell (who later after the Navy became a close friend), gave us all a short refresher course in how to use the 1911. We then strapped on the 45s, and went to General Quarters Battle Stations.

Fortunately (for us and for Haiti) the Cubans did not invade; we protected the peace with 45s and BARs and M-14s. If you don't think we all thought of ourselves as John Wayne prototypes (Sands of Iwo Jima, etc.), make no mistake -- the choice was clear: be scared of the grim possibility of warding off the Cuban amphibious armada with small arms, or be courageous, tough, and stalwart -- we chose the latter, which served us well the following year in Vietnam.

I was Officer of the Deck on the 4-8 (am) watch the following morning. We were standing modified General Quarters. Just before sunrise, our surface radar picked up a large number of skunks (unknown/unidentified vessels) leaving from the coast in the vicinity of Baracoa. If it was the amphibious armada of small vessels crossing the Passage, we were in trouble. A P-3 aircraft had come on station that evening; we sent it to scout the skunks. Fortunately they were just fishing boats leaving port. We all breathed a sigh of relief.

After the watch I went down to CIC (Combat Information Center) to check on the Electronics Signal Intelligence Reports (I was also Electronic Warfare Officer). EW1 Doxford was manning the EW gear, and blurted out he just detected what could have been a ping from a Russian missile tracking system emanating from the Gulf of Gonave in Haiti. We got pinged a second time -- set all electronics countermeasures, called for full General Quarters, and alerted Washington. Fortunately the radar profile was just slightly different from the missile tracking frequency -- it came from an innocent transmission by a merchant freighter. We were lucky again.

Cuba evidently decided to call off the invasion of Haiti.

Several years later I learned how delicate and dangerous the electronic warfare game can be. During the Falkland Islands war HMS Sheffield was hit and sunk by an Exocet missile. From what I was told, the missile was actually aimed at a British carrier, which cloaked itself in electronic disguise, repositioning itself to the missile. Once the missile passed through the false electronic image, it locked onto the *Sheffield*, a guided missile destroyer, which was located behind the carrier. In an instant the *Sheffield* was gone. They had only 5 seconds warning -- too little to respond. That was 1982; imagine what electronics are doing now.