



The Rescue in 1966

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Note: I have placed a Glossary at the end.

December 21st, 1966, I was a know-it-all Interior Communications Petty Officer, 3rd class, aboard the guided missile cruiser, USS Columbus. I had come aboard in January of that year for the adventure of a lifetime. You know, join the Navy and see the world kind of thing. Actually, Viet Nam was going on and I had decided that a nice climate controlled ship would be much better than a damp smelly foxhole with projectiles flying over head and people trying to kill me.

Since coming aboard in Norfolk, I had been to St Thomas, US, Virgin Island twice, Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico twice and countless two or three week cruises off shore to the Atlantic missile range for test firings. I got paid, had plenty to eat and a nice, comfortable place to sleep. Couple this with plenty of time off when I was in port, at twenty I was on top of the world.

In September we departed Norfolk for a six month deployment to the Mediterranean Sea area. Our sister ship, the Albany, had been there for nearly six months and it was time for her to return to the states. After making one last calling in St. Thomas to take on booze for the officer's wardroom, we

crossed to Gibraltar and the rendezvous with the Albany near Palma de Majorca. From that point until the 21st of December it was an enjoyable working cruise at Uncle Sam's expense. But, it all changed that day.

We had been in port near Plakias, Crete for a day where we took in the history and local culture. Local culture there is based upon the Greek curse of the gods, ouzo, the colorless alcohol flavored with anise. Thank god we did not sail early. Our next port of call was Ismir, Turkey where we would spend Christmas day. Departing Crete the weather was partly cloudy and the light wind blew from the lea off of the mountainous shore where the ship rode peacefully on a gentle swell. We were all professional seamen and quickly settled into the ship's routine for what should have been a day and a half passage North in the Aegean Sea to Ismir. Just before the change of the watch at 4 PM we rounded the Western tip of Crete and slammed into a nearly hurricane force North wind.

I was sure that Aphrodite, the goddess protector of semen, was not doing her job at the moment. I'm certain she was recovering from the previous evening where she graciously entertained the ship's crew at a local bar in Plakias. Swells fifty feet high slammed into the bow of the ship lifting it high in the air then shook it furiously before dropping it to meet the next great wall of water. After an hour banging into these swells the officer of the watch ordered the engines slowed to ease the ride and while the banging stopped, the footing deep in the ship was still difficult. I think the old shell back boson was the only one to eat dinner that evening. The cooks said that he locked his legs around the table; held his tray with one hand to keep it on the table; slung his fork with the other; sang fifteen rounds of "Blow the Man Down" between bites; and cursed the land lubbers who choose the easy life ashore. He was a salty lifer who was admired by all us young'uns.

At 7 PM I went to the ship's theater to watch some movie that I now can not remember. Near the end of the second reel the ship took a great roll that we all thought she would not recover from. Men

and chairs all piled to one side, the projector fell off of its stand and loud banging, and clanging could be heard coming from somewhere deep in the ship. All of this was happening in the dark of the theater. I found my way to the door.

The 1MC system crackled to life with the captain's voice saying that we had just made a major course change to go the aide of a Greek Ferry Boat that was sinking about 26 miles north west of our position. He had obviously ordered an increase in speed because the Columbus was once again banging into the head sea.

I knew that I would get no sleep this night because I had the mid watch (midnight to 4:00AM). I had counted on sleeping after I got off watch but now I knew that any search and rescue operation would drag on into the next day and I would want to be in the middle of the whole thing. On unsteady legs I made my way to the galley for a cup of coffee, and then poked my head out of a main deck door to see what the weather was like. It was a whole gale. The night was completely dark. Not a light was to be seen. Only the faint glow of the phosphorescence in the water as it rolled beneath the ship gave a clue as to where the water was and the sky began. I slammed the door and dogged it tight again, then made my way up to the bridge.

On the bridge the captain and watch officer were bending over the chart table discussing the coming operation in low mumbled tones. I looked through the bridge windows in the direction we were heading but still no light was in sight. By this time we must have been about fifteen miles from the last reported position of the ferry, but there was no light to be seen. The captain shouted to the radar operator to let him know when there was a target on the screen that might be the ferry. "Aye, captain," was his reply along with, "I have six other targets on the scope that are converging on the same position as us. They are probably other search and rescue vessels." "Very well," the captain said.

The position we were all heading to was a point about 15 miles southwest of Melos Island. This piece of ground sticking out of the Aegean Sea has been inhabited since at least the 14th century BCE. Perhaps millions of seafarers have lost their lives in the water surrounding this place. It is about halfway between Peiraus, near Athens, and Herakleion, Crete.

The name of the ship in distress was the *Herakleion*. She was a car and passenger ferry almost 350 feet long and displaced about 15,000 tons. I don't know what her passenger limit was but on this fateful night she carried over 450 passengers and crew excited for the start of the Christmas season. But now, as we approached her last reported position there were no lights on the water.

The watch officer called for general quarters for search and rescue and I left the bridge to go to my station. As I walked down the outside ladder on the port side, (one sheltered from the wind) the boson was turning on the huge spotlight to search the water. Already the Columbus was passing through a debris field. Bunker "C" oil, used for firing the boilers of the ferry, floated everywhere. Deck chairs, cardboard boxes, planks, loaves of bread, were all held together by the oil like glue. I think the thing I will never forget is the smell.

The smell seemed to defy the gale force wind. It had a pungent, petroleum and salt marsh smell. Mixed in all this was the remainder of every human smell on the ship. Onions from the galley, perfume from the cabins, cocktails from the bar, baby diapers and more all mixed together and hung in the air like a spirit reluctant to give up. It was unlike anything I had ever smelled and it was horrible. Just an hour or two ago these smells were all in their proper places. The people who made them were alive and excited about the future. Now, the best that we could do was to find a life in the cold dark water clinging to hope. I hurried on down into the bowels of the Columbus to man my duty station next to the Combat Information Control room.

During the next ten hours we miraculously found twenty six people alive and clinging to flotsam. In addition, we picked up about forty bodies wearing life preservers. These poor souls must have entered the water alive, but died from exposure. The sea water that night was 33 degrees (f). It was a miracle that we found anyone alive that night. Out of the more than 450 people on the Herakleion that night only 26 people survived.

By day light the wind had laid down somewhat and there was a large international group of ships in the search area. Freighters and Tankers of nearly every major seafaring nation picked up bodies. There were Russian Frigates, Italian Destroyers, Greek fishing boats, and private yachts all circling the debris field. At about 7:00 AM I went on deck to view the scene. Our ship was maneuvering along side a truck van body that was floating with just its top above the water. The boson had one of his men lowered to the top where he chopped a hole in it with a fire axe so that it would sink, thus not be a hazard to navigation. It was loaded with oranges. They took five or six cases out of the truck before it slipped beneath the waves. Later I heard that there was speculation that the truck might have broken its chain restraints and knocked a hole in the ferry causing it to sink.

Perhaps no one will really ever know for sure what caused the Herakleion to founder that night and take so many souls to their cold water grave. The search went on for another day but we left the scene around noon that day to take the survivors on up to Peiraus to salvage whatever they could of their lives. The Columbus continued on to Ismir, Turkey arriving on Christmas Eve in time for a poignant and much appreciated observance of the holiday. It was my first Christmas away from home.

Photo
USS Columbus in 1967 preparing to take on fuel at sea in the Mediterranean.

Glossary

1MC – This is the main paging system on any US Navy Ship.

Bow – the pointy end of the ship.

Bridge – the part of the ship where the steering wheel and engine commands are used to control the operation of the ship.

Dogged – leavers around the edge of a door or hatch that are used to make it water tight.

General Quarters – This is the alarm that calls the crew to their duty stations for some purpose like battle or in this case, search and rescue.

Head sea – large waves meeting the ship head on.

Interior Communications Petty Officer - This is a non-commissioned officer whose work involves the technical aspects of providing fire control information such as ship's heading, speed, wind direction and speed to the weapons systems. This function also maintains the telephone and television systems of the ship.

Land Lubber – is a person who knows very little about life at sea and would prefer to chart his course on dry land.

Officer of the watch – the officer actually in command of the operation of the ship.

Port Side – the left side of the ship.

Shell back boson – this is a person whose job it is to tend to all the lines and exterior maintenance of the ship (painting). The boson's department also operates the ships small launches. This boson was a shell back because he had crossed the equator. He had also been in the Navy a long time. He was what we call a salty lifer.

Wardroom – the officers country club on the ship.