



Sea Stories

email your sea stories and other correspondence to mel.harder@snet.net

Subject: A U.S.S. Guardian (AGR-1) Sea Story
Date: Sun, 23 Jun 2019
From: Frederick Muller <ted.muller@att.net>

Gentlemen,

Attached is a personal account of our making it through Hurricane Ella in October 1962 on our way to participating in the Cuban Missile Crisis blockade. It is all true and you may have room for the story as part of the Guardian's history. I proudly served as the Electronics Officer in 1962-1963.

Frederick L. (Ted) Muller, LT, U.S.N.R., 1960-65.

THE HURRICANE BEFORE THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS October 1962

In October 1962 our U.S. Navy ship, the *U.S.S. Guardian*, was ordered by Secret message to proceed southwest on course 225 degrees at best possible speed from our operations in the northern latitudes of the mid-Atlantic, far off the coast of Canada, to take our position in the Naval blockade of Cuba as part of the U.S. response to the Soviet missile threat. We had a problem on the way down: Hurricane Ella with 130 knot winds and horrendous seas. Between North Carolina and Bermuda, she took a rare, if not unique in NOAA's records, turn to the southeast and became stationary instead of proceeding northeast along the usual tracks closer to the U.S. coast. We hit Ella head-on and were subjected to three complete days of 50-foot and higher waves with a periodicity of seconds accompanied by frightening winds.

The ship rolled, pitched and yawed violently as we climbed a wave with the screw lifting out of the water, spinning uncontrollably thus threatening to burn out the bearings and lock up the shaft. Then we sped down the wave's backside and crashed into the oncoming one, burying the bow deep in the water, before lifting again to start all over. The ship would

take repeated 40-degree rolls, teeter on its side shaking for a long minute, testing our faith that we would recover stability for a few moments. That process was repeated for three days. Meanwhile, the ship groaned, and metal twisted, flinging all aboard into bulkheads like ragdolls, causing extreme seasickness for most of the crew and injuring some. At all costs we had to keep the bow straight into the waves, which required a strong seaman at the helm needing frequent relief and a resolute captain and officers-of-the-deck in charge. The 130 knot winds moved around to starboard as the hurricane vortex dictated, thus pushing us to port, constantly making the ship vulnerable to a forced move to a broadside position parallel to the waves. With no way to recover from such a situation, the sea would engulf us and ensure the crew a place in the next world. With the ship completely buttoned-up for watertight integrity, the internal temperature was over an oppressive 100 degrees and the fuel oil stench was sickening and pervasive.



A friend aptly described an angry sea as "primal chaos". We thought the fist of God had descended upon us with no escape possible. Over 150 souls on our ship met God face-to-face in those 72 hours of unmitigated terror never thinking there was much chance for survival. One of the ship's 15 officers at age 24, I had to appear to be far braver than I was as Officer-Of-The-Deck in performing my leadership duties when the captain was not on the bridge. No one slept, showered or ate much at all. Yet, all hands, with few exceptions, kept their poise, functioned admirably and performed dangerous tasks under punishing stress. I learned what the word teammates meant in its full dimensions and how dependent we were on one another.

But we did make it. That encounter with nature at its most violent brought into grave focus the fragility of

life not only for me personally but also for the crew members. Contemplating an unknown fate from possible nuclear annihilation of family and many Americans, we proceeded to our station in the blockade with fellow Navy ships of the Second Fleet. Our orders were to aggressively contest and hound the oncoming Soviet surface ships and submarines, but not attack with live weapons. Our commanders and President Kennedy's team in the White House did not know the Soviet submarines were armed with nuclear torpedoes at the time and the U.S. only learned about it when we and the U.S.S.R. jointly declassified our respective records of the Cuban Missile Crisis, simultaneously, in the late 1980's. Why the Soviet submarine captains, under continuous harassment by our ships, did not fire their torpedoes to surely ignite nuclear war was an act of courage on

their part almost beyond comprehension. A perfect example of an unknown risk in the fog of war. As well-publicized in the media accounts right after the encounter, we asserted that the Soviets "blinked first" and a nuclear holocaust was averted. Two weeks later we returned to homeport in Newport for a few days of rest and ship repairs before heading out to the North Atlantic again.

By the grace of God, the *World* and the *Guardian* escaped a close encounter with Armageddon!

*Frederick L. (Ted) Muller, LT, U.S. Navy, 1960-65
6-16-2019*

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