

HOWARD E. BARTHOLF
12011 SUNRISE ROAD
RICHMOND, VA 23233
SS# 149-36-4605
HOME PHONE 804-364-26
OFFICE 804-279-8800

SS AMASTRA – BRITIAN'S UNHERALDED CONTRIBUTION
TO THE VIETNAM WAR EFFORT

It is rare that a naval vessel once sunk to the bottom of the seabed is given a new lease on life. For the SS Amastra, a British registered Shell Oil Tanker that was the case.

Early on the pitch black morning of Wednesday, April 12th 1967, while I was walking my guard mount in the motor pool of the 459th Signal Battalion at Camp John F. McDermott at Nha Trang, a terrific explosion pierced the nighttime quiet. The Sergeant of the Guard checked my post and asked if I had seen anything. All I could say was that I had not, and that the explosion seemed to have come from the harbor, just a few hundred yards to the east of our encampment. As I had been up most of the night, when my guard relief came on duty, I retired to my tent to get some much needed shut eye.

The next morning, I was detailed to carry some messages down to higher headquarters and was driving in a jeep down along the beach road paralleling the harbor when I noticed a large vessel sunk by the stern resting in about sixty feet of water. It was the SS Amastra.

The Amastra, a 12,273 gross ton tanker had been unloading 15,000 tons of aviation fuel when the explosion occurred. Viet Cong frogmen had planted plastic explosives on the hull which tore a hole six feet by four feet wide about ten feet below the ship's waterline.

The cargo had been loaded aboard Amastra in Singapore and the ship had been in Nha Trang's harbor unloading the precious cargo into an underwater pipeline since Tuesday April 11th. Most of the JP4 fuel had been unloaded at the time of the explosion and that helped prevent a much more horrific catastrophe. Luckily, there was no loss of life or serious injury to the crewmembers.

The Second Engineer aboard Amastra was Colin Avery. In his memoir of that event, he States "at approximately 00:15 the whole world seemed to turn upside down. A massive explosion awaked me and simultaneously the ship felt as though it was leaping out of the water and a huge searing blue flash from outside lit up my bedroom. She settled back into the water, rocking and groaning and with the noise of the shockwave echoing all around". As Colin picked himself up he grabbed a towel to cover himself with and made for the door. He ran into the Chief Steward's wife, a Mrs. Harry Travis, who was also aboard ship. She had purchased a canary named "Guinness" somewhere during the ship's voyage. As she came out of her cabin amidships, she shouted "Colin, Colin, save the canary, save the canary". He tried to reassure her, but told her he was rather busy at the moment.

Chief Steward Harry Travis would himself recall "We had been to see a movie that night and we went to bed about 10:30, expecting to sail for Camh Ranh Bay the next morning, but we were awakened about 12:15 a.m. I wasn't sure whether it was the explosion that woke me or the fact that I banged my head against part of the bed. I got up and the ship was rocking".

As Colin Avery made his way to the funnel deck, the event was only minutes old. He spied an American fast patrol boat, approaching from the port side. He stated "I remember vividly, even now, seeing a crewmember on its bow manning a machine gun, another on the cabin roof and the boat commander, chubby in his kapok flak jacket and with his steel helmet pulled businesslike over his forehead. To my horror he had a flare gun in his hand which he suddenly aimed across our main deck and pulled the trigger. You daft b-----d I mouthed, as the flare sped towards our discharge manifold. I started running to the ladders down onto the stern. Fortunately the flare cleared the ship completely" It would have been like throwing a match into a gas can.

Sometime later that morning the salvage ship USS Current ARS-22 arrived on the scene to begin salvage and refloating efforts. Most of the forty three crewmembers left the Amastra around 0400 hours and were taken ashore to Camp McDermott. Salvage operations continued under the direction of the Current's Commanding Officer LCDR George M. Giganti. I recall many fuel trucks lining the beach area for several days helping to offload the fuel so the ship could be "lightened" for refloating. Within days another company ship the "Kara" arrived on the scene to assist with offloading.

Once the Current's crew constructed and affixed a temporary patch over the gaping hole in the ship's hull, pumps were started and the compartments were pumped out, allowing the ship to rise to the surface. A member of Currents crew LtJg Vince Weis recalled his work on Amastra as follows " I did a dive with a Harbor Clearance Unit One staff member in the interior of the ship using shallow water gear. We had to go into the engine room that was filled with gas fumes to close a whole set of valves in order for the oil cargo in the Amastra to be pumped out of her tanks to help refloat the ship. This dive

was the only one I did in the navy without getting wet and it was one of the most dangerous dives I ever made.”

After being raised to the surface, the ship was made seaworthy after many days and on the 29th of April the ship was ready for departure under tow, by two Smit Salvage tugs named “Humber” and Loire”. The ship’s destination was Singapore where she entered the dockyard on May 4th.

The Amastra, which was built by Smith’s Dockyard Company, Middlesbrough England in 1958, went on to serve many more years, making repeated voyages back to Vietnam. She was sold for scrap in 1985, towed to Chittagong, Bangladesh on the Bay on Bengal and cut up. Her ship’s bell adorned the desk of Mark Moody-Stuart, former Chairman of Shell Transport and Trading Company for many years.

Strangely enough, after my return from Vietnam in September 1967, I read in the paper that another Shell tanker, the SS Helisoma was mined and sunk in almost the same spot in Nha Trang harbor, in December of 1968. It was De ja vu all over again. It has been suggested that VC swimmers from the near by beach hamlet of Truong Tay, a known VC infested fishing village, were responsible for both sinkings.

Although the British government was not overly supportive of our effort in Vietnam, and had no armed contingent in country, with the exception of some New Zealand and Australian units, there were few restrictions placed upon British commercial vessels transporting goods and supplies to the American forces. The maritime commercial industry of the United Kingdom played an important role in materially assisting our government.

Sadly, as a footnote to the Amastra's story, Chief Engineer Colin Avery passed away in January of 2003. Commander George Giganti retired from the navy and lives in Hawaii. Mrs Joan Travis at age 92 was still living in her native England as of 2004. As for "Guinness" the canary, it's fate is unknown.

BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Howard E. Bartholf was born in Hoboken New Jersey in 1947. He grew up in Bergen County New Jersey and received his elementary and high school education in Closter and Demarest New Jersey. Bartholf also attended Bergen Community College and Virginia Commonwealth University. He entered the United States Army in 1965 and served until 1971. His assignments included, Fort Dix, New Jersey, Fort Benjamin Harrison Indiana, Fort Huachuca Arizona, Fort Eustis Virginia and a year in the Republic of Vietnam. While in Vietnam, he was assigned to the 459th Signal Battalion, 21st Signal Group, 1st Signal Brigade. His decorations include the Good Conduct Medal, National Defense Service Medal, Vietnam Service Medal, Vietnam Campaign Medal, Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross with Palm, and the Meritorious Unit Citation. He also holds the New Jersey Meritorious Service Medal and New Jersey Vietnam Service Medal.

He is a Charter Member of the Army Historical Foundation, and maintains membership in the International Naval Research Organization (INRO), the Sons of the American Revolution, the 459th Signal Battalion Association and in addition sits on the Board of Directors of the First Signal Brigade Association. He also is a holder and member of the Order of the Silver Rose. By profession, he is an Industrial Sales Engineer. He resides in Richmond, Virginia with his wife Janet Benning Bartholf.

REFERENCE SOURCES

NEWSPAPERS

The New York Times 12 April 1967
New York, NY

The New York Times 13 April 1967
New York, NY

Stars and Stripes April 1967

MISCELLANEOUS

The Records of the 459th Signal Battalion
Howard E. Bartholf, Battalion Historian, Richmond, Virginia

Annual Dinner Report of Mark Moody-Stuart, Chamber of
Shipping, Royal Dutch/Shell Group, 22 January 2001

COMSERVPAC Information Bulletin, "Current Sparks Salvage
Work", August 1967

Memoir of Colin Avery, Chief Engineer, SS Amastra

The History of the USS Current ARS-22

Letter communication between Cmdr George M Giganti, USN
And Howard E. Bartholf 13 February 2002

Letter and E.mail communications between James Vasko and
Howard E. Bartholf, Various dates

Letter communications between Mrs. Joan Travis and Howard E. Bartholf, Various dates

Letter and e.mail communications between Colin Avery and Howard E. Bartholf, Various dates.

E.mail communications between Vince Weis and Howard E. Bartholf, March 2002

Coventry Web, Writer's Corner M.S. Amastra by Dorothy Roberts