



"Amastra" mined Nha Trang Vietnam

picture by Barney Boylan, with permission.

Vietnam, Nha Trang bay, POL station.

Picture shows Barney Boylan on the left, with hands in pockets.

The Amastra's crew is returning to the vessel in a landing craft.

The crew volunteered to go back on board to tie up the Dutch Shell tanker "Kara" when she would come alongside.

Here follows the story by Barney Boylan as published on Helderline, with permission.

On the 11th April 1967 I found myself sailing along the coast of Vietnam bound for the port of Nha Trang. I was a crew member on board the Shell tanker MV Amastra.

We were carrying a cargo of Jp4 fuel for the American air force.

We had loaded this cargo in Singapore, while there the Bum Baot girls had come on board, along with an Indian Sikh, he was telling fortunes.

He told me I would be going home soon, I had already been on board the Amastra for seven months. On this morning I went on deck at seven o'clock to watch the early morning mist clear from the mountains, a first glimpse of this country so much in the news for so many years of war. Mid day came and we finally reached our destination in the large bay at Nha Trang. We were to anchor and connect up to a submarine pipeline, where we could remain as a floating storage depot for the American air force. The idea being the fuel would be safer in a ship in the bay than in the storage tanks ashore where the Viet Cong could attack and destroy it.

There would be no shore leave as we were in a war zone. That evening we had a film show on board, one of the three films we were allowed per month, so things were not so bad, a few cans of beer and a nearly new film, what more could we want.

The film ended about ten thirty pm, I returned to my cabin to play with the dials of my brand new Phillips World receive radio, just bought in Singapore. It had been a long day and soon I was in my bunk with lights out, but not for long.

I was rudely awakened by a dull thud and vibration in my cabin, quickly followed by the ships alarm bells being sounded. I was out of my bunk as quick as a cat chased up a tree by a bull dog, on with shoes and trousers, and one other very important thing my Lifejacket, for I could not swim an inch. I was met in the alleyway by my ship mate John Young from Longford and the third engineer shouting, get out quick she's going down. We dashed along the alleyway and up the companionway to the deck where we found the crew messman cowering down behind the ships steel bulwark. I asked him what had happened, he replied we might have been fired on from ashore, he didn't know for sure. Within an few more moments the lights went out and the ships horn sounded the abandon ship signal. My lifeboat station was amidships on the port side, which meant I now had to make my way along the catwalk above the tanks of jet fuel oil to reach my boat station, where my job was to tie the painter from the lifeboat to a bollard on the fore deck. I have often heard of the expression of a person's knees knocking together, now I was experiencing it for myself first hand as I made my way along the deck after securing the painter. My lifeboat had now been swung out over the ships side by the other crew members, when along came the marines to rescue us. Small patrol boats and amphicars were sent from shore when the lights went out, and our distress call was picked up. By now we could see and feel the ship sinking by the stern. The Viet Cong had sent out an under water swimmer to plant a limpet which blew a large hole in the engine room. As no one knew how many had been planted, we were told to stop lowering our own lifeboats and get in the rescue boats as quick as possible, because if there was another explosion we were all dead men. The marines in the amphicars brought us to a beach to await a lift to Camp McArthur, it was the start of a new day for all the crew now safely ashore in war torn Vietnam.

From US Navy archives the following story was extracted:

At 0010h, on April 12, 1967, the privately chartered 9,000 ton British flagged Shell Oil tanker M/V AMASTRA had been holed by an external explosive device while moored in the POL transfer anchorage in Nha Trang Harbor, Vietnam.

The AMASTRA was preparing to off load aviation fuel for military aircraft when the explosion ripped open a four by six foot jagged hole at the waterline near the fire wall between the engine room and the boiler room.

The engine room, fire room and the after pump room flooded in twenty minutes causing the AMASTRA's stern to settle to the harbor bottom leaving the rear decks awash.

Another Shell Oil tanker, the Dutch flagged M/V KARA from 's-Gravenhage, Netherlands arrived and moored port side to the AMASTRA. The KARA provided auxiliary power and steam so AMASTRA could transfer 640,000 gallons of fuel to the KARA. The AMASTRA's damaged area was thirty feet below the water line and required a twelve by twelve-foot patch.

In the early morning hours of April 13, USS "Current" ARS-22 arrived at Nha Trang. Shortly after arriving, the work boat was placed in the water and a salvage team departed for the tanker to survey the damage and plan a course of action. Commander Service Group Three salvage officer Commander J. B. Orem was designated Officer in Charge of the AMASTRA salvage operation. USS "Greenlet" ASR-10 as well as Harbor Clearance Unit One's HCT-3 staff members were also sent from Vung Tau to assist during the re-floating operation.

Floodlights were secured on USS "Current" ARS-22's rails and directed into the waters around the ship at sunset. Armed sentries were posted during darkness to defend against any attempt to attach an explosives charge to USS "Current" ARS-22's hull. Early each morning, USS "Current" ARS-22 weighed anchor and moored starboard side to AMASTRA. At the end of each day, USS "Current" ARS-22 departed AMASTRA and re-anchored in the center of Nha Trang Harbor for security.

Prior to transferring fuel oil to the KARA, USS "Current" ARS-22 diver LTJG Vince Weis along with a HCU -1 diver wearing shallow water diving gear went into the AMASTRA's engine room, filled with dangerous gas fumes, to close a set of valves that allowed AMASTRA's oil cargo to be transferred to the KARA. USS "Current" ARS-22's crew rigged salvage pumps and compressors then transferred them to the decks of AMASTRA. After the ship's divers maneuvered a fabricated patch into place to stop the inflow of sea water into the engine room, the salvage pumps were started and the AMASTRA began to show freeboard. The spaces on the AMASTRA that had been flooded were cleared with the help of thirty to forty Vietnamese and Filipino stevedores.

With the loss of power for refrigeration, combined with the hot climate of Vietnam, an estimated six thousand pounds of spoiled meat and vegetables were removed from AMASTRA to a barge then dumped at sea. While ashore hiring the stevedores, USS "Current" ARS-22's Operations Officer LTJG Mark Lusink in a conversation with local villagers was informed that the AMASTRA was mined by the South Vietnamese to prevent it from sailing to Haiphong, North Vietnam. Shell Oil tankers did not travel to North Vietnam.

The initial investigation indicated that a Limpet mine of approximately 80 to 90 pounds of explosives was used. In view of the close proximity of 150 yards to the beach hamlet of Truong Tay, a known haven for local pilferers, black marketers and other questionable individuals, the investigation determined that the explosive charge was most likely delivered from the hamlet area by a swimmer sapper. The Vietnam war was certainly a strange and crazy war. The majority of the 43 man crew was removed by local Army landing craft about half an hour after the explosion. They spent the night at the American Army Officers' quarters at Camp John McDermott in Nha Trang.

On April 22, 1967, USS "Current" ARS-22's salvage crew successfully raised and dewatered the AMASTRA. The fabricated patch was removed and a more permanent steel patch was constructed. SFM2 "Ace" Acfalle, one of USS "Current" ARS-22's ship fitters, spent the better part of two days, without any rest, welding the metal patch to the AMASTRA to make it seaworthy.

The AMASTRA was towed by commercial tug to Singapore for dry-docking and repairs.



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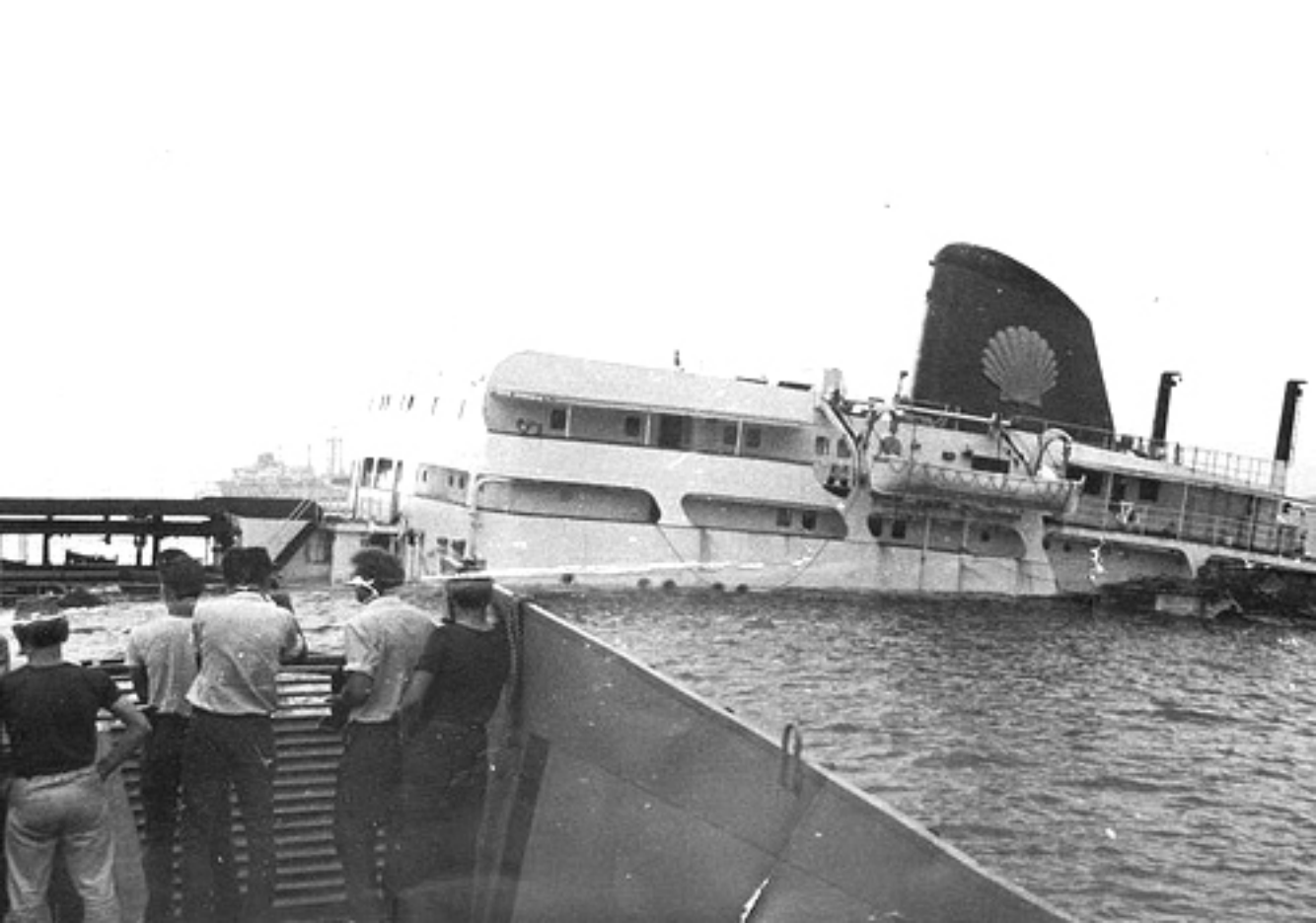
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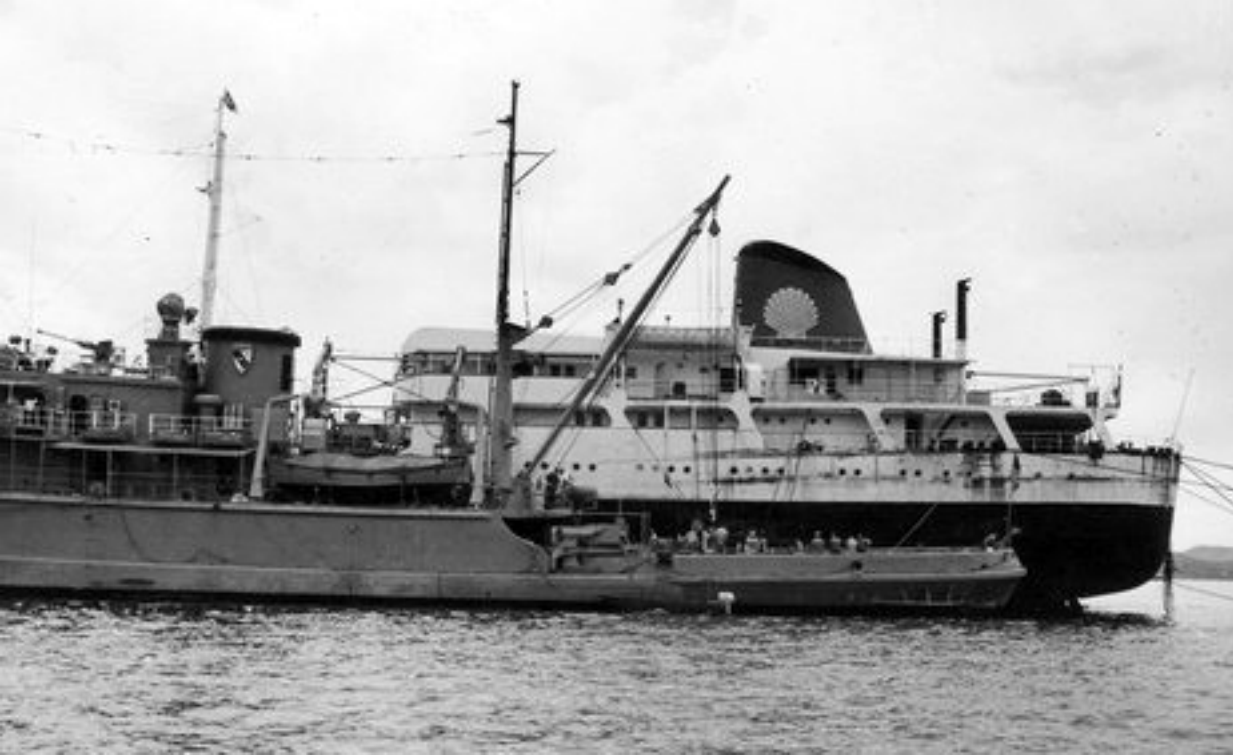
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CURRENT





































"Amastra" under attack



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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.

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