

Barry Litchfield  
USS Ponchatoula (AO-148)  
18 March, 1967  
First Watch, 0300 Hours  
Tonkin Gulf  
Approx. 40 miles off Cap Lay, Vietnam

I was standing watch as lookout on the starboard bridge wing during the early morning hours of 18 March, 1967. It was a clear night with good visibility, and the water and wind was fairly calm. I had been standing watch for approximately three hours of a four hour watch rotation. There were no other ships visible in the area where we were operating. As I was scanning the horizon looking for other ships, a red flare was observed about 20 degrees off the starboard bow. It was a small flare, and it didn't last but about 2 or 3 seconds. I called out to the Officer of the Deck, Lt. Johns, to report what I had observed. I'm not sure he believed me because he told me to let him know if I saw any more flares as he turned and walked back inside the bridge. Again I observed a flare, and again called out to Lt. Johns. He was not able to observe it, but the lookout on the port bridge wing, and a signalman also saw the second flare and reported it to Lt. Johns as well.

Captain Greer was awakened, Lt. Johns ordered "all stop", and the engine order telegraph was set to "all stop" by the man standing the Lee Helm watch. The person in the water who had shot off the flares started blowing a whistle, like a policeman, or sports referee would use. The OOD got out a bull horn and told the person in the water to blow the whistle three times if they could understand English. The person in the water blew the whistle three times, waited a few seconds, blew it three times, waited a few more seconds, and blew it three more times.

The signalmen used the signal lights to search the area where the flares were observed. When the beam of the signal light hit the person in the water it was a very bright white reflection from his helmet, like a reflective highway sign. We were pretty sure it was an American pilot, and the Ponchatoula slowly maneuvered closer to the person in the water. The whale boat crew was loaded into the whale boat and it was lowered into the water. The engine on the whale boat started and they went toward the person who was being illuminated by the signal lights. When the person was reached by the whale boat a rope was thrown to the person in the water. **THE WHOLE ROPE WAS THROWN.** The person throwing the rope failed to hold onto one end so the person in the water could be pulled into the boat. He threw back one end of the rope back to someone in the boat and he was finally out of the water after 5 1/2 hours adrift with nothing but the inflatable life jacket he was wearing, pencil flares, and a whistle. We brought the whale boat back aboard with the downed pilot and the boat crew.

The person in the water was a Lt. Robert B. Moore II, a U.S. Navy pilot that had ditched his A-1 aircraft after it was badly damaged by North Vietnamese anti-aircraft fire. Lt. Moore was flying a gunfire support mission about 40 miles north of Dong Hoi, Vietnam when he was hit with anti aircraft fire. His communication and navigation equipment was knocked out by the anti-aircraft fire and he could not fix his position or communicate with his home carrier, USS Hancock (CVA-14). His aircraft sank very quickly because of the damage, and he did not have time to remove the life raft before it sank with the aircraft.

Captain Greer loaned Lt. Moore a dry uniform and boots to wear. The next morning USS Hancock sent a helicopter and picked up Lt. Moore from the USS Ponchatoula and transferred

him back to his ship. I had a chance to meet with Lt. Moore before he was returned to the USS Hancock. Below is a photo of that brief meeting.



Lt. Moore

Capt. Greer

SA Barry Litchfield

The next time we refueled USS Hancock the crew of USS Ponchatoula was rewarded with a surprise that was transferred from Hancock to Ponchatoula by highline during the underway replenishment. It is a Navy tradition when a Navy pilot is recovered by the crew of a ship, that ship's crew is rewarded with ice cream. Ponchatoula's crew received our reward from USS Hancock.

Captain Greer received the following letter from Lt. Moore and he gave me a copy:

19 March, 1967

Dear Captain Greer,

I just want to thank you, your lookouts, the whaleboat crew, and everyone of PONCHATOULA again for spotting me and picking me up out of the drink. It was mighty lonely out there and you certainly were a welcome sight.

I'm sure you've seen the message since as to what went on that night. Unknown to me, my wingman was shot down too during our run on target. He ditched and while trying to pick him up a couple of "tin cans" were taken under fire by shore batteries, one was hit, and they had to retreat. In the ensuing SAR effort our skipper and his wingman had a mid-air. My wingman and the skipper were picked up miraculously that night, but we fear the skipper's wingman was lost. Then of course you picked me up.

Somehow during the short time I had your clothes on I got some oil on them, probably from the helo. I'll have them washed and sent over with the boots.

Enclosed is \$5.00 which I think should go to the lookout who spotted my first flare for a fifth of whatever he wants. It may not have been hard to see as he put it, but he did his job and I feel I owe him something. If a parachute works, the parachute rigger gets a fifth and that's his job too.

Again many thanks,

Very respectfully,  
R. B. Moore