

Barry Litchfield
USS Ponchatoula (AO-148)
During the 1966 - 1967 WESTPAC cruise
Location - Formosa Straits
Sun Tans, Typhoon Pamela, and Snow

Ponchatoula had finished its latest series of underway replenishments "on the line" in Tonkin Gulf. We had pumped most of our tanks to empty or very close and we were riding very high in the water. We were on our way to Sasebo, Japan from Vietnam and we were looking forward to some R&R in Japan.

When Ponchatoula left Tonkin Gulf it was clear and very warm, but we were heading for winter weather in Japan. We were on holiday routine Christmas day and just had to do our normal watch schedule on Christmas. Dick Weber, Richard Palmer, and I were up on the 04 deck (the top deck) near the smoke stack and were stripped down to cut-off shorts made out of dungarees, and no shirts getting some sun. We were enjoying the nice weather on Christmas Day. Something two guys from Kansas City and one from Merrillville, Indiana were not used to seeing on Christmas.



Christmas Day Suntan - 1966 - 04 Deck

Our route to Japan took us through the Formosa Straits, between the island of Formosa, (Peoples Republic of China), and the Chinese mainland. Ponchatoula was heading into the path of Typhoon Pamela, a category 2 storm, rated between 96 - 110 MPH wind, that formed on Christmas day, 1966 and lasted until December 31, 1966. Ponchatoula did not get into the typhoon until after dark when things started getting pretty rough aboard Ponchatoula. The bow of the ship would clear the top of a wave, and then the bottom of the ship would slam into the trough of the wave as Ponchatoula fell from the crest. The bottom of the ship slamming into the water caused a vibration, or shock wave along the

keel that went to the stern, and seemed to bounce back toward the bow of the ship. By the time that vibration had reached mid-ship moving forward, it was met by a new shock wave heading aft. These were some serious vibrations. The Ponch seemed to be doing ok while we were heading into the waves, with the exception of these shock waves following the keel fore and aft. They were kind of annoying and worrisome for me.

After we had been shaken for what seemed like a long time, things got much worse. Ponchatoula lost power, went dark, and without propulsion we were turned by the wave action so the ship was "in the trough" with the ship rolling side to side in these enormous waves. I was in the 1st Division sleeping compartment in almost dark conditions. All we had for lights after we lost power was the battery powered lights that turned on automatically throughout the ship. Barely enough light to even know there was a light. The noise in the darkness consisted of large heavy metal trash cans sliding back and forth across the tiled deck and slamming into lockers, bulkheads, and the racks (bunks) that we slept in. Then some of the welds broke on the legs of the lockers, where they were secured to the deck, allowing them to join the trash cans in the sliding and slamming action as the ship rolled side to side at a very severe angles. Some of the crew was in the mess deck watching a movie when things went dark. They described the sounds of most of the Ponchatoula's drinking glasses and coffee cups sliding out of the cabinets and breaking on the deck, along with the trash cans and other things that were not secured, or had broken loose slamming into everything in their path. Many of the things that the crew had in their work spaces like tape recorders, etc. were falling off of shelves onto the deck.

We had power reestablished after what seemed like a long time and got underway again. We finally got past Pamela and we were on our way to R&R in Sasebo, and winter weather. The sea bag locker was unlocked for the crew so we could get out the blues and pea coats we would need for the winter weather in Sasebo. The first morning in Sasebo we woke up to snow. The weather had shown us that it's in charge and we are just along for the ride. Within about a three or four day period Ponchatoula had seen the good, the bad, and the ugly of Asian weather.

The forward cargo hold had very large spools of wire cable to use on winches that were stacked and secured to the bulkheads all around the cargo hold. These large wooden spools had fallen from the stacks as they broke loose and had started rolling around on the deck and slamming into anything that was in their path. Unfortunately, the Jeep that was used as the Captains vehicle was secured to the deck in the center of the same cargo hold as the spools of wire cable. The Jeep looked like it had been crushed by every spool of wire in the cargo hold. The wooden spools had broken and allowed the heavy wire cable to unravel off of the spools and it looked like a backlash on a fishing reel, only on a much larger scale. The cargo hold was a serious mess to clean up.