

“MAN OVERBOARD”

The USS Ponchatoula (AO-148) was three days out of Long Beach California on the way to Sasebo Japan. It was a clear sunny morning, with a warm light breeze. The Pacific Ocean was its usual deep dark blue color with normal gentle swells. It was a perfect day to conduct a man overboard drill.

Preparing for the drill

During the morning muster the word was put out that the Captain had ordered a man-overboard drill be conducted sometime that morning before noon. Of course we didn't know exactly when the drill would occur. The ship had a stuffed man overboard dummy named, "Oscar", (same as the man-overboard flag) dressed in a sailors work uniform. To start the exercise someone tosses "Oscar" over the side and yells, "Man Overboard".

We had assembled on the Signal Bridge, after morning muster, so the leading Petty Officer, QM1 Smitty, could assign the days work. During the assignments Smitty said, "Everyone keep on your toes this morning. Be ready to jump into action the minute you hear someone holler "man overboard".

All our training paid off

Around ten o'clock we heard, "Man-overboard starboard side". That was our call to action. I grabbed a pair of binoculars and headed to the starboard wing of the signal bridge and scanned aft for "Oscar". Jim ran over to the port side and gave a yank on the halyard to release the man-overboard flag, which flowed freely.

Jim then ran over to the Starboard side, with a pair of binoculars, to help me keep "Oscar" in site. I pointed to where he was so we both could keep a visual on him until the ship was brought back around. At the same time Petty Officer Bowen headed aft to the life boat with a portable signal lamp, semaphore flags and a very pistol (flare gun).

As soon as the word was passed, "man-overboard", the Officer of the Deck began bringing the ship back around 180° using a "Williamson Turn". So far so good! Jim and I continued to maintain visual contact.

Petty Officer Bowen ran across the cargo deck and up the ladder to the 02 level and down the starboard side aft where the rest of the life boat crew was assembling by the Motor Whale Boat. The crew was

made up of a Coxswain, Engineman, Corpsman, Signaller and an Officer. "Lets go", hollered the boat officer". As soon as all hands were onboard the deck force started began lowering the boat into the water even though the crew was still in the process of putting on their life jackets.

All of a sudden, without warning, the five crew members found themselves in the ocean. While the boat was being lowered and was still twenty feet above the water, the forward Raymond Release Hook attached to the falls malfunctioned. The boat fell forward, throwing all five men into the ocean. Luckily, all five men were able to hang onto their life jackets. No one hit the water without one.

"Shit", we now had five shipmates in the ocean and in possible danger. It was too early to know if anyone had been injured in the fall. The OOD hollered up to the signal bridge, "Signals, whatever you do don't lose sight of the five men". The ship was again brought around 180° to head for the men in the water. I hollered back to the OOD, "We've got them in sight sir".

The men had been able to group together. Two of them had managed to hang onto their white hats, which made it easier to keep

them in sight. Also, Petty Officer Bowen had not lost the semaphore flags and was frantically waving them over his head. To our advantage the ocean had only light swells and the water temperature was in the sixties.

The men in the water seemed to be doing okay until one of them blurted out, "I wonder if they're any sharks around here". Of Course this added to an already stressful situation. Just in case, there was a Gunnersmate standing by, on the ship's 01 level, with an M-1 rifle. There were no sharks spotted but it did make for some long anxious moments for the men in the water.

While the ship was getting turned around the deck force went to work getting one of our liberty launches ready to lower into the water. As soon as we got near enough the boat was dispatched out to pick them up. The men were retrieved without further incident and brought safely back. Once the crew was back aboard we all breathed a sigh of relief. The five men were sent to Sick Bay for an examination to determine their condition and given the traditional shot of medicinal whisky. Other than being wet and shook up all five were okay.

The Motor Whale Boat was also retrieved. The after hook had held fast and the deck crew was able to bring her back aboard and into

the cradle, ready for use the next time she was needed. We even managed to retrieve "Oscar". The only losses were the battery operated portable signal lamp, the flare gun, a few Dixie Cups and an Officers Cap.

The whole crew received a "Well done" from the Captain for the excellent way the emergency was handled. Cool heads, fair weather, quick action and hours of training had prevented a bad outcome. The deck crew was admonished for lowering the boat before everyone onboard had secured their life jackets.

The five members of the boat crew had a pretty good story to tell their grand kids someday.