Crossing the Path of a Black Cat

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When a black cat crosses your path, it is supposed to bring bad luck. But what happens when you cross the path of a black cat? I crossed the path of a black cat in January 1971. Not only did I cross the cat's path; I joined in its path for the next two and a half years.

The black cat whose path I crossed was Destroyer Squadron 13 of the U.S. Navy, known as the Black Cat Squadron. Referred to in Navy shorthand as Desron 13, the squadron was known as the Black Cat Squadron because its emblem, which was emblazoned on each ship in the squadron, prominently featured a black cat. The designer of the emblem apparently decided that the unlucky number thirteen deserved to be accompanied by another unlucky symbol in the form of a black cat.

I was reporting to a new duty station during my service as an officer in the Navy. I had been assigned to the staff of the Commander of Destroyer Squadron 13, also referred to as Comdesron 13, whose home port was Long Beach, California. There were initially eight destroyers in the squadron, but the number was later reduced to five in a reorganization. The squadron commander was a Navy Captain with the honorary title of Commodore. Although the title of Commodore historically was used to describe a one star admiral, there were no one star admirals in the Navy at that time, so it was being used for Navy Captains who commanded more than one ship.

The Commodore's staff consisted of five officers and five enlisted men. The officers included a doctor and a chaplain, as well as three line officers including me. The enlisted staff was composed of two senior enlisted men with specialties in communications and ship maintenance, together with clerical personnel and a steward to cook for the Commodore and take care of his stateroom.

When I first reported for duty, I was the Communications Officer for the squadron. My primary duty was to ensure that the Commodore had proper communications, both with higher commands and with the other ships he commanded. Communications at sea were primarily by radio, including voice and radio teletype, some encrypted and some not, but they also included flashing lights and signal flags for communicating with other ships within eyesight. These non-electronic forms of communication were preferred when available because they could not be intercepted by any enemy ships or listening posts. When the Commodore and staff were embarked on a ship in the squadron, the communications function of the ship was under my supervision. Having just left duty on a destroyer escort as that ship's Communications Officer, I had experience in shipboard communications. Later, I took on the additional duty of Operations Officer for the squadron, which required me to prepare the detailed operational plans needed when ships in the squadron operated as a group.

The ship serving as the Commodore's headquarters was known as the flagship, because the Commodore's flag would be flown from that ship. The Commodore and staff moved from one ship to another as needed to accomplish particular missions, so that the ship designated as the flagship changed from time to time with the Commodore's movements. Although the officers and crew assigned to the flagship were friendly and helpful to the Commodore and staff, the additional demands placed on a ship acting as flagship meant that those regularly assigned to the ship were not happy to see us arrive and were not unhappy to see us leave.

The first several months of my duty with Desron 13 consisted largely of training and upkeep for the squadron, as we were scheduled to leave for a six month deployment

to the Western Pacific in October 1971. The Western Pacific included Southeast Asia, where our primary mission would be to serve in the Vietnam War. Our presence in that part of the world would also project U.S. sea power in the region and help keep the sea lanes free.

When October 1, 1971 arrived, we were underway for the Western Pacific, leaving California and the continental U.S. behind for the next six months. Our flagship was the USS Decatur, a guided missile destroyer. Decatur was a 418 foot long 1950s era ship, with a crew of 25 officers and 339 enlisted men. On this transit, the Decatur and another destroyer were escorting an aircraft carrier, the USS Constellation, and a helicopter carrier, the USS Tripoli, which was used in amphibious warfare. Before the first day was over, we had already crossed into another time zone as we made our way across the Pacific, headed first for Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

Five days later, during the mid-watch, which is the watch from midnight to 0400, we first made radar contact with the island of Hawaii, which was about 75 miles away. Finding the Hawaiian Islands in the middle of the Pacific was always a relief for the navigator, as the islands are easy to miss in the vast reaches of the Pacific. At that time, when there was no gps navigation, the most accurate way to navigate was by taking star and sun sightings with a sextant, which required clear weather and depended on the skill of the person using the sextant. We also had a radio triangulation system known as LORAN, which was available in cloudy weather, but it was not as accurate as celestial navigation.

We moored in Pearl Harbor on October 6, and stayed for almost a week, leaving on October 12 for weapons exercises in preparation for the Decatur's coming duties in

the combat zone. The exercises took place at the Pacific Missile Range, which was an area in the ocean in the vicinity of the Hawaiian Islands that was designated for ships to fire their weapons at targets that were towed by ships or aircraft. The tests were successful, and we returned to Pearl Harbor on October 14, staying for two days before departing for Subic Bay, Philippines on October 16.

Decatur continued to escort the aircraft carrier Constellation as we steamed westward to the Philippines. On Sunday the 17th, the Constellation sent two Navy chaplains over by helicopter to hold services on the Decatur. When carrying chaplains, a helicopter was called the "Holy Helo." Because the Decatur's deck was not large enough to land a helicopter, each of the chaplains had to be let down, and later taken back up, by a sling under his armpits attached to a line on the helicopter as it hovered over the fantail of the ship. Because the ship continued to steam forward while this was occurring, the helicopter pilot also had to move forward at the same speed while hovering and lowering and raising the line. This was a necessary skill developed by the Navy helicopter pilots and it became a matter of routine for them.

During this transit, we engaged in underway replenishments of fuel from the Constellation and we also rendezvoused with a Navy oiler for an underway replenishment. An underway replenishment was carried out by the two ships steaming close together and side by side, with the replenishing ship sending over a fuel hose and pumping the fuel as the ships continued to move forward. Because of the closeness of the two ships at sea, and the need to maintain their positions while the fuel was pumped from one ship to the other, well-developed ship handling skills were needed for this

maneuver. The underway replenishments were necessary, as it was a long way to the Philippines from Pearl Harbor, and we made no refueling stops along the way.

We arrived at Subic Bay Naval Station in the Philippines on October 28, twelve days after leaving Pearl Harbor. The naval station was a huge base, including shipyard facilities and a naval air station, located on a beautiful natural harbor about 50 miles from Manila. It was only two days by ship from Subic Bay to Vietnam, so the naval station at Subic served as the main support base for ships operating in the Vietnam combat zone. On November 2, while in Subic Bay, we changed flagships to the USS Fox, a large destroyer known as a guided missile frigate. Fox was a 547 foot long ship built in the 1960s, which carried a crew of 33 officers and 469 enlisted men.

On the same day that we moved aboard the Fox, we left Subic Bay for Kaohsiung, on the southern coast of Taiwan. At that time, which was only a few months before President Nixon's visit to China, which opened up the relationship between the U.S. and the Communist government of mainland China, the U.S. was still recognizing Taiwan as the only legitimate government of China. For many years, the U.S. had been showing its support for Taiwan by sending Navy ships to operate in the waters around Taiwan, including the Taiwan Straits between Taiwan and mainland China, and to visit ports in Taiwan. We arrived in Kaohsiung on November 3, and spent 5 days there.

On November 8, we headed back to Subic Bay where we stopped briefly on the 9th for refueling and then left again that same day for Yankee Station in the Gulf of Tonkin, off the coast of South Vietnam. Yankee Station was the name of an operating area used by aircraft carriers to launch their aircraft on strikes over Vietnam. We arrived at Yankee Station on the 11th, where Fox escorted the Constellation for a day.

Upon being detached from escorting the Constellation, we headed north to Piraz Station, which was an area off the coast of North Vietnam near the North Vietnamese air base at Vinh. Piraz stood for Positive Identification Radar Advisory Zone. Our mission was to monitor the takeoffs and landings of aircraft at Vinh with Fox's air search radar. In the event of any air combat, air controllers on Fox would control U.S. fighter aircraft, and Fox would also engage in search and rescue operations for any pilots and crew who were shot down over the Gulf. The Fox was large enough to land helicopters, so we took on two helicopters, with their pilots and crews, during our transit to Piraz Station, so that we would have them for rescuing downed flyers.

Patrolling on Piraz Station became a matter of routine over the next few weeks. Typically we had a smaller destroyer escort, known as the shotgun, accompanying us. The air picture in our area was continuously maintained on radar screens, which showed each aircraft in the area, with different symbols for the contacts, depending on whether they were friendly or enemy aircraft. Whenever an enemy aircraft took off from or landed at Vinh, we tracked it. Generally the North Vietnamese war planes did not fly over the Gulf of Tonkin, as U.S. naval forces had control over the airspace above the Gulf, and would have fired on any North Vietnamese aircraft which tried to penetrate it.

While patrolling on Piraz Station, we had periodic underway replenishments where we received fuel, food, supplies, mail and newspapers. We also conducted flight operations with the helicopters stationed on the Fox to keep them in a high state of readiness.

Our last day on Piraz Station was December 7. The ship that was going to relieve Fox on this duty was the cruiser USS Chicago. Members of our staff were helicoptered

over to Chicago to give a briefing to the staff of the admiral on Chicago who would be performing Piraz duty for the next three weeks. We returned by helicopter to Fox, which then departed for Subic Bay.

When we arrived in Subic on December 9, waiting for us were the wives of the Commodore and several members of our staff, including my wife. They had flown to the Philippines to meet us, and after we spent nine days together in Subic, they flew to our next port, which was Hong Kong, where we would have another week together, including Christmas.

Our visit to Hong Kong, which was considered an R&R port, for rest and recreation, was the Navy's version of giving us a vacation. We had reduced work hours and no non-essential work was done, partly for R&R reasons, and partly because the British Crown Colony of Hong Kong did not want to be viewed as acting as a base to support the Vietnam War. We were tied to a buoy in Hong Kong harbor, but there was frequent commercial water taxi service to take us ashore. Those of us who were fortunate to have our wives in Hong Kong moved to the Hong Kong Hilton, and reported to the ship for only a minimal amount of time each day.

On Monday December 27, Christmas, R&R and our time with our wives were over, and it was time to get back to work. Fox departed for another patrol on Piraz Station, and our wives returned to California, with over three months left in our deployment before we would be together again in Long Beach in April. On Tuesday December 28, we arrived at Piraz Station, and again I and other staff members went by helicopter to the USS Chicago for a briefing, as we were now going to relieve the Chicago which had been performing the duty since we had left.

Piraz patrol was not so routine this time. Carrier-based Navy aircraft as well as Air Force planes had been attacking North Vietnam since December 26. The Fox immediately assumed its role in this action. In addition to keeping track of the air picture, Fox's air controllers controlled combat air patrol fighters whose job was to shoot down enemy fighters that attempted to stop our aircraft from achieving their mission of dropping bombs on their targets in North Vietnam. Fox also stood ready with its helicopters to pick up any downed U.S. flyers who could make it over the Gulf before they came down.

The fighting was fiercest on December 30. Before the attacks began that day, the radio airwaves were filed with siren-like sounds of pilots testing out their emergency transmitters which would be used to help locate them in the event their planes were shot down. Once the attacks began, the airwaves were filled with cries from the aviators, who were continuously calling out threats as they encountered them. They cried "SAM" for surface to air missiles, "Triple A" for anti-aircraft artillery and "Bandits," for enemy aircraft.

Each Navy war plane carried two officers, a pilot in the front seat and a naval flight officer in the back seat. Each had the ability to eject from the aircraft if it were shot down. Upon ejection a parachute would open to bring the flyer safely down as the aircraft crashed into the land or sea. Each man had a radio he could talk on from his parachute to help rescuers find him. One of my most vivid memories is hearing the words one flyer spoke as he was parachuting down after ejecting. With an expression of deep resignation that could clearly be recognized in the radio transmission of his voice, he said: "Coming down in a damn community.'' He and I both knew what that meant: he

was about to become a prisoner of war. This was because U.S. search and rescue helicopters could only pick up those who parachuted into the Gulf, and could not safely enter and exit North Vietnamese air space to pick up downed airmen who landed in North Vietnam.

For one shot-down flyer that night, there was a more fortunate ending. The helicopter crews on Fox were on alert during the attacks so that they could perform their search and rescue mission if needed. An A-6 Intruder from the USS Constellation was shot down by a surface to air missile that night, and one of the flyers safely ejected over the Gulf. A helicopter flew from the Fox to rescue him. Although he was able to land in the water, he was close enough to an island controlled by the North Vietnamese that there was small arms fire coming from the island to try to prevent the rescue. A crewman from the helicopter was lowered into the water to rescue the downed airman. Despite facing hostile fire from the island, the swimmer successfully completed his mission. The helicopter brought the flyer back to Fox, and he was quickly but safely evacuated by helicopter to obtain medical care.

After this night of intense action, Fox resumed a routine patrol. A few days later, however, we were able to read news reports of the attacks that had just taken place. One of the helicopters which periodically brought us mail and supplies brought us copies of the January 1, 1972 Pacific Stars and Stripes newspaper, a daily publication which was distributed to military personnel throughout the Pacific area. The Stars and Stripes reported on the five days of air attacks, from December 26-30, in which Fox had just participated. According to the report, this was the heaviest bombing attack on North Vietnam by the U.S. in over three years. There were 1000 sorties flown by Navy and Air

Force planes against airfields, supply depots, surface to air missile launchers, anti aircraft artillery and air defense radar sites. Two Navy jets, an A6 Intruder and an F4 Phantom, had been lost on Thursday the 30th, and an Air Force F4 had been lost on the 26th, with only one person rescued and the other five individuals missing. It was clear from the report that one of the two Navy jets lost on Thursday was the one carrying the flyer who had been rescued by Fox's helicopter, and the other bore the flyer whose transmission I had heard as he parachuted onto land.

The Fox also observed New Year's Day 1972 with a Navy tradition: the first entry of the new year in the ship's log, on the midnight to 0400 watch, is written in rhyme and may contain fiction as well as fact. While the complete log entry is lengthy, as the would-be poet who wrote it appears to have made full use of his four hours on watch, one section is worth quoting, as the writer used his poetic license to poke fun at Comdesron 13 and his staff. His log entry included the Navy acronyms CIC, SOPA and OTC. These acronyms stand for Combat Information Center, which is the space on the ship containing radar scopes and tactical communications, Senior Officer Present Afloat, which is the senior officer in the formation, and Officer in Tactical Command, which is the officer in command of the movements of the formation. The entry also uses the term blackshoe, which is the Navy term for a shipboard officer, as distinguished from a brownshoe, which is an aviator. This part of the log entry reads as follows:

> When out of the night that was windy and cold
> And into the New Year's distraction
> A man stumbled in from CIC who seemed eager
> To scope out the action
> He looked like the straight-arrow blackshoe type
> (Not ready for such celebration)
> Yet he poured from a flask then thoughtfully asked'
> "Are we still on Piraz Station?"

Nobody knew, though we thought it was true,
For we'd been there the night before
It's hard to keep these little things straight
When you're on a ship in a war.

There's men that somehow just grip your eyes
And squeeze them so hard that they burst
And such was he and he looked to me
Like he had an unquenchable thirst.
So we gave him a beer and we all shed a tear
For the good times of '71
And we looked to the future and '72
Which promised to be just as fun.
Then I got to looking him up and down
And wondering who he could be
And I saw it was SOPA – Comdesron Thirteen
Our staff-toting friend OTC.

The beginning of the new year brought us several days of routine patrolling. In the late evening of January 11, however, Fox was tracking an enemy aircraft, believed to be a Soviet-built North Vietnamese MIG fighter jet. We were operating under Rules of Engagement from higher command which dictated when we could or could not take hostile action. The MIG's movements warranted a response under the Rules of Engagement. The Fox quickly placed itself in position to fire surface to air missiles at the aircraft, by reducing its speed and assuming a course suitable for firing missiles at the enemy plane. The Fox fired two missiles. Neither missile hit the plane, but there was no further threatened action from it, and Fox resumed its patrol.

On Sunday January 16, we received a visit from the Secretary of the Navy John Chafee, who later was elected U.S. Senator from Rhode Island, together with the Admiral who commanded the Seventh Fleet, which consisted of the entire Navy at sea in the Western Pacific, including Southeast Asia. They stayed for a few hours, during which time the Secretary and Admiral met with us and thanked us for our service.

On January 19, it was once more time for Fox to be relieved on Piraz Station by USS Chicago. Fox had deployed to the Western Pacific before Comdesron 13 and his staff had, so as Fox left the Gulf of Tonkin, it began its voyage back to the United States. But Comdesron 13 and those of us on his staff were just about to begin another month of duty in the Vietnam combat zone. One of Fox's helicopters flew us to the USS Arnold J. Isbell, a 1940s era destroyer that had been launched just as World War II was ending. The Isbell, which was 390 feet long with a crew of 11 officers and 245 men, was smaller and older than both the Decatur and Fox. This deployment turned out to be the Isbell's last active duty assignment, as it was placed on reserve duty after it returned to the U.S.

Unlike the Fox, the Isbell had no sophisticated system to monitor the airspace at Piraz Station. Nor did the Isbell carry the missile launchers which armed both Decatur and Fox. Instead the Isbell's primary armament was three twin five inch gun mounts, whose value to the war effort was the capability to provide naval gunfire support to the U.S. Army in South Vietnam. The Isbell's job was to patrol within a mile or two of the coastline of South Vietnam, and to provide gunfire on inland targets as directed by Army spotter planes.

The Isbell's first gunfire support mission after we came onboard was on January 22. This mission and the others that followed were to fire on targets for harassment and interdiction, referred to as H and I. The purpose of H and I fire was to disrupt the routes by which the Viet Cong transported people and supplies. Once it began, the firing took place both day and night, with some breaks to go to Danang for supplies or to obtain fuel or ammunition from supply ships at sea. During the night gunfire support missions, all of us on the ship learned how to sleep through the constant firing of the guns.

Until February 3, all of Isbell's gunfire support missions took place in Military Region I, which was the northernmost region in South Vietnam, just south of the demilitarized zone between North and South Vietnam. On February 3, however, after a brief stop in Danang, we headed south for Military Region IV, which was the southernmost region of the country, near the Mekong River Delta and the area where Vietnam adjoins Cambodia. After conducting several gunfire support missions in this part of Vietnam, we headed back north on February 9, arriving in Danang on February 10, where Isbell anchored for several hours while the Commodore and we on the staff went ashore for a briefing by the Army. We also visited a military facility known as a Coastal Surveillance Center, where U.S. Navy personnel kept track of the ocean traffic off the coast of Vietnam so that any supplies moving by sea from north to south for support of the Viet Cong insurgents in South Vietnam could be intercepted.

After we left Danang, the gunfire support missions continued both day and night on a regular basis. Because we were within a mile or two of the coast of South Vietnam, we could see clearly the long undeveloped beaches dotted with the dwellings of Vietnamese fishermen. We watched the fishermen going about their daily routines in their small fishing boats, seemingly unaffected by the war that was going on over their heads and a few miles inland.

Finally, on February 15, the Isbell's gunfire support missions were over, as was our staff's almost two straight months at sea in the combat zone. After a short stop in Danang, we headed for Subic Bay. We arrived in Subic late on the 16th, and on the 20th, we moved back to the Decatur, which was itself just arriving in Subic.

On February 26, Decatur left Subic Bay, with Comdesron 13 and staff aboard. Our deployment was ending and we were leaving Southeast Asia. We were not heading directly back to the U.S., however, because we were first going to make a good will tour of Australia and New Zealand. Therefore, we still had several weeks to go before we would tie up in our home port of Long Beach, California.

Two days after leaving Subic on our way to Australia, we crossed the equator. As all Navy ships do, we observed this passage with the "Crossing the Line" ceremony. Most of the crew, including the Decatur's captain, had never before crossed the equator. They were known as pollywogs, and had to be initiated by those called shellbacks, including myself, who had previously made the crossing and been initiated. The initiation of the pollywogs included constant verbal harassment by the shellbacks during the course of the day, without regard to rank. Before the day was over, King Neptune made his appearance and initiated all pollywogs in the ancient mysteries of the deep, so that the entire crew now consisted of trusty shellbacks instead of lowly pollywogs. In today's Navy, where women as well as men serve on warships, hazing is prohibited in the Crossing the Line ceremony. In those days, the opportunity for the shellbacks to haze the pollywogs, particularly where the pollywog normally outranked the shellback, was the whole point of it.

On March 1, we arrived in our first port in Australia, which was Darwin, on the northern coast of Australia. Although the seasons had now reversed because we were in the southern hemisphere, Darwin had a tropical climate, as it was closer to Indonesia than it was to the population centers of Australia, so that we did not feel a great difference from the Philippines. We stayed in Darwin only one day, but had enough time to see

what the Australian outback looked like, because Darwin was a small town close to the countryside. Outside Darwin were fields filled with a creature called the wallaroo, which is a marsupial that is in-between the sizes of a kangaroo and a wallaby.

We departed Darwin on March 2, headed for Fremantle, which is the port town for Perth in the southwest of Australia. On our way to Fremantle, during which we passed from the Pacific Ocean into the Indian Ocean, we experienced the roughest weather of my naval career. Off the Northwest Cape of Australia we encountered a typhoon, which is the southern hemisphere equivalent of a hurricane in the northern hemisphere. We engaged in what is known as outrunning the typhoon, which meant that we had to steam on a course that would keep us as far away as possible from the typhoon's center. For about two days, the ship crashed up and down in the high waves, slowly making headway, and the only work accomplished was to keep the ship afloat and moving. No normal maintenance or paperwork could be done under those conditions, and the combination of the noise and the extreme up and down movements of the ship made sleeping almost impossible. In order for us to eat, the chairs in the wardroom were lashed down to the deck, the tablecloth was wetted down to keep china and utensils from sliding as the ship moved up and down and from side to side, and each man had to hold on to his plate and his cup as he ate to prevent them from flying off the table. We learned to take bites and sips quickly as the ship heaved into the air on top of a wave before it crashed down again into a trough.

After about two days of outrunning the typhoon, the weather calmed down and we made our way to Fremantle, where we arrived on March 6. We stayed in Fremantle for four days, and were treated with warm hospitality by the Australians. It had been a little

over 25 years since World War II ended, but the Australians were still grateful for the assistance given them by the Americans in defending against the Japanese. Perth had a chapter of the Australian-American Association, whose purpose was to foster good relations between the peoples of Australia and the United States. We were welcomed to Perth by members of this association at a reception held at the U.S. Consulate in Perth. The Royal Australian Navy also invited us to their base while we were in Fremantle. Finally a group of Australian families in a small wheat farming community in Western Australia hosted members of the Decatur's crew in their homes overnight, and these crew members were honored guests at the meeting the next morning of the local government body, known as the Shire Council.

We left Perth on March 10 for our next stop, which was Melbourne, and arrived on the 14th for a two day visit. The fact that we were now moving into the fall season was more evident in Melbourne, which is on the south coast of Australia and therefore has a somewhat temperate climate. As in Perth, the local chapter of the Australian-American Association welcomed us to Melbourne with a reception. We departed Melbourne on the 16th, headed for Auckland, New Zealand.

We arrived in Auckland on March 19. While the New Zealanders were friendly on a person to person basis, we did not receive the organized welcome we had received in Australia. Instead, we were met with protestors on the pier who were complaining about U.S. testing and use of nuclear weapons. There was no organization comparable to the Australian-American Association, but we did have the chance to meet with officers of the Royal New Zealand Navy at one of their bases.

Our mooring place in Auckland was just behind a Soviet trawler which was tied to the same pier. Soviet trawlers were ostensibly fishing vessels, but they were really intelligence gathering platforms, as was evident from their vast array of antennas, which were not needed for fishing. We encountered these trawlers from time to time at sea, but had never been this close to one. The Soviet sailors and the Decatur's crew looked at each other from our respective ships, but in those days of the Cold War, there was no contact whatsoever.

Our good will tour ended on March 22, and we finally were going to head home to Long Beach via Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. However, Pearl Harbor was too far to go from Auckland without refueling. The Commodore tried to get permission for us to stop in Tahiti, but the French government would not allow it, so instead we stopped for fuel in Pago Pago, American Samoa. As we steamed from Auckland to Pago Pago, we passed many small South Pacific islands. The water surrounding them was so shallow that we had to steer clear of them to prevent running aground, and therefore we could not even tell which ones were inhabited, as our view was generally just of tree tops which could be seen as specks on the horizon.

We arrived in Pago Pago on March 25, and met up with three other destroyers, including the Isbell, which had made similar tours of Australia and New Zealand but to different cities. All four ships were to sail together from Pago Pago to Long Beach, under the command of Comdesron 13. Although Pago Pago was just a fuel stop, its fuel pumps had limited capacity, so it took much longer to refuel four destroyers than it would have taken at an operating U.S. naval station. So we ended up staying at Pago Pago from

early in the morning on Saturday the 25th until late in the afternoon on Sunday the 26th, giving us a chance to see the island a bit.

American Samoa resembled what Hawaii probably would have been like fifty years earlier. Many of the people wore traditional Polynesian clothing and their subsistence appeared to consist primarily of fish, pigs and coconuts. They held land communally. Because we were there on a Sunday, we saw them observing their custom of gathering the extended family on a pavilion located on the communal land and eating and talking for much of the day.

After leaving Pago Pago on March 26, it took us until April 1 to reach Pearl Harbor, where we stayed only long enough for the four ships to take on fuel for the voyage home. Just before we arrived in Pearl Harbor, however, the war in Vietnam had intensified, with what was known as the Easter Offensive. This action had begun on March 30, as the North Vietnamese made their first attempt to invade South Vietnam since the Tet Offensive of 1968. Many of the ships still in Southeast Asia that were scheduled to return to the U.S. had their tours of duty extended, while some ships in the U.S. that were scheduled to go in coming months had their deployments advanced. The Decatur and the other three ships in our group, however, were considered to have been away too long and to be too far toward home to send back, so we proceeded to Long Beach as planned.

We arrived early on Friday April 7 in Long Beach, having been gone for over six months. The families of the ships' crews were waiting on the pier, and long-awaited reunions took place. As is customary, the crews were given reduced hours for the first month or so back in the U.S., and most took some leave during this month.

For the next several months, Desron 13 for the most part stayed at or close to Long Beach. With the exception of a six week cruise in the summer, when Decatur and other ships visited San Francisco, Seattle and Pearl Harbor to train midshipman from the Naval Academy and Naval ROTC for their duties as future naval officers, we were limited to conducting local training operations in the waters off Southern California. There was also the necessary maintenance to keep the ships of the squadron in shape and to prepare them for their next deployment, scheduled for January 1973.

While we were in the U.S. in 1972, the nation was in the midst of the Presidential campaign between President Nixon and Senator McGovern. The major issue was the war in Vietnam, with McGovern wanting to end it as soon as possible, and Nixon campaigning on a platform of achieving an honorable peace. Just about a week before the election in November, National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger announced that "Peace is at Hand." Nixon won the election in a landslide, but the war continued on, and Desron 13 prepared for its deployment in January. Despite the talk of peace, our briefings and training were based on the assumption that the war would continue indefinitely.

On January 3, 1973, we once again started across the Pacific on the Decatur, with four other destroyers, under the command of Comdesron 13. We were headed for Pearl Harbor, where we arrived on January 9. Contrary to Kissinger's assurance that peace was at hand, the fighting in Vietnam had escalated since the election. In December, President Nixon had ordered the massive "Christmas Bombing," of North Vietnam by Air Force B-52 bombers stationed in Guam, and that bombing was continuing as we made our way across the Pacific. In the meantime, Kissinger and Le Duc Tho were meeting in Paris to

discuss ending the war, but there were no reports on how the talks were progressing, and journalists had to resort to reporting on the expressions on Kissinger's and Le Duc Tho's faces as they left their meetings, as the only clues to whether progress was being made.

On January 17, after conducting training exercises in Hawaiian waters, we headed for Guam where we were scheduled to make a fuel stop. We arrived in Guam on Wednesday January 24, and were there for a day while the ships took on fuel. That day, the main road in Guam was filled with a long line of trucks carrying the bombs that would be loaded on B-52 bombers and dropped over North Vietnam. However, while we were in Guam, we heard an important and historic announcement on the radio by President Nixon. He stated that the U.S. had reached a cease-fire agreement with North Vietnam, and that the cease fire would begin at midnight Saturday the following weekend.

After taking on fuel in Guam, we headed for Subic Bay, where we arrived late on Saturday the 27th, a few hours before the cease fire was to go into effect. At midnight that night, the war officially ended. A message went out to all military personnel in the Pacific command that day from the Commander in Chief Pacific, who stated:

1. Today we are concluding our longest and in some ways our toughest war. Through your courage and devotion to duty we have achieved peace with honor.
2. We remember today with deepest feeling, our dead and our badly wounded, who paid for us all the greatest price that can be paid, and we await eagerly the return of our prisoners from long tough captivity.
3. You soldiers, marines airmen and sailors of the Pacific command have served your country well. You have fought in the jungle, in the mud, at sea and in the air with fortitude and devotion and endurance, not once but many times. Neither the most primitive and hidden danger, nor the toughest assault, nor the deadliest guided missile have deterred you from your duty.

4. The grateful thanks of our country are due to all of you now in the ranks and all who have gone before you. Well done.

The Pacific Stars and Stripes newspaper the next day bore the banner headline: "It's All Over." According to the newspaper, fighting had continued up until the time of the cease fire, as each side tried to position itself best for the period to follow the cease fire, and four more Americans had died during the time between the announcement of the cease fire and the time it went into effect. President Nixon was reported as saying that we had achieved peace with honor. The Stars and Stripes wrote that South Vietnam's President, Nguyen Van Thieu, thanked Americans for their sacrifices and said the cease fire was an important step toward the establishment of lasting peace. While the Americans and South Vietnamese were careful not to claim that they had either won or lost the war, the North Vietnamese officials did not exercise similar restraint. According to the Stars and Stripes, the North Vietnamese government issued an announcement to its people that it had won a great victory over the United States.

For Comdesron 13, his staff and the deployed ships in his squadron, the cease fire changed their mission, but did not eliminate it. Over the next months, destroyers continued to operate off the coast of Vietnam, as the release of the American prisoners of war by the North Vietnamese, and the simultaneous sweeping of the mines in Haiphong Harbor by the Americans, would take several weeks to accomplish. Instead of escorting carriers, coordinating search and rescue, and providing gunfire support, the destroyers now patrolled the area to make sure that merchant ships were notified of areas that were still mined and to show the North Vietnamese that we were ready to resume action if the prisoner release did not proceed as scheduled. The destroyer force also turned its

attention back to our country's longstanding commitments in Korea. We demonstrated support to South Korea by visiting its cities of Chinhae and Pusan, and by participating with the South Korean military forces in an amphibious landing on the South Korean coast, just south of the demilitarized zone.

The release of prisoners of war held by the North Vietnamese began in mid-February, but it took until early April to complete, as the prisoners were released in groups, with those who had been in captivity the longest being released first. On February 14, the Pacific Stars and Stripes reported on the release of the first group, which included men who had been captured as early as 1964 and 1965. According to the report, a crowd of 2000 persons greeted the first released servicemen with cheers, banners and chants as they arrived at Clark Air Force Base, Philippines on a plane from North Vietnam.

A few weeks later, the Commodore and our staff were at Clark Air Force Base, awaiting a flight to join a ship in Okinawa after having spent a few weeks on shore duty in Subic, coordinating the logistical needs of the destroyers in the Seventh Fleet. While we were waiting for our flight, one of the planeloads of released prisoners arrived. By this time, the prisoners being released were those who had been captives for less than a year, and although there was a group to welcome them, it was fewer than fifty people. Nevertheless, the resilient spirits of those who had survived the ordeal of capture and imprisonment were evident as they walked down the steps from the aircraft that brought them to freedom.

During the several weeks that the prisoner release was taking place, I followed the reports showing the names of the prisoners as they were released. I was happy to see that

the aviator I had heard on the radio on December 30, as he was speaking from his parachute while descending into captivity, was among those who were released.

By May of 1973, the prisoner release and mine sweeping had been completed. My four year commitment to serve in the Navy was also coming to an end, and it was time for me to return to the United States to be separated from service and to return to civilian life. Desron 13 still had a few weeks to go before it would complete its deployment and head back to the U.S., so I left the Commodore, the other staff members, and the ships of the Black Cat Squadron, and flew back to the United States from Clark Air Force Base.

And so my crossing of the path of the black cat ended as we parted ways after two and a half years together. Our journey together had certainly not brought me bad luck. After all, anyone who serves in a war without suffering physical or mental harm is fortunate. My service with the Black Cat Squadron had been a unique experience and a chance to witness our country's relations with both friends and foes throughout the Pacific region during a period when significant events were taking place. This experience also made it clear to me that no matter how well skilled and dedicated our military is, there are limits on the ability of the United States to impose its will on distant people in distant lands, and that the decisions made by civilian government officials are not merely moves on a geopolitical chess board, but rather are actions that have a direct impact on the lives of individuals, and particularly on the lives of those who serve in our armed forces.