

## Stories as I Remember/Imagine Them

By Roger Hiemstra, December 15, 2019

### Hard Luck Hiemstra

My freshman year in high school was no picnic. I had yearned to play football for years because of pick-up games with neighbors and uncles. Thus, I wanted to do my very best right from the start. I was not a big kid so at the beginning of football practice in late August, 1952, I stood 5 feet 6 inches and weighed 138 pounds soaking wet. However, wanting to impress the coaches with my energy and enthusiasm, I tried to make up for my physical limitations with energy and speed. Then the third day of our twice-a-day practices the week before school, during one tackling exercise I was matched against a kid much taller and heavier than me. I decided to hit him very low with all the speed and “cunning” I could muster. I knocked his feet out from under him and he came down hard on my left shoulder pads (they weren’t very protective in those days) breaking my left collar bone (the clavicle — it aches once in a while to this day in cold weather).

Gone was my first season of football (the reserve team where freshmen played lost every game that season and **I know it was because I was not playing**). My Mom was called and she took me to the emergency room in Kalamazoo’s Bronson Hospital. X-rays quickly showed it was broken. Surgery was seldom used in those days and instead I was placed in a half body cast from waist to shoulder (my right shoulder and right arm were left free) with a supporting rod (covered with tape) that held my arm (also in a cast) out in a right angle to my body (see the photo and newspaper article below). I also stayed two nights in the hospital while they got my pain under control.

The body cast was hot, heavy, and very inconvenient. I was in it for almost two months and it itched (oh, did it itch), smelled, and got very grungy. The only good things were that I became somewhat popular as kids wanted to write on my cast and I was in just the right position to do things: One was dancing; so many girls (wheeee) would ask me for a dance at the Friday night gatherings (see the photo of me in the cast to visualize it) that I actually believed myself popular – a feeling that soon dissipated as my natural shyness soon shone through to those girls). Second was being able to hold a shotgun at just the right angle to shoot squirrels in a tree (read a later story about me and my shotgun – it is somewhat pathetic).

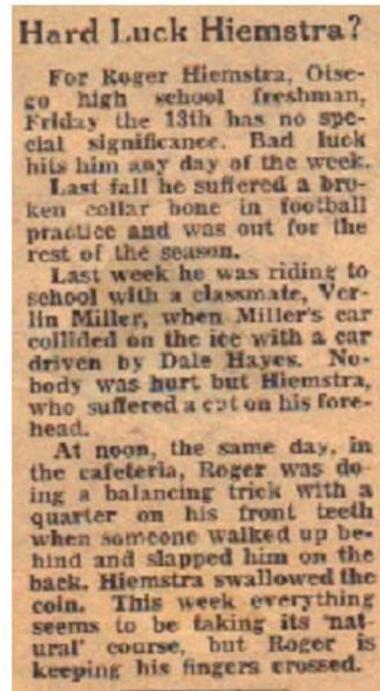
Then a few months later, after I was healed and that dreaded cast removed, on a snowy day I was riding to high school with my next-door neighbor, Moose (Verlin) Miller. [Guess what position he played on the football team – a tackle right next to me when I played in a guard position the next year — Moose had trouble remembering what to do when our quarterback, Hal Hewitt, called a play – Coach Larsen had me whisper to Moose as we left each huddle to tell him what he was to do such as block left, block right, etc.] As we were entering the small town of Otsego from our homes in the country six miles south of town, a car driven by a Mr. Dale Hayes pulled out in front of him. Because of a slippery road Moose was unable to stop in time and we slid into the left side of his car. As there were no seat belts in those days, my forward momentum meant that I tried to put my forehead through the front window on the passenger side. I had blood dripping down my forehead from that resulting gash. After he left information with Mr. Hayes on his insurance, Moose was still able to drive the car. When we got to school I went to the principal’s office for a band-aid and made a call to my Mom. She came and got me and took me to the emergency room where they pulled a few pieces of glass from my forehead and put a butterfly bandage on the area (stitches were not

used readily then either). [Years later a small piece of glass finally emitted itself from my forehead – but that is another story.]

I got back to school (I could not convince Mom that I needed two or three days of recovery at home when an aspirin would do the trick) in time for our lunch at the cafeteria. I was showing off my bandage waiting in line and demonstrating how I could balance my quarter (can you remember in 1953 when school lunches were a quarter) on my teeth and lips (kids, don't try this at home or school). A buddy came up behind me and slapped me on the back as a greeting and I promptly swallowed the coin. Okay, after another phone call, my long-suffering Mom took me back to the emergency room (twice in one day, is that a record?) again (sigh). The doctor said that he thought it would normally “pass” through. So, ugh, I had to stare at my poop each time for three days. It did come through and the only thing good about it was that once it was washed my stomach acid had made it a very shiny quarter. That is the end of this story (get it?).



Me in that upper body cast. Notice the “ready to dance” and shotgun holder stance. Mom had to tailor several shirts for me. What would we do without our mothers?



A newspaper clipping describing all my misfortunes. An uncle living in Los Angeles saw this same article in a newspaper there. My fame (shame) was spreading!

### Me and My Shotgun

I suspect I probably pestered my folks, at least Dad, for a gun so I could go hunting. Many of my friends and relatives were doing it, so why not me. I had just turned 15 and could now legally hunt without having to be accompanied by an “adult.” So with my non-football season coming to a close, my body cast experience behind me, and feeling so “grown up,” finally I prevailed. I probably had

saved up some money from odd jobs (baby-sitting, working for farmers, etc.) and no doubt finagled some cash from my Dad. I don't remember the brand, make, etc. but now I was with the "in-crowd," could show my prowess as a marksman, and "bring home the bacon" so to speak with visions of venison, pheasant, and rabbit ahead for the family table. Ha!!

I do remember doing a bit of practice up in the woods behind the folk's home as I still had a few weeks of pheasant season before me. Thus, one brisk Saturday morning in early November I was walking in the Modderman's swampy area to the south of my folk's property. Being stealthy and crafty (probably neither in reality), I had only gone a few feet off the road when a beautiful pheasant rose rapidly in front of me. I swung up the shotgun with the safety no doubt dangerously already off and fired. The luck of whatever Irish blood I have in me was guiding my gun and the pheasant tumbled to the ground. Fortunately, I had remembered to wear boots and with growing excitement I sloshed toward my quarry. Unfortunately, no one had told me that birds have a third eyelid, the nictitating membrane used for blinking. The "shot" from my exploding shell had hit and instantly killed the pheasant, no doubt just as the blink was beginning. When I reached the still bird it lay there staring right into my murderous eyes with an accusing stare. As this was my first "kill," it also became my last as I never could forget that accusatory stare. I fully realized with instant clarity that I had most certainly killed some relative's parent.

I then switched to hunting squirrels, of which many inhabited the woods directly to the east of our property. I was counting on the fact that I had a built-in shotgun perch. Remember that body cast I had to wear after my shoulder break in the earlier "Hard Luck Hiemstra" story (see that photo), well I quickly found that propping the shotgun in that perch and staring down the barrel provided a steady stance for all the forthcoming kills. Little did I know that the "kick" of the shot forced the barrel to instantly move and my body to twist slightly to the left. I spotted three squirrels that afternoon, got off three shots, but hit nothing by branches and leaves. I swear I heard a chorus of squirrels and probably some rabbits laughing a sigh of relief that a hapless hunter was on the loose.

So I gave up hunting small game and moved on to larger animals that would supply meat for my family over a cold winter. I went deer hunting. At the time, my Dad and Mom owned 40 acres of farmland about six miles north of their home place. Dad used it for cropping, mainly corn, but it also contained a fairly large wooded area from which Dad could extract some firewood each year. I decided to make my first kill on this property as we had frequently seen deer foraging in the corn field once the corn ripened each year. I knew from hearing others talk that unless you were going to build a tree stand, something unhandy me was not capable of doing, you needed to find a place where you could quietly rest against a tree and stare out at areas in which a multitude of deer would pass by. Now that I had a learner's permit and could drive during the day, I borrowed Dad's car one mid-November Saturday morning and traveled to the property on AB Avenue in Otsego, Michigan. I had not thought through what I should or would do if I managed another lucky shot now that I was using slugs in my 12 gauge shotgun. I suppose I would have driven home and asked either Dad or an uncle to help me. Fortunately, I did not need to worry about that as all I collected that day was a cold. I was not adequately dressed, a light snow had covered the ground, and after sitting by a tree, not moving for a couple of hours, I was freezing. I neither saw nor heard any deer. In retrospect, I think they were all no doubt hunkering down in some dense foliage, staring out at the inept boob, and just waiting to tell all their cousins about my lack of expertise. My cold began two days later.

However, I had fortitude. Toward the end of November when deer season was still in effect, I decided to try one more time to get something other than dismal failure out of the \$10 I had paid for

my license. I knew that my friend, Bruce Harrington, also had a shotgun. I called him and he said he did have a license but had not been out hunting that season. I asked if he would be interested in trying his luck with me the next Saturday. I said that my Uncle Walter had some property east of Plainwell, Michigan, that included a fairly large wooded area. Walt had agreed I could hunt there if I wanted to. Bruce drove and he and I arrived early that morning, gave our greetings to Walt, and set out for the woods across the street. Here we were two fairly inexperienced teenagers (neither of our fathers were hunters) tromping through the woods, no doubt much too noisily, in our quests for glory and bragging rights. We entered what we surmised was about the center of the woods and we looked for an area in which to settle and wait for our quarry. We spotted what looked like the ideal spot and just as we approached it, we saw a body. Yikes, neither of us had ever seen a body other than in a funeral home. We panicked and decided to run back to fetch Walt. Walt phoned a friend and the four of us trekked back to the scene of the demise. Just as we arrived our “body” was sitting up. Walt laughed and said it was old Jake, who no doubt had come to the woods to get away from Mabel and drank himself into a quiet sleep, something he did periodically. Sure enough, Jake wanted to know why we were sticking our noses into his business. Uncle Walter and his friend had a hearty laugh at our expense and we walked back to the car to drive back to my house somewhat rejected, embarrassed, and endowed with another life lesson. I actually never went out hunting again. The next spring I sold the gun to a classmate and never handled another gun until I joined the Navy several years later.

### **Gus Grissom**

[Based on fact, my memory as having been right there, and Internet research]

Having graduated from high school in 1956, I began college studies. This actually turned out to be an eight-year process, rather than the normally expected four years. I struggled in two important ways. First, I had difficulties determining what I wanted to be and what to study. My high school in a small blue-collar town (Otsego, Michigan) did not have a guidance program or any vocational counselors. Thus, my first few years of college were rather hit and miss in terms of courses, a major, and grades. Second, I had difficulties economically and was forced to work my way through with several part-time jobs and inadequate sleep which also contributed to those poor grades. I also “stopped” out of college periodically for a while to work full-time jobs.

Then in 1960 I read about the Naval Aviation Cadet (NAVCAD) program. I had never thought too seriously about being a pilot, but the idea of flying and becoming a naval officer was appealing in figuring out what to do with my life. Subsequently, I went through the application and testing procedures, was accepted, and began the program in Pensacola, Florida, in the spring of 1960 at the age of 21. I appreciated the basic training and soloed in a wonderful trainer, the T-34 Mentor. I especially enjoyed learning to fly various acrobatic maneuvers.

Unfortunately, as I was nearing the end of my initial training period and looking forward to jet training in Texas, I began having headaches after staring at the instruments for very long. Thus, as I watched my classmates move on to the Corpus Christi Naval Air Station in Texas to begin their experiences with jets and eventually learn to land on carriers, I was held back for a series of medical tests. It was determined that I needed glasses to correct my vision to 20/20 and I have been wearing spectacles ever since.

I was disappointed to subsequently learn that the Navy was not then accepting pilots who needed to wear glasses. One option was to continue training, as a navigator, also an officer-training program,

and finish out a five-year commitment on active duty. I decided to choose another option: I converted to a non-officer status with only a two-year commitment on active duty followed by a Navy-reserve status until my service completion date. Thus, in the fall of 1960 I became an enlisted man with the grade rate of E-2 and was assigned to the USS Randolph, an aircraft carrier stationed out of Norfolk, Virginia.

I arrived at the Naval Station in Norfolk in late 1960 to join the crew of the USS Randolph. The Randolph was initially a 27,000-ton aircraft carrier in the Ticonderoga class. It was commissioned in October 1944, and began combat in February, 1945. Unfortunately, on March 11, 1945, the ship was hit by a suicide plane, lost 25 crewmembers, and sustained considerable damage. Quick repairs brought it back on duty in April where it was involved in the Pacific War and the fight for control of various islands during the Okinawa campaign through September. From then on it was responsible for trips bringing service-men home as the war finally wound down. It was decommissioned in 1948. It was modernized in 1955-56 and put back into commission for anti-submarine support as the cold war began heating up.

I was initially assigned as an electrician's mate and scheduled to begin the requisite training. However, in filling out all the necessary paperwork they learned that I had attended college and could type. Thus, for the remainder of my two-year service I became a yeoman doing secretarial and clerical work in one of the ship's many offices or in a Station office when we were back in port. We generally were out at sea on maneuvers in the Atlantic for two weeks and two weeks back in the Norfolk port. I was promoted to a rate of E-3 in March of 1961. In essence, I rocked as a typist.

It was an interesting tour of duty. As a country we still were nervous about Russian interventions in the Atlantic Ocean and were also becoming engaged in the space race. During the time I was at sea we constantly practiced against attacks by Russian naval vessels on and under the sea, sat off-shore of Cuba's Guantanamo Bay as part of a task force ready to support the Bay of Pigs invasion on April 17, 1961 (that support was called off the night before), sat off the Dominican Republic coast for a week after the May 30, 1961, assassination of dictator Rafael Trujillo, and picked up astronaut Gus Grissom after his sub-orbital trip on Friday, July 21, 1961. We had sailed into the Caribbean as the recovery ship for that flight.

The first photo below is of the T-34 Mentor, the trainer in which I learned to fly. The second is of the USS Randolph. The remaining photos relate to the attempt to pick up Gus Grissom's capsule from the Atlantic. After splashdown (viewing those billowing chutes on its way down was such a treat) the spacecraft's hatch prematurely blew off. We, of course, did not know this but soon discovered there was a problem. Seawater began entering the capsule. A downwash from the helicopter's rotors was pushing Gus below the surface and his suit began filling water. He was struggling to stay afloat. One frogman had jumped in the water and hooked the chopper's winch to the top of the capsule. Two other frogmen also leaped into the sea to help get Gus into the lift harness, but it was a precarious situation. Because the capsule had filled with water, the added weight was too much for the chopper and it was being pulled into the water. The pilot made a split decision and released the capsule to prevent his engine from being destroyed. As it was, that helicopter (a Sikorsky Seahorse) limped back to the deck with smoke trailing from the engine. A second chopper picked up a water-logged Gus Grissom. I could see much of this from the deck of the Randolph, as well as see Gus as he left the helicopter and walked by us sailors on the way to the medical facilities below deck.

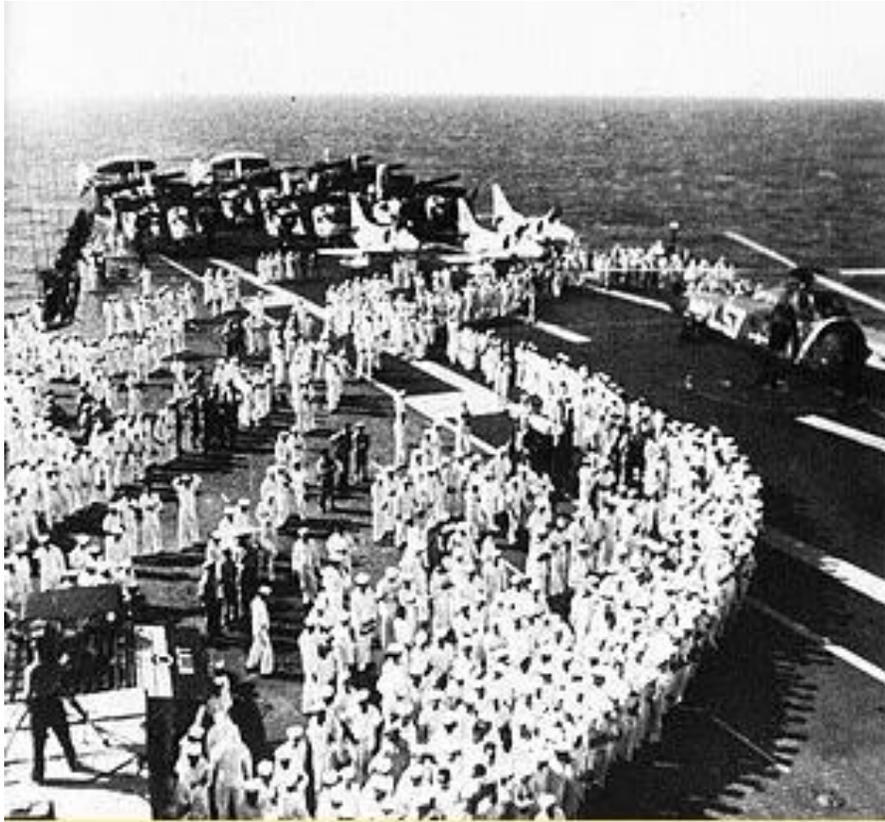
Overall, it was all an amazing experience filled with many life lessons!



The T-34 Mentor – I loved this plane!



**USS Randolph.**



Randolph's crew crowd the deck during the recovery effort.  
(I'm somewhere in the row in front of the TVn camera – I remember turning to look back at it.)



Sikorsky H-34 Seahorse struggles with the Liberty Bell 7 capsule before releasing it to the sea.  
(This is the view we could see from the ship.)



This was a photo snapped from inside the helicopter as they attempted the lift.



The Randolph helicopter hoisting the drenched Gus Grissom to safety.



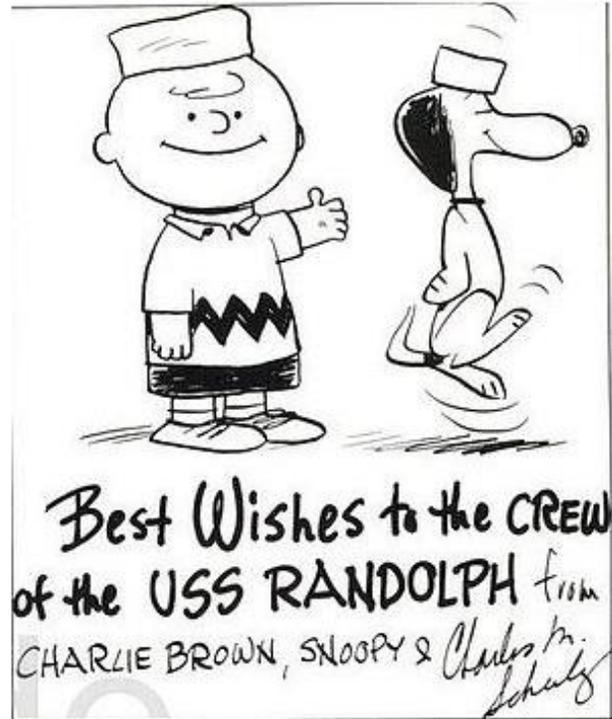
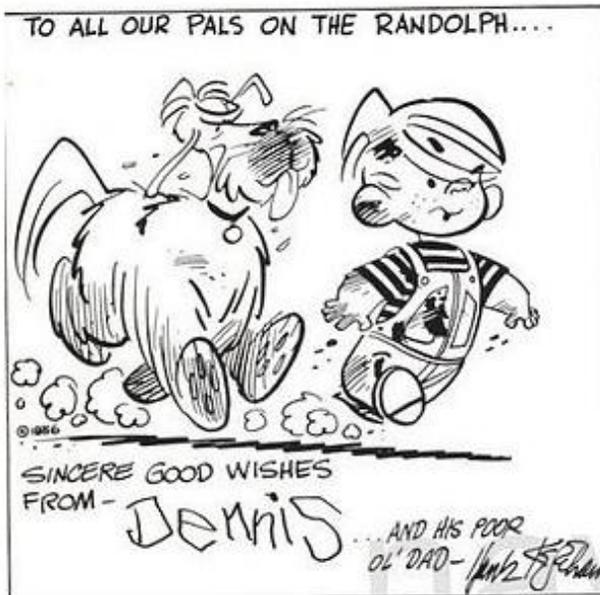
The final photo shows Gus walking by. I was 20 feet away from the photographer who took it. I am sure he did not, but I like to brag to others that Gus was looking directly at me.



The Liberty Bell was discovered and raised in 1999, 38 years after it sank.



Refurbished, it has been traveling again. It currently is on display (a loan from the Smithsonian) at the Museum at Prairiefire, Overland Park, KS.



Photos courtesy of <https://www.ussrandolphcv15.com/>

### Collision at Sea

(Created from my memories and accounts about the accident found online)

I have to confess that when I decided to become a NAVCAD I did think a bit about the potential dangers of flying. I had heard about some accidents during the training process, experienced one of my colleagues dying in a landing mishap while he was on a solo flight, and even witnessed the aftermath of a non-fatal one. However, because my instructors were so proficient, confident, and encouraging, thoughts of my own vulnerability quickly left me. Little did I dream that my greatest peril might come when I was assigned to the USS Randolph (as noted in an earlier story), especially because I was a Yeoman and my most dangerous assignment involved typing confidential or classified letters. I even inwardly chuckled when my assigned duty station was sitting at a typewriter during those drill sessions aimed at repelling Soviet sailors and submariners who were “cold war” toying with the convoys. If we were ever boarded was I supposed to throw a typewriter at an invading Soviet sailor? I guess I was expected to destroy any confidential papers, but I was never given any such training.

When we were cruising in the Atlantic it was often my habit to be up on the flight deck each early evening. I loved to simply gaze at the sky and water and watch any maneuvers that might be going on such as aircraft landings, refueling other ships, and trying to catch a glimpse of any sea life. It also was typically very warm in the bunk-rooms below decks so the fresh air was really appreciated

and occasionally I even brought up a blanket and slept wherever I could find a secure spot. On October 16, 1961, we were just less than half-way between Charleston, SC, and the coast of Bermuda. We were conducting sonar sweeps. We were sailing in parallel with the destroyer USS Stormes (DD-780) off our starboard side as we were refueling it. This meant that fuel oil lines had been snaked between the two ships as well as other lines used to transport mail, films, and other items. In essence, during such maneuvers we had the right of way and were carrying the appropriate signal flags and lights to so designate.

Starting about 1930 hours (7:30 pm) those of us standing on deck saw some lights from another ship off in the distance heading our way. This was nothing unusual as ships often passed by at safe distances. Radar, radio transmissions, and signal lights from the various vessels were used to inform each other of their intentions, headings, etc. About the same time our radar detected that ship heading our way and on a collision course. The ship was a Liberian oil tanker, the Atlantic Viscountess.

However, as time rapidly progressed it was clear that collision path was closing. Even though the night was slightly foggy if I remember correctly, the sea was relatively calm and there seemed to be good visibility, a situation needed when refueling. In a few minutes after radio signals were not acknowledged, various warning claxons began sounding with six blasts of noise. Believe you me, the sound was deafening and should have easily been heard across the rapidly diminishing distance. Three more blasts were then sounded. This unusual circumstance quickly began bringing men up from below decks to see what was going on.

It suddenly became a dangerous situation and Captain Harry Cook ordered an emergency break away by the Stormes during which the fuel line snapped spewing fuel everywhere until it could be shut off. I also remember seeing items (probably films, letters, orders, and other material) falling into the sea. Immediately the Stormes cleared out to the starboard side. At approximately 1800 hours (8 pm) the Captain then ordered "all engines back full," and the collision horn rang with this announcement still clearly burned into my memory, "Stand by for a collision on the port side!" Just before the collision I tried to brace myself. The tanker gouged into our port bow and the prow of that ship buried into the Randolph. The vigorous shaking of the ship knocked me to my knees. The Randolph then lunged ahead to free itself from the tanker. The collision ripped a large hole almost the size of a small house in the port side of the front of our ship. It made a 25-foot gouge in the hull and ruptured the gasoline line on that side and created a torching fire with flames shooting up very high to my untrained eye. The image that immediately went through my mind was of the various ships in Pearl Harbor sunk, sinking and burning after the December 7, 1941, sneak attack.

The oil tanker was dragged along our port side as momentum from the Randolph's bulk carried us forward. As it slid by it took with it such things as our antennas, rafts, landing mirrors, etc. A general alarm was sounded and we immediately went to General Quarters.

We only had to fight the ensuing fires for several minutes, but we were at General Quarters for a long time. I had not had any training in fighting fires so I simply watched what others were doing and helped as best I could. I do remember that my clothes and shoes were soon soaked and whatever was in the water and fog foam being sprayed left such an odor that I eventually threw away everything I had been wearing. The fire was close to an ammunition magazine where 5" fixed rounds were stored. There were guys who formed a "chain gang" and passed, hand to hand, rounds

from the magazine and threw them over the side. I was part of one chain gang for a while. We did not experience any fatalities but some on the chain gang had burns.

The Atlantic Viscountess also had some fires and a nearby destroyer came around to help fight those fires with their water spraying equipment. It turned out that the tanker had been on “iron mike” and the individual who was manning the bridge had left his station. “Iron mike” is the name given to a mechanism that when engaged, will steer a ship to a preset course without anyone manning the wheel. It is also likely that someone who should have been on duty had fallen asleep. They did experience some injured men and a medical team from the Randolph was sent over to the Viscountess to provide some assistance. We all were lucky that there were no fatalities.

Randolph proceeded slowly to the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard, Portsmouth, VA, where she immediately went to dry-dock for about a month. Staring down at the temporary repairs made to the side of the ship made me realize how much damage had actually occurred. As I was ending my two years of required enlistment, I never went back on the carrier and completed my assignments in a port office. I should note, too, that there was a general order after this incident that we were not to talk about the collision, but I am hopeful that after 56 years I won't be sent to any brig. There also are some Internet sites that talk about this so I should be okay. Was I scared? Sure, but it was all a good learning experience and a story I can tell to others.



USS Randolph.



Atlantic Viscountess.



USS Stormes DD-780 13 Nov., 1968.

<https://www.usstrandolphcv15.com/>