

THE NAVY:

Knox on the Rocks

Dark was the night and rough were the waters of the China Sea as the U.S.S. Frank Knox, a \$24 million destroyer launched in 1944, boiled along toward Taiwan. Behind her were long weeks of patrols with the Seventh Fleet, ahead of her, a week or more of provisioning—and shore leave for all hands.

Then it happened. There was the crunch of steel plate on coral, and the ship ground to a jarring stop. Her skipper, Comdr. Nicholas Grkovic, 43, bolted to the bridge from his cabin. "All en-

gines back full!" he bellowed. The propellers churned until they were mangled on the coral. But nothing happened, nothing at all: the Knox was aground, and well aground, on a clearly charted reef just 7 miles from the Communist Chinese Pratas islets.

Grkovic then tried to work his ship free by shifting the ballast, next by racing the crew back and forth from bow to stern. All to no avail. Nor could the five salvage vessels that sped to the scene budge her. In desperation, as the days turned into weeks, and insistent inquiries poured in from the Pentagon, the crew systematically transferred to the flotilla of salvage ships everything that could be unbolted or pried loose—deck stanchions, anchors, coils of cables, ship's furniture, radar and radio gear, captain's silverware. They pumped the fuel tanks empty. Then all but a work crew of 63 out of a complement of 250 abandoned the ship. Still, the Knox didn't budge.

Humiliation: Finally, the commander performed the ultimate act of humiliation. He ordered the Knox's 5-inch guns dismantled and removed. Still no luck. She wouldn't move, not even when divers blasted away at the coral reef

while rubber pontoons buoyed her bow. After five weeks of red-faced futility, the salvage team finally hit on an idea that worked. They pumped the sagging hull full of a foamy plastic called polyurethane. Forced into flooded compartments, the foam hardened, displaced water and lightened the ship. On the 36th day, the Knox, namesake of a proud Secretary of the Navy, floated free and was towed to repair docks at Yokosuka, Japan.

There she remained last week, while the Navy tried to figure out how to put the best possible face on the fiasco. The admirals finally managed this last by bravely hailing the use of the poly-

urethane foam as "a major breakthrough in salvage technology." But this did not solve the problem of the naval engineers laboring aboard the Knox: "It was one thing to get that foam in," said one, "but how in the hell are we going to get it out?"
