

Richard Huehn, YN3

The hot weather during typhoon season spurred creativity in sleeping arrangements. Huehn was fortunate to be able to make the ship's office his sleeping area the night the FRANK KNOX ran aground. He would line up four padded chairs to sleep on. For ventilation he would open up the starboard port hole pushing fresh air into the office space about the size of pullman style kitchen. The night was beautiful, clear skies with occasional clouds. The seas were calm. Huehn "hit the rack" in the ship's office thinking only of the Sunday routine ahead and eggs to order, a crew favorite. Then there was a thump.

Huehn is not sure of the exact moment he woke up. He does recall the high-pitched grinding of the ship as it pushed further up the reef. He was fully alert as the ship came to a hard "stop". He recalls he simply "rolled off his bed of chairs on to the deck of the ship's office." The ship listed heavily to starboard, then righted itself. Huehn left the office and went to the port side of the O2 level. He realized the ship was aground. "My first thought was 'there go our eggs to order.'" He was right, the popular eggs to order was gone for this day. The ship's holiday routine became a desperate effort to free the ship from the reef. And, by noon on this day, word passed among crew members that the ship was 130 feet, or more, resting on the reef, surrounded by calm water. The calm conditions gave way to Typhoon Gilda, a storm that savaged the grounded ship, forcing extraordinary measures to save the ship. Huehn could see a barge, loaded with ammunition and fuel, from the port hole in the ship's office. He could feel the impact of the barge slamming into the ship about every 12 seconds as storm swells up to 12 feet pounded the area.

The typhoon continued into the day forcing the Navy to evacuate 155 personnel by helicopter from the ship. Another 95 men volunteered to remain aboard to work with salvage personnel to save the ship. Huehn volunteered to stay aboard, He was the only Yeoman, and the only one who was familiar personnel records. He was soon to be keeper of payroll records as well. His duties included typing officer's reports for the Captain and the ship's deck logs which no errors. The acting Executive Officer worked with the remaining officers and enlisted individuals. The Captain would only communicate with the Executive Officer. Huehn saw both sides as the only administrative person on board the grounded ship. Storms, including torrential rain regularly assaulted the ship making living conditions survival level. Food was delivered by boat or helicopter as salvage operations continued all hours of the day and night.

One day, just after the 20th day Huehn was ordered to pack all personnel records and payroll records and move to USS Prairie the current flag ship for salvage operations. Moving to a ship with laundry service, hot food and fresh water for a shower was a dream of every sailor on the grounded ship. Huehn was reluctant to leave his shipmates. The records he handled were vital to all and he followed orders. That evening, in a clean uniform and freshly showered, enjoyed hot chow and spooned his first bite of soft serve ice cream. He never stopped thinking about his shipmates aboard to grounded ship.

Huehn moved records aboard a new flagship, USS MARS. MARS was a brand new ship, super clean, with facilities the envy of every ship in the salvage fleet. In spite of the good conditions he was from a crew of a ship that had embarrassed the Navy. As such, he was treated with cool reserve and missed his shipmates. Away from his ship, his work arrived remotely and lacked any personal contact with his shipmates.

It was on the MARS that Huehn got his first glimpse of his battered ship towed free of the reef after 38 days, a sight he never forgot. Only 38 of the original 95 volunteers remained aboard.