

ROYAL REEF RUNNERS - The Ride of His Life – Rick Swaney BM3 (BMCS ret.)

The USS FRANK KNOX DDR-742 went aground on Pratas Reef 18 July 1965. By 21 July the on-board salvage crew of 95 volunteers was reduced to around 38 toward the end of the 38 day salvage operations. Rick Swaney was one who stayed aboard to the end. Swaney's skills emerged a few weeks earlier and grew during the salvage operations.

The FRANK KNOX was picking up Secret orders from a mine sweeper off the coast of Qui Nonh, South Vietnam. Swaney was coxswain of the ship's 22' motor whaleboat. The boat officer was ENS Price. Price recalled the weather was rough as the whaleboat came alongside the bucking mine sweeper. During the transfer the minesweeper reared up on a swell, rolled and the downward course would have crushed the whaleboat and injured the crew. Swaney's reactions moved the whaleboat clear just as the much larger minesweeper narrowly missed the small boat. A few weeks later, following unloading of the forward magazines onto a barge alongside the starboard side of FRANK KNOX, the weather deteriorated. Typhoon Gilda approached. The ammunition loaded barge was smashing against the side of the ship and the motor whaleboat was in jeopardy. Swaney recalls "We would have brought the whaleboat aboard using the boat falls if power to the winches was available. It was not." He was ordered to get the boat underway in mounting seas and shelter near GRAPPLE ARS-7. Swaney and two crew motored out from the ship as darkness fell during the storm. "It was a very long night," until Swaney and crew could secure the whale boat alongside GRAPPLE.

GRAPPLE was dealing with the effects of wind up to 30 kts and 8–10-foot seas. The crew sheltered on GRAPPLE the next two days then, mid-day on the third day the crew of three were brought aboard a helicopter and returned to FRANK KNOX. Nothing can dim the memory of the ride of his life in a 22' boat during Typhoon Gilda. After returning to the FRANK KNOX, Swaney and fellow boatswains' mates were plunged into a series of challenging assignments assisting the ship salvage operations. Twenty-foot steel I-beams were brought aboard for reinforcing the front part of the ship. Welding equipment and generators were next. A section of anchor chain was relocated from forward to the ship's stern to secure beach gear cables. A huge air compressor was broken down into two parts and brought aboard ship. There was the forty tons of foam, and catalyst in 55-gallon drums, and nitrogen cylinders arriving to be stored aboard. The steady stream of fuel, food, parts, supplies, and boats delivering these items created a crash course in advanced techniques and skills for the boatswain's mates.



Boatswain's Mates saw or performed a wide variety of highly skilled tasks far beyond routine on-board operations. Safely and skillful execution was a priority. He retired as a Senior Chief Boatswains Mate. "We were 20 somethings. The ship was our home. We just did our duty."