

Chapter 11 (16-17 May)

16 degrees 58 minutes N 107 degrees 52 minutes E

Mullinnix Arrives on Vietnam Gunline

An uneasy feeling was in my gut as we arrived. I wanted to kill. Probably more emotion, not intention. One never really knows. We were kids. We should still be in HS or freshmen at State U. Boom-boom as I pulled the trigger. The slight echo-like delay caused by the machinery in MT52 as it matched MT53's anger. Die you red fucks!

May 16 - June 16 7,821 Song Than 6-72

NAVPERS 3100/2 (1-66) (Formerly NAVPERS 719)		DECK LOG—REMARKS SHEET			
USS <u>MULLINIX (DD944)</u>		ZONE DESCRIPTION <u>-8H</u>	DATE <u>TUESDAY 16 MAY 1972</u>		
AT/PASSAGE FROM <u>SUBIC BAY, PHILIPPINES</u>		TO <u>COAST OF VIETNAM</u>			
<small>POSITION</small>	<small>ZONE</small>	<small>TIME</small>	<small>POSITION</small>	<small>ZONE</small>	<small>TIME</small>
<small>0800</small> L <u>17° 00' N</u>	BY <u>2</u>		<small>1200</small> L <u>16° 58' N</u>	BY <u>2</u>	
<u>λ 107° 53' E</u>	BY <u>2</u>		<u>λ 107° 52' E</u>	BY <u>2</u>	
<small>2000</small> L <u>16° 49' N</u>	BY <u>2</u>		<u>λ 107° 53' E</u>	BY <u>2</u>	
					LEGEND: 1-CELESTIAL 2-ELECTRONIC 3-VISUAL 4-D. R.

Mullinnix arrived on the Vietnam gunline at 1217 with three advanced single-barrel 5-inch/54-caliber guns. Peeling the face off Vietnam, the fleet's fire power was greater than anything the world had seen since the war in the Pacific in WWII. Few big guns. A few six-inch and fewer eight-inch. But the sheer number of five-inch barrels trolling a thousand yards of shore was astonishing. 500, 600, 700 and 800 class destroyers. And the newest, the Shermans, the 900 class. All with five-inch barrels. The rate at which the fleet could pore tons of explosives on a single command was unparalleled in modern warfare.

The crew had been cocooned in continuous training. GQ, man-overboard, abandonment drills, night illumination exercises, Condition II Blue-Gold team drills, highlining, refueling. Had we been lulled into a false sense of security?

On the morning of 16 May the crew was up at 0330 to load ammo until 0630. Then refueling. You go to war with full magazines and full fuel tanks. The dim outline of the coast began to take shape. An early morning mist rose from the ground. With it lurked a very real danger. Birdman was in the MK68 Director. He could see fires burning up and down the coast before we were even officially on the line. The beach was stained brown at the high-water mark. Below was exposed sand sculptured by the current. Beyond the elephant grass, rice paddies, and hills chemically defoliated with Agent Orange (A.O.) was smudged black smoke and the gasoline-smell of napalm. Bird thought, 'we all are going to die!'

Country Joe again. The sun climbed and Mux lost her shadow. The mountains appeared above thinning clouds. Heat rose with the authority of a flooding tide. The sun burned through to bone. We had arrived. The fresh-air mental asylum of Indochina. Mullinnix flashed a light to inform the other ships "*the top gun of the Atlantic Fleet had arrived*". Each sent a return light. The decks were already hot to the touch. The sky was an indigo blue.



**Doyle & Gus
Loading 5" Powder**

In a cloudless sky, US jet engines changed pitch to a loud, ear-numbing scream as they dove into the jungle. Abruptly they would pull up just clearing the treetops. Releasing their load as they climbed. Little black eggs tumbled end-over-end, then vanished into the canopy. Moments later the lush green changed to molten red and orange as fire balls consumed both oxygen and vegetation. Napalm.

A mushroom cloud of smoke and flame rose from a fuel dump that was hit. Generating heat so great water in a nearby lake boiled. Liquid flame rained down in umbrella fashion setting of drums of diesel like strings of firecrackers.

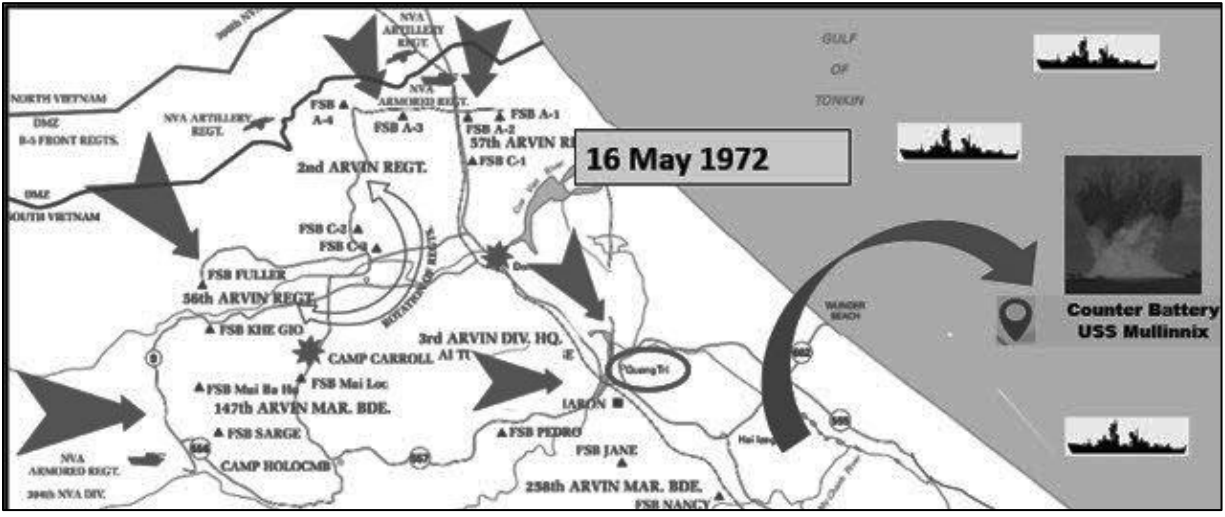
The crew watched tanks battling on the beach. The earth erupted filling the air with grit. We could hear the constant rattle of machine-gun fire and the sharpness of rifle-fire and the heavy pounding of shelling from offshore. Fires flared and twisted in the wind. The smell of smoke, death, and decay slowly drifted towards Mullinnix. Leaving a metallic taste in our mouths that we couldn't shake. My thoughts were like scrambled eggs. I didn't know what to think. So, I didn't. Birdman may have been right. I knew the Animals were.

The crew didn't have to wait long. A mere thirty-eight minutes after arriving, an explosion port side at 1307 send a geyser of water as high as the stacks. Then the scream of the 1MC...

Counter Battery! Counter Battery! Return Fire!

NAVPERS 3100/2 (1-66) (Formerly NAVPERS 719)		DECK LOG—REMARKS SHEET			
USS <u>MULLINIX (DD944)</u>	ZONE DESCRIPTION <u>-84</u>	DATE <u>TUESDAY</u> <u>16</u> <u>MAY</u> 19 <u>72</u>			
AT/PASSAGE FROM <u>SUBIC BAY PHILIPPINES</u>		TO <u>COAST OF VIETNAM</u>			

station 1245 commenced firing 776 51353 1255 Cease Fire 776 51352
 16 Rounds expended bars clear no casualties steering various courses and
 various speeds 1307 Received counter battery 50 yds off our stern
 1 round 1314 Commenced firing 776 51352 steering various courses
 and speeds to maintain firing position 1336 Fires lit 2B Boiler
 1404 Cease Fire 776 51353 22 Rounds expended Bars clear no casualties
 1414 Commenced firing 776 53 1419 Cease fire 776 53 22 Rounds expended
 bars clear no casualties steering various courses and speeds



Hell with Fire Control. Three 5"-54 guns manually swung their barrels around and rapid-fired at the smoke escaping the jungle from the enemy battery until the 1MC shrieked...

Cease Fire! Cease Fire!



It's a wonderful thing about a photograph. It stops time just for that second. It's like everything will always be the same. Of course, it never is.

RDSN Steve Haight was on the torpedo deck sightseeing when the shell burst next to Mullinnix. Being the macho man he was, he

beat feet to the nearest hatch and didn't venture outside for three days.

As an E-3 Fire Control Technician Seaman (FTGSN), with the trigger in my hand, I was on the sound powered phones with the gun mounts and the Weapons Officer, LT Schrope in CIC (Combat Information Center or “*Combat*” for short).

Triggers in the gun mounts were set on automatic and as I pulled my trigger in Plot, I started the war for Mullinnix firing her first sixty rounds.

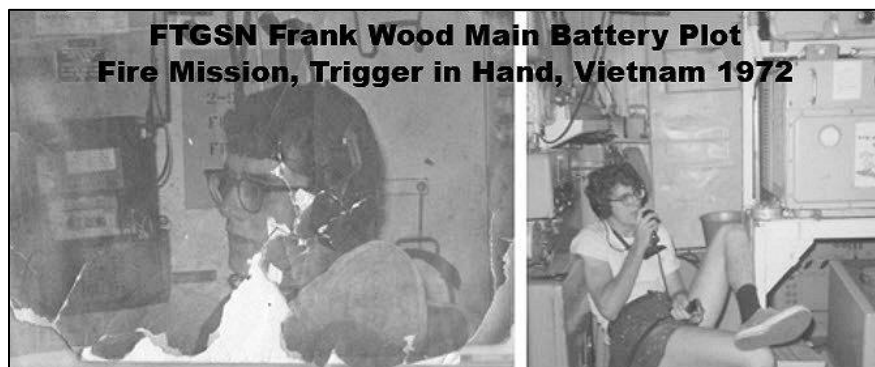
A half-hour later two radars locked on the ship. An hour after that a fishing boat neared too close to the ship and GMG2 Robert Tyng opened fire with one of the 50-caliber machine guns on the bridge-wing. Bapbapbap, bapbapbap!

The tension was obscene. My nerves were on fire. I became jumpy and paranoid, and this was only the first day.

The crew worked six-hour shifts, Section “A” Blue Team and Section “B” Gold Team. Twenty-four-seven. Plot was one of the few compartments that was air-conditioned due to the heat generated from the vacuum tubes in the equipment. I had the 1200-1800 watch (Gold Team). How a green wet behind the ears FTGSN was assigned to this critical job for eighty-eight days on the gunline was beyond me.



The civilian in me suggested, “*we shag ass!*” The “*hate the Navy*” part of me said, “*maybe my fucking orders would come through.*” Then I remembered, “*I had NO fucking orders coming.*”



We were in a SAM (Shit Awful Mess) for sure. Then the sensible steady-as-she-goes sailor in me decided, “*Well fuck me and the horse I road in on. Let’s do this thing!*”

Small fishing boats may not be small fishing boats. We were always on guard in the event an attempt was made to attach a magnetic mine to the hull. The CO would sit in his bridge wing chair with a box of grenades in his lap. Pull the pin and throw them over the side every now and again. All day and night.

The 1MC, the basic communication system on a naval vessel, reached all spaces on the ship. It was used for general announcements and to transmit general alarm signals. Control stations were located on the bridge, quarterdeck, and central station. There were other MC and JV circuits used for communications as well. These other circuits were typically system-specific such as weapons systems, navigation communication, engineering systems, and firefighting.

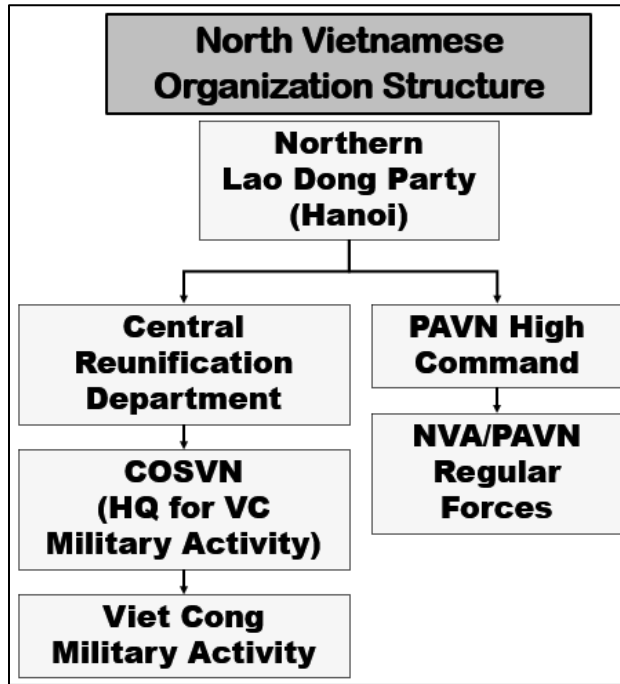
In an attempt to break the tension somebody played a joke. Kept calling and not talking. One of the officers finally had enough and yelled, “*Tell me who this is, or I will crawl through this line and piss on your brain!*”

The crew’s tension was already causing hyperarousal, self-isolation, anxiety, and a struggle to regulate emotions like skylarking and grab-assing. Where would we go from here?

Within the hour *The Mighty Mux* was firing the first of 171 NGFS missions she would fire in her eighty-eight days of combat action. During her first thirty-day gunline period Mullinnix provided 7,821 rounds in support of South Vietnamese operations and in particular the amphibious assault ‘*Operation Song Than 6-72*’ (See Chapter 14).



Mullinnix fired 325 rounds in her first twenty-four hours. With highly accurate precision and an experienced crew she was able to provide successful gunfire support for South Vietnamese ground troops. This performance was later recognized in a formal presentation of the Gunnery E for Excellence to the Weapons Department.



Captain Dung Hung Nam had his VC soldiers hiding among the occupants of a coastal village. He heard the first rounds just before they hit. Three 5-in/54 hi-frag shells impacted within fifty feet of their location. See “North Vietnamese Organization Structure” chart.

The first of the rounds struck the narrow roadway less than ten feet from the front entrance of their hideout, vaporizing a half dozen soldiers. The concussion crushed the life out of several others. Exploding the street-facing windows turning the interior into a whirling horror of glass splinters. Obliterating the occupants inside.

Following the blast wave there was a secondary implosion as the vacuum created was filled by an inrushing fury of air. The front of the building and squalid houses on either side, already weakened, toppled into the street.

At the same instant the next round hit across the roadway. Several VC standing at the front of a small shop saw their comrades running down the street. Blinded by the detonation, their chest walls collapsed under the force of the blast, rupturing every major organ.

Captain Dung hated the American ships. He couldn't understand why General Secretary Le Duan would not put a stop to them. The next shell reached the ground midway between the buildings on either side of the road. The force of the explosion trapped between the rows of buildings took the path of least resistance. Blowing in the fronts of the remaining buildings. Burying the running soldiers in a welter of tinder-dry debris. Which began to burn furiously, ignited by the exploding stash of stored ammunition.

Captain Dung and his Lieutenant, Dinh Huy Long, were furious they could not complete their mission because of the Americans.

Captain Dung ordered his men into the tree line. Marine spotters radioed adjustments, so the next salvos followed the fleeing soldiers into the trees. The rounds demolished several buildings as well as shattered a large propane tank that was functioning as the village natural gas supply.



The entire area was turned into a nightmarish landscape. Severed limbs and charred pieces of flesh littered the area like refuse from a slaughterhouse. Water buffalo lay scattered across the rice field. Thick green dotted with gaping holes of black, smoking earth. One water buffalo was wandering in a ditch alongside the road trailing intestines. Bellowing. Her big brown eyes crazed with fear and pain.



The shelling continued as the remaining troops tried to flee death. Wave after wave of shells descended at the village edge. Guided by the spotters and the continued explosions from additional ammunition caches hidden near the tree line. Men died that afternoon. Dozens more were wounded. Many of the innocent villagers were left homeless. Within an hour after the shelling stopped these instant refugees were trudging south on Highway 1.

Desperate to escape the growing communist presence.

Hours following the conclusion of the mission, fires continued to rage, fueled by sporadic explosions of munitions. The entire road seemed to have disappeared, with most buildings reduced to rubble. A bird pecked at the outstretched hand of a body buried under a pile of debris. The stench of death permeated the village amidst the summer heat.

War is a human endeavor. If human activity moves location, war will follow. War is death. Plain and simple.

The fleet was operating under blackout conditions. The darkness combined with the large silent ships produced an eerie feeling of restrained lethality. War is a two-way street. The first night and many more to come we could see heat-lighting to the North. I thought it strange at first when a slow low rumble drifted across Mux several seconds later. In Nebraska lighting that far away would not yield sound. Arc-light raids of B-52s

on enemy positions will. Flash, flash, rumble, flash, flash, rumble, flash. Hitchcock-like in Rear Window's final scene.

FTGs, GMGs, and Radiomen slept below MT52's carrier room. The first night from sheer exhaustion, fatigue, and terror, I collapsed in my bunk before midwatch. I was sound asleep when Mullinnix had a mission call in that required MT52 and MT51 to fire off the port side. The side I slept on. I'd never been asleep when the guns were fired. When the first round fired, I jumped out of my rack thinking, "*Damn, we've been hit!*"

I was terrified. I literally flew out of my rack. Swiping away the cockroaches thinking we'd been hit by enemy fire. I had my glasses on, pants on, and looking for my shoes, thinking I was either going to Plot for GQ or heading to my abandon-ship life raft. Then I heard a sharp metallic sound that I had heard before. The sound of MT52's carrier system cycling another shell from the magazine below up through the compartment into the carrier room. Then and only then did I realize it was the Mighty Mux that was firing not the enemy. I was rattled beyond fear. I couldn't sleep the rest of the night.

After many nights of being awakened by missions most of the crew learned to sleep through them. We didn't have much choice. Non-stop exhaustion and fatigue will do that. Fitful sleep with precious little rest.

Then there was something like this...

We continued firing into the night. First the sharp deafening slams then the cloud of pungent fumes and blizzards of seared cork and pulverized cardboard. Woody had the 0000-0600 watch in Plot. Manning the phones with Combat and the gun mounts. It was quiet, that dead of night quiet. Unsettling when everything is so silent. When blood pounding through your veins sounds like a rushing river.

Suddenly the sound power phone crackled to life. The shock nearly knocked him over. It was Woody in Plot. "Hang on boys, were loading a fire mission into the computer." In a flash, once the solution was validated, the aft director and all three mounts sprang to life. In synchronous harmony all swinging to starboard.

"Standby," Woody announced. "Wait for it!"

The tension was obscene. No spotting round. Somebody was fixing to be in deep shit.

"Fire for effect. Fire fore effect!" yelled Woody. With the mount triggers on automatic all three guns belched as fast as Woody could pull his trigger.

There was a brilliant flash high overhead with a retina-burning brightness of a parachute flare igniting. In the distance you could hear coastal batteries began to snort and bang. More flares went up. Lighting up the battlefield like the surface of the moon. The

alabaster of the white phosphorus (Willie Peter (WP)) smoke was screening the allies' operation from the enemy.

***Warfare isn't exciting
It bleeds your energy
Drains your spirit
And consumes your soul***



Hope is a good thing. Maybe the best thing. You are sitting on a beach with a drink in your hand and the water washes away your dreams and thoughts. You are still sitting there with a drink in your hand and the waves wash again.

When not on watch I'd go topside for air. Nervously eyeing the sky for MiGs. At night a deep rumbling noise was always present. Arc-lights reminded me that war does not take a break just because the sun went down. The noise was non-stop. Each second a minute, each minute and hour, each hour eternity. Too many thoughts. Like BBs rolling around inside an empty boxcar.

Frank Wood letter home

16 May, Tuesday, 1972 (Arrived off coast of South Vietnam - Gunline)

Dear Mom, Dad, and Sue:

Today was our first day. Up at 0300 to load 1400 rounds of powder then fuel. I had the 1200-0600 watch. We fired 120 rounds on 2 separate missions. I pulled the trigger to start the war for Mux. Altogether I fired 60 rounds. On our first mission they shot back. Landed about fifty yards away. A half-hour later two radars locked on to us. We have 4 marines on board to operate Red Eye missiles, firing them from their shoulder like a bazooka. Used against MiGs. They are heat seeking. I've got the 0000-0600 watch. Better go to bed. Love, Frank

Everything is interconnected. Even when it's not. You cannot separate it. It's like wet on rain. Woody Allen used to say, "ninety percent is just being there".

17 May, Mullinnix' First Full Day on the Gunline

On her first full day Mux fired 239 rounds. Next to the heavy cruiser USS Newport News (8" guns) and light cruiser USS Oklahoma City (6" guns), Mullinnix was one of the most powerful gunships off the coast of Vietnam.

When a ship is steaming in open water the self-made wind carries ship-generated odors off the fantail with a schnook-like force. Patrolling at 1-2 knots, the air smelled of stagnant water, burnt cordite, and decaying vegetation. It was hot and breathless as

the sun fell on moist earth. The air tasted like pencil-lead. To say the gunline was hot was like saying hell was slightly warm.

Standing on dark gray metal decking too hot to touch with an ungloved hand the heat climbed through the souls of your boondockers like a kitchen stove set on high through a cast iron skillet. Boondockers were Navy issue high-top black boot-like shoes worn as part of the working uniform. As personal appearance was a distant second to fire missions against the enemy, many of us were bare-chested, in old cut-off dungarees and white tennis shoes.

NAVPERS 3100/2 (1-66) (Formerly NAVPERS 719)		DECK LOG—REMARKS SHEET			
USS <i>Mullinnix</i> <i>DD944</i>	ZONE DESCRIPTION	<i>-84</i>	DATE	<i>Wed. 17 May 1972</i>	
AT/PASSAGE FROM		<i>South Vietnam</i>	TO <i>Coast</i>		
<i>12-18 Underway as before steering various courses and speeds parallel to beach. ¹⁴⁴² Commenced firing Mts 51, 52 and 53. 1445 Ceased firing, 101 rounds expended. Bore clear, no casualties.</i>					
<i>1446 CAS 36 Arrived on board 1448 Equipment failure 2254-1445</i>					
<i>Mt. 51, 52, 53 1553 4/ 135°T 1555 4/ 2 knots 4/ 130°T 4/ 3 knots</i>					
<i>1642 4/ 125°T 1706 4/ 130°T 4/ 1 knot.</i>					

The heat radiated from the coast siphoning moisture from the South China Sea. In the mornings the moisture-laden air would form a thick mist hanging over the water making the coastline disappear. You could smell it, fog was coming. In the time it took to smoke a Marlboro the purple mountains were bisected by it. Mountain tops jutting skyward out of a fog can be a beautiful sight, but it can also be dangerous for ships as it cuts into the response time for enemy counterbattery. One moment your view is clear, the next distances become deceptive.



SAIGON - The Navy has a new sense of purpose since the North's invasion began March 30. The Fleet off Vietnam now numbers about 65 ships and 41,000 men.

Carriers: Constellation, Coral Sea, Hancock, Midway, Saratoga, Kittyhawk. (Anti-submarine carrier Ticonderoga is enroute. Helicopter Carrier Okinawa.

Cruisers: Oklahoma City, Newport News, Providence, Chicago, Long Beach

Destroyers: Berkeley, Bausell, Charles P. Cecil, John R. Craig, Eversole, Miles C. Fox, Glennon, Gurke, Hamner, Hanson, Hull, John Paul Jones, Everett F. Larson, George K. Mackenzie, John S. McCain, **Mullinnix**, Ozbourn, Somers, Rowan, Sarsfield, Benjamin Stoddert, Joseph Strauss, Lloyd Thomas, Waddell. Destroyer

Escorts: Davidson, Albert David, Whipple.

Guided Missile Frigates: Biddle, Sterett.

Amphibious Landing Ships: Blue Ridge, Denver, Nobile, St. Louis, Port Defiance, Juneau, Anchorage, Schenectady, Manitowoc, Tuscaloosa, Alamo, Sumter, Cayuga, Duluth. Ammunition Ships: Vesuvius, Kilauea.



On 17 May at 1035 GMGSN Joe Paglia required fourteen stitches in his right index finger due to an injury loading ammo. Manually lugging and moving seventy-pound projectiles and twenty-pound powder casings as fast as possible can be tiring and dangerous work.

06-12 UNDERWAY AS BEFORE. 0623 OBSERVED SUNRISE. 0628 SHIFTED STEERING CONTROL TO PORT MOTOR/PORT CABLE. 1035 PAGLIA, SN [REDACTED] INJURED IN MT 51 MAGAZINE BY POWDER CASING. REQUIRED 14 STITCHES IN RIGHT INDEX FINGER. 1105 AWAY THE GIG TO TRANSFER COMDESRON 36 AND STAFF TO USS MCCAIN (DDG-36). 1115 GIG RETURNED TO SHIP AND IN THE SKIDS.

One and a half days into this fight and we had been shot at, fired 564 rounds, and Joe came damn close to losing his index finger. If this is some kind of pattern developing it ain't good. I had already decided I was going to miss this shit like a mole I had removed.

