

Torpedo in the Jungle
(A True Account)
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The following document has been reformatted from its original version and partially edited.

The following story is based on an incident that occurred in November of 1972.

PREFACE

Beginning in May of 1972, the US Navy and Air force had been mining North Vietnam waterways for over 6 months utilizing underwater mines laid by aircraft and assembled in Subic Bay, Philippines and Guam. The Paris peace talks had stalled again and President Nixon was fast approaching the crucial decision to re-seed the already established minefields, located throughout North Vietnam. It was especially critical to re-seed the minefields in the Haiphong shipping channel, which had already been successful in halting strategic Russian shipments of rockets and creating profound logistical difficulties for North Vietnam.

The Russian ships were instrumental in bringing SAM rockets into Haiphong unabated for the past 8 years. SAM rockets were extremely effective in shooting down our planes on a daily basis, killing or making POWs of the pilots that survived. The re-seeding operation was expected to be carried out by A-6 Intruders, launched from aircraft carriers located in the Tonkin Gulf.

President Nixon's decision to re-seed the minefields awaited one key piece of data. Could submarine-launched underwater (torpedo) mines be utilized to covertly mine the Haiphong channel rather than risk laying the mines by aircraft? Loss of aircraft could be expected during the execution of this operation, placing personnel in great jeopardy.

The problem was that the (MK 27) torpedo mines required for this operation, as-well-as the submarines that could launch them, were located in Oahu, Hawaii. The possibility that they

could be armed and be safely loaded into the subs, then transited to Haiphong, was out of the question due to obvious safety concerns.

An alternate solution was to ship the unarmed torpedo mines in crates to the nearest ammunition magazine to Haiphong, where they could they be armed and loaded onto submarines equipped to launch underwater mines, then transited to Haiphong and covertly launched into the channel?

The question was: Could it be done?

MY STORY

I was stationed at the Naval Magazine, Subic Bay, Philippines, at the height of the Vietnam War. I supervised a "Destructor" (MK 36 DST) assembly crew in an area called P-5. The "DST" was a classified weapon used heavily on and around the Ho Chi Minh trail and in the river deltas of Vietnam. The DST assembly shop was located on the highest ridge in the midst of thick, class "C" jungle, which is considered to be the thickest jungle on earth.

In November of '72, I received a phone call from my chief supervisor requesting that I come down the hill to the main mine-assembly compound. I was to bring a detonator tool box and one helper to assist me.

When I arrived at the main mine-assembly compound, I was met by my chief supervisor, Chief Wendy Johnson and a strange looking man that I had never seen before. He looked strange because he was wearing a suit and tie. His coat was draped over his arm and his tie was pulled loose because it was hot in the jungle; 120 degrees with 100 percent humidity.

Wendy Johnson walked me over to a flatbed (trailer) bomb carrier, which is used to load bombs under aircraft wings, and pulled back a tarp which covered a MK 27 submarine launched underwater torpedo mine.

The odd thing about a MK 27 torpedo mine sitting on a bomb carrier made me wonder what my chief was up to. Torpedo mines were not stockpiled in our magazine and the nearest (and only) stockpile in the Pacific was in Oahu, Hawaii, where all the submarines were stationed. Another oddity was that it was now here in the middle of the jungle where there were no facilities to properly handle this type of weapon, for at least a thousand miles.

I now understood why Chief Johnson chose me to come down with a detonator toolbox. It was obvious that he had reviewed my certifications and found that I was the only MK 27 technician available at the Naval magazine. Also knowing that I had recently been transferred from the Naval Ammunition Depot, Oahu, Hawaii, where I worked as a MK 27 assembly technician.

After revealing the tarped torpedo mine, he asked if I knew how to arm it. I answered in the affirmative so he handed me a box of MK 46 detonators and directed me to arm the weapon. I then put on my protective facemask and proceeded to arm the 3000 lbs. MK 27 torpedo mine there in the jungle. As I worked, several questions entered my mind; “So what happens after I arm it; a live torpedo mine can’t be left out in the open in the middle of the jungle, it needs to be loaded in a submarine torpedo tube as soon as possible”. “Who was that man in the suit”? “What the hell was this all about”?

Working in 120 degree weather with a facemask was brutally uncomfortable. In my misery, I couldn't help but chuckle, as my mind wandered back to my early Navy training. I remembered when one of my instructors told us that the reason why Minemen wear facemasks while arming a weapon filled with 2,500 lb of high explosives, (such as this torpedo mine), is so that we can have an open casket funeral. As I returned to my task at hand, I couldn't help but reflect on that comforting thought.

Twenty minutes passed with intent concentration on my hazardous task. When I finished, I lifted the facemask and turned around to ask my Chief what he wanted me to do next, but he and the suited man were gone. When I had started, they were just five feet behind me, but now they had moved about 75 yards away. I remember thinking; "If this thing detonates, 75 yards isn't going to make a difference." I shook off the thought and I yelled over to my chief, telling him that the mine was armed. Then Wendy Johnson yelled back for me to remove the detonator from the mine and re-stow it back in the box. I did as instructed and when I was finished he took the box of detonators and drove off with the strange man, who I never saw again.

Eight years later, a Navy commander handed me a 100 page document that had been written for the chief of naval operations (CNO). It was a debrief of the entire Vietnam Mining Campaigns from 1964 to 1973. This is when I learned of the Solar Flare incident (another story) for the first time and also why I was asked to arm a torpedo mine in the jungle. The fact was that President Nixon, himself, wanted one of his aides to witness the arming in order to insure that it could be

performed in the jungles of Naval Magazine Subic Bay (the closest mine assembly area to the Vietnam war).

The plan was to transport the torpedo mines across the ocean from Hawaii (unarmed), deliver them to our magazine, and then arm them in the jungle. Specially equipped submarines, fitted for mine-laying operations, would then transit from Hawaii to one of our local secured docks at the water's edge of our magazine. The mines would be loaded aboard the subs, then sail off to Haiphong Harbor where they would be secretly and covertly planted.

Consequently, because of the possibility that a torpedo mine might be compromised by inadvertently running aground in the narrow Haiphong channel, the plan was re-evaluated and eventually scrubbed. But the President was satisfied that the task could be accomplished, if and when it would be needed.

Little did I know at the time, that by mere chance of being in the right place, at the right time, and having the unique skills and training, I became a key individual in the process for President Nixon to choose the next phase of the mining campaigns of Vietnam. On Dec 18, 1972, he made that historical decision that ended the Vietnam War.

True Story.