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Bravado

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Freedom of navigation. That's what brought Seventh Fleet's judge advocate general to our humble destroyer. Assembling all of the ships would only have turned the wardroom into a sardine can. Compacting in the available chief petty officers, and our best first class petty officers destroyed any expectation of personal space. I was covered in sweat just waiting for the brief to start, though I was confident that less than half of it was mine.

The South China Sea is home to many islands, natural and manmade, under many different sovereign claims. In international maritime law set forth by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, a nation owns the territorial seas twelve nautical miles off its coast. It also has exclusive economic rights to the resources found within 200 nautical miles of the coast to include drilling, fishing, and other economic activities.

We were to express that the United States does not recognize any claim of sovereignty to one spot in particular: The Fiery Cross Reef. Though Taiwan, the Philippines, and Vietnam lay claim to her, one can only find fortifications with "People's Republic of China" sprawled across it now. Though the international maritime community has refuted China's claims of ownership of everything within their historical claim of the "nine dash line," this has not hindered their progress. Arguments continued to rage over ownership, but China built it and other rocks and reefs up with imported sand. The Spratlys, the Paracels, and many others found themselves similarly fortified. On those islands only grains of sand outnumber number missiles. In a debate over ownership, some find this persuasive. We do not.

I would stand watch on the bridge as we piloted our vessel within twelve nautical miles of the reef. My excitement outweighed my nervousness.

As I took the watch as conning officer, we were fifteen nautical miles out from the reef, and planned to plow through the twelve nautical mile radius with a closest point of approach of

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eight nautical miles. Four miles off our port quarter was a PLA(N) Luyang III class destroyer armed with her own missile defense system, the Dragon Eye Radar. Plenty of missiles as well, no doubt. She had stopped hailing us over radio by the time I took over, as our officer of the deck was done responding with the appropriately heavily lawyered response describing our passage through what we made clear are international waters. So we did, with one of our largest American flags billowing in the wind behind us.

Through binoculars her bow surged angrily and pointedly toward us. We broadcast publicly we would be maintaining course and leisurely cruising at twelve knots. This made my job easy, since I was responsible for relaying course and speed changes to our helmsman. Radar return showed the Luyang advancing at twenty knots towards us. Visible light return showed her bow crushing waves beneath her bow, and sea spray thrown out of the way of her advance. As we entered twelve nautical miles of the coast of the Fiery Cross Reef, the Luyang was only a nautical mile off our port quarter now. She slowed, but kept advancing. Sixteen knots.

A mile into their claim of territorial waters, she was running parallel with us at a rather cozy 300 feet off our port beam. All US sailor eyes were on them, all Chinese sailor eyes were on us. Our bridge team was silent. All unnecessary watch standers were ordered off the bridge. Still responsible for the safe navigation of our own vessel, I searched the waters to starboard of our vessel but found us very much alone with our PLA(N) counterpart. Our bridge team and theirs were in the middle of the most uncomfortable staring contest I've ever seen, and no one else was around to witness it. I pointed out to the captain that they had sailors on their fantail. A closer look revealed there were about twenty of them. Twenty of them doing push-ups, looking at us while doing so no less.

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I didn't know what my captain would say, or if I should have just been quiet. Why would I mention that they were doing push-ups? That was stupid of me. After all, this was a tense interaction of near peer adversaries at sea in a hotly contested region, on orders from the President of the United States of America ... yet he grinned. He told the junior officer of the deck to get deck division outside on our fantail in PT gear, immediately. They were out in minutes, exercising to the cadence of our command fitness leader. Our staring contest was disrupted as the attention of the captain of the Luyang was directed to our fantail, and then to their own by one of his officers. He appeared to say something to the officer in return, who then picked up a phone on their bridge wing. Within minutes, there were more Chinese sailors on the fantail doing pushups.

My captain struggled to contain his grin and wide eyes. He instructed the officer of the deck to stay vigilant and maintain course and speed. We held distance with the Luyang at 300 feet; her course matched ours, and so did her speed. There were still no other vessels around. Captain then ordered the junior officer of the deck to get all available combat division sailors out on the fantail, and all available electronics technicians on the port side of the ship with coverall sleeves rolled up. Members of the bridge team shared glances. There was some muffled chuckling that was quickly muffled further.

As the ETs got out portside, I recalled one in particular fancied himself a body builder when not repairing fried circuit boards in the shop. Looking over the bridgewing, I could see his forearms and biceps glistening in the midday South China Sea summer heat. I suppose some of his posing oil lathered onto his arms made them hard to miss.

The officer of the deck reported we had reached our closest point of approach. We were now on our way out from our freedom of navigation operation. I issued a small course correction

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to the helmsman; it appeared he was somewhat distracted by these sea antics. I gave him a look to relay the importance of course adherence at this particular moment.

Looking back at the Luyang, her own starboard side was swarmed with sailors I needed no binoculars to see in detail. All male. Regulation haircuts. Modest to highly impressive upper body physiques. The latter were bare-chested. Perhaps they had posing oil as well. Our junior officer of the deck was the only female officer on the bridge team at the time. I noticed her sigh when realization appeared in her eyes to what my captain was really ordering the ship's crew to do. I also noticed her cheeks flush ever so slightly when she identified our near peer adversary's deployment of their posing oil-covered assets.

My bridge rounds were interrupted when both ship captains seemed to come to some shared idea creation. It would seem the Luyang's captain must also have shouted to raise their battle ensign, a ship's largest national flag. I looked skyward from the port bridgewing to see our quartermasters and theirs locked in a race to haul these massive flags up their respective halyards. Our bodybuilding ET took it upon himself to ascend to the top level of the ship to assist those less endowed of hypertrophied biceps in closing up our battle ensign just before the Luyang did theirs.

Back on the fantail, testosterone filled the sea air as physical fitness teams dueled it out through reps and sets of bodyweight exercises. The Sailors lining our port and their starboard side all leaned forward on the lifelines. Some of our sailors disrobed to half-mast, opening their coveralls down to the belt line from the chest. My captain saw it as well. His silent endorsement was deafening.

Both ships stayed like this. The staring contest carried on straight to the edge of what our new friends would call their territorial waters. As we proceeded out into the rest of the South

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China Sea, the Luyang peeled off to port, back towards the Fiery Cross Reef. Further into the distance, the captain issued a call to secure the weather decks, recalling all sailors back inside the ships. As soon as we confirmed all sailors were within the skin of the ship, the captain said only three words behind smiling teeth, “All ahead flank.”

I repeated the command to the helmsman, and within seconds we accelerated to over 30 knots. I don't know what winds the battle ensign was designed to fly in, but I had to admit it looked fantastic, and near taut at this speed. Over thirty knots, US destroyers push so much water through their propellers that it causes the water level immediately behind the ship to drop, and then water shoots out of the water near vertically behind that. It's called a rooster tail. It could be seen by someone on the bridge of a destroyer within at least three miles due to their high vantage point. The Luyang was still within two miles.

It was silent otherwise on the bridge, until I asked the captain if he wanted to maintain course and speed, or let the judge advocate general know what happened. He sat in his chair, looked out the window and smiled, and said nothing.