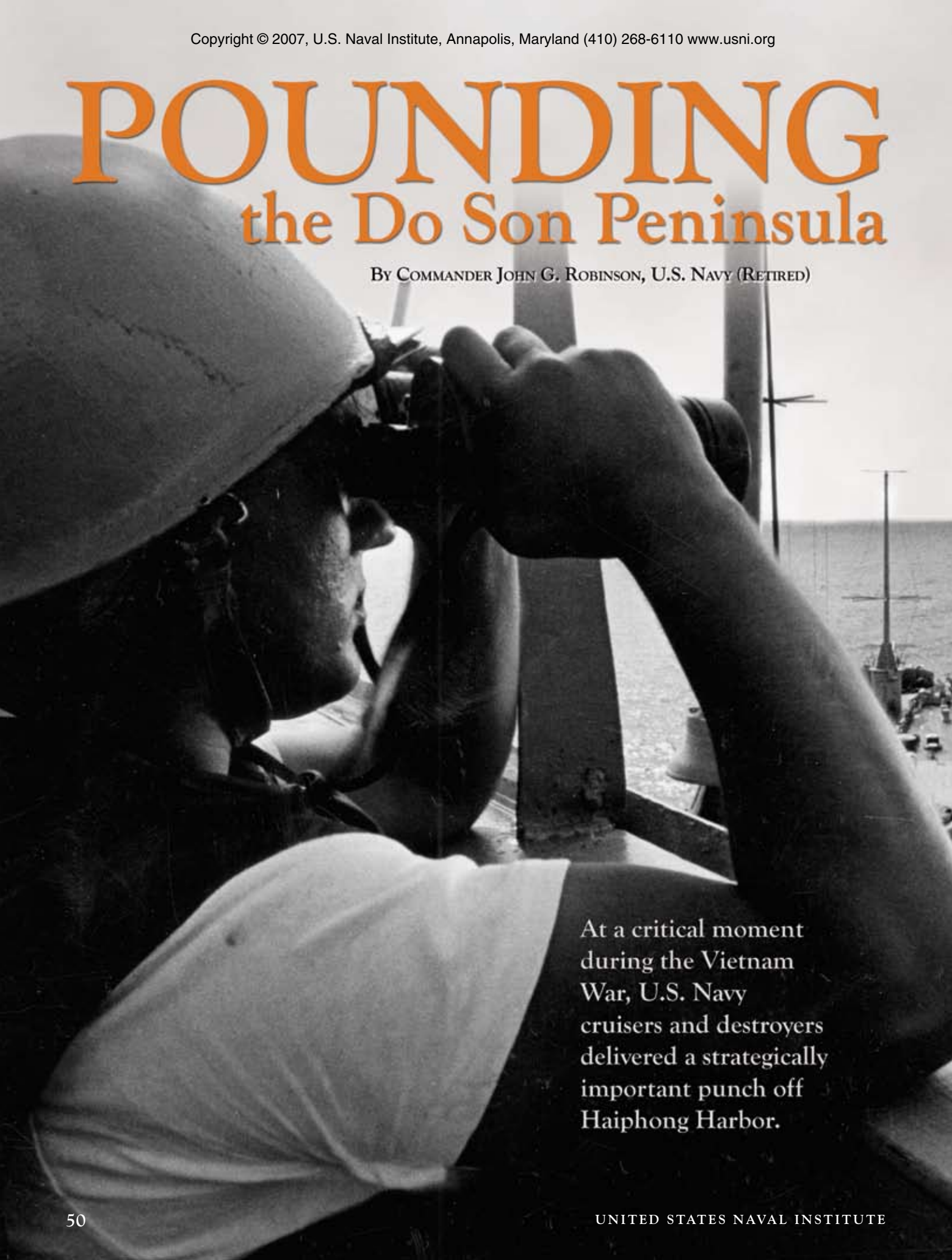


# POUNDRING

## the Do Son Peninsula

By COMMANDER JOHN G. ROBINSON, U.S. NAVY (RETIRED)



At a critical moment during the Vietnam War, U.S. Navy cruisers and destroyers delivered a strategically important punch off Haiphong Harbor.

**R**elatively little has been published about how the U.S. Navy contributed to the end of America's involvement in the Vietnam War. President Richard Nixon formally announced the Vietnam cease-fire at 0800 28 January 1973, but naval actions eight months earlier, on 9-10 May 1972, had helped make possible the cessation of hostilities between U.S. and North Vietnamese forces. Seamen of all ranks contributed to the success of the early May operation off North Vietnam's coast—from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Thomas H. Moorer; to the commander of the Seventh Fleet, Vice Admiral W. P. Mack; to the commander of Cruiser Destroyer Force Vietnam, Rear Admiral R. C. Robinson; and down through the naval ranks to the officers and men of carriers, cruisers, and destroyers and pilots of the aircraft involved.

*Confronting a Crisis*

From 21 to 28 February 1972, President Nixon made his historic trip to the People's Republic of China, the first step in normalizing relations between the United States and one

of North Vietnam's two primary military supporters. At the same time, the President was also actively courting the other supporter: the Soviet Union. In addition to easing Cold War superpower tensions, the White House hoped the diplomatic offensives would directly impact, perhaps even nullify, North Vietnam's ability to wage war.

When Nixon made his China trip, he had been president for three years and the U.S. military had been directly involved in the Vietnam War for more than ten years. As a token of restraint, Nixon had not resumed U.S. bombing north of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) when he entered the White House, and by the end of March 1972, he had reduced American ground forces in South Vietnam to 68,000 men, of whom only 6,000 were combat troops. Peace negotiations in

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*Seaman John Sharr watches as the USS Newport News fires on a target in North Vietnam. In the early hours of 10 May 1972, the heavy cruiser's 8-inch guns pounded a North Vietnamese military airfield south of Haiphong as accompanying U.S. warships hit targets on the Do Son Peninsula.*



Paris, however, were going nowhere; the North Vietnamese did not seem to want to make any concessions comparable to the U.S. withdrawal schedule. In fact, to ensure that they were negotiating from a position of strength, North Vietnam launched a 120,000-man, three-pronged attack—the Easter Offensive—across the DMZ on 30 March 1972.

President Nixon quickly ordered Henry Kissinger, his national security advisor, to accelerate negotiations with the North Vietnamese in Paris, but they proved intransigent to all U.S. proposals. By the end of April, the situation in South Vietnam was serious; Northern forces, as well as thousands of Vietcong, were increasing the magnitude of their assaults.

On 4 May, Nixon privately agreed to a proposal by Kissinger that the United States strike back at North Vietnam by imposing a blockade. America would mine Haiphong Harbor, the country's main port, and bomb its railroads leading from China. Called into the meeting, Admiral



COURTESY OF COMMANDER JOHN ROBINSON, U.S. NAVY (RETIRED)

Rear Admiral R. C. Robinson, commander of Cruiser Destroyer Force Vietnam, was to oversee the 9 and 10 May bombardments of the Do Son Peninsula and nearby areas until he was killed in an 8 May helicopter crash.

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objections of most of Nixon's other advisers. Although the President adjourned the meeting without making a formal decision on the operation, he had already planned to announce it that night at 2100 (0900 9 May Vietnam time) in a televised address. Admiral Moorer informed him that for the actual mining to coincide with the speech, he needed to sign an Execute Order by 1400 8 May (0200 9 May Vietnam time).

At that time, the President did sign the order, and Kissinger delivered it to Admiral Moorer. The order was then quickly transmitted to Admiral Mack; Rear Admiral Damon W. Cooper, the commander of Attack Carrier Striking Force Seventh Fleet; and Admiral Robinson. The naval staffs involved continued frantically preparing for

the combined surface attack on the Do Son Peninsula and mining of the entrance to Haiphong Harbor.

### *How to Close Down Haiphong*

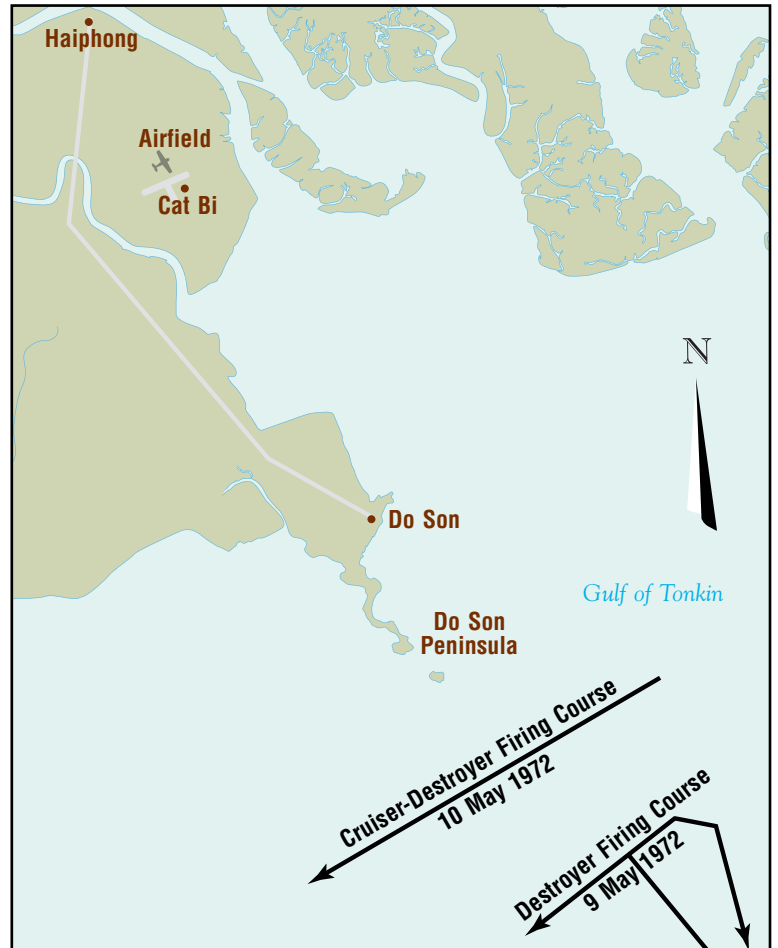
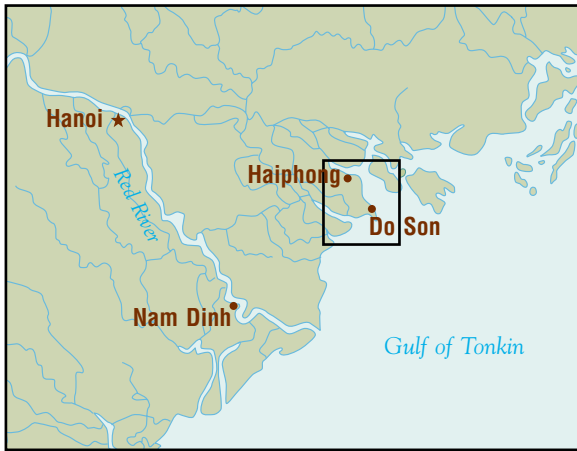
Admirals Robinson and Cooper, in anticipation of the presidential Execute Order and with so much at stake, had agreed to convene a planning meeting with their staffs on board the USS *Coral Sea* (CVA-43). Robinson departed the USS *Providence* (CLG-6) with his chief of staff, Captain Edmund Taylor; operations officer, Commander John Leaver; and naval gunfire and aviation officer, Commander M. L. "Marty" McCulloch at 1429 on 8 May (this and all subsequent dates and times are Vietnam time).

Following the meeting, Robinson and his staff were returning to the *Providence*, but while attempting to land at 2245, one of the helicopter's two engines failed and the aircraft crashed into the side of the ship and overturned into the waters of the Gulf of Tonkin. A search helicopter from the *Coral Sea* found Admiral Robinson's body several hours later. It was returned to the carrier, where he was pronounced dead from injuries sustained. The bodies of Captain Taylor and Commander Leaver were never recovered. Fortunately for the upcoming mission, one member of the staff, Commander McCulloch, survived the accident, as did the entire helicopter aircrew.

With most of the command element for the surface attack killed, the conduct of the mission fell to the captains of the individual ships. Time was still of the essence since the President would address the world in less than 11 hours, giving legal notice of the mining. The initial phase of the plan comprised three parts. First, four destroyers, formed into a special task unit designated TU 77.1.2, would make a diversionary attack against enemy batteries on the Do Son Peninsula, a heavily fortified three-mile-long finger of land that protected the southern approaches to Haiphong Harbor. The 9 May morning strike would be a high-speed daylight charge to distract and disrupt the numerous surface-to-air missile (SAM), artillery, and anti-aircraft batteries that dotted the peninsula. It was intended to draw fire and attention from the inbound mine-laden aircraft. The timing of the attack was of utmost importance. It had to immediately precede the dropping of the mines, which would coincide with the President's announcement.

According to the plan, aircraft from the USS *Kitty Hawk* (CVA-63) would also make a diversionary attack, against Nam Dinh, about 60 miles southwest of Haiphong. Finally, at 0900 three Marine A-6A and six Navy A-7E aircraft from the *Coral Sea* would drop strings of 1,000-pound, bottom-moored MK 52 mines across the two channels at the mouth of the harbor. The mines were set with a three-day arming delay, allowing ships to leave the harbor before the minefield went active at 0900 on 12 May.





The second phase would kick off early on 10 May with the USS *Newport News* (CA-148) leading a three-cruiser, three-destroyer strike on the Do Son Peninsula and Cat Bi, which was about four miles south of Haiphong and the site of a North Vietnamese military airfield. The attack would be the largest multi-cruiser-destroyer surface strike since World War II. The diversionary attacks, mining, and 10 May bombardment would be the opening parts of an integrated strategic plan to deal an economic and psychological blow to the North Vietnamese in an effort to end their offensive in the south and to bring them in earnest to the negotiating tables.

### The 9 May Operation

On the morning of the 9th, Captain Rogness Johnson, the commander of Destroyer Squadron 31 (DESRON 31) who was embarked in the *Buchanan* (DDG-14), and Commander James Thearle, the destroyer's skipper, formed up the attacking force's four destroyers in column; the *Buchanan* led the way, followed by the *Myles C. Fox* (DD-829), *Berkeley* (DDG-15), and *Richard S. Edwards* (DD-950).

At 0828 at a range of 4,000 yards, Thearle ordered the *Buchanan*, followed by the *Fox*, to turn to starboard and onto their firing course of 045T. The *Berkeley*, followed by the *Edwards*, turned to port and onto their own firing course. The intent was to distract and confuse the North Vietnamese and make it harder for them to pick a target. With the rising sun perfectly silhouetting the warships for enemy gunners, Commander Thearle and the destroyer skippers were already concerned about the daylight mission. In any event, the four destroyers fired 903 5-inch rounds at preselected targets on the peninsula.

After completing a 30-minute firing run, the *Buchanan* and *Fox* continued to turn to starboard and to course 180T to retire. North Vietnamese 152-mm shells, however, rained down on them, and both skippers violently maneuvered their vessels into the most recent splash marks on the assumption

no two shells were going to come down in the same spot. Although the counterbattery fire was intense, no casualties were incurred, and both ships retired to the safety of Tonkin Gulf. Experiencing much of the same, the *Edwards* and *Berkeley* continued to port and also safely retired into the gulf.

Minutes later, at 0900, the *Coral Sea* aircraft came in low and slow, dropping 36 mines across the entrance to Haiphong Harbor. The destroyers' tactic of distracting the enemy batteries worked perfectly, and there were no aircraft losses. Meanwhile, poor weather forced the *Kitty Hawk* aircraft to divert to secondary targets, which they hit at 0908. The mining portion of the operation took less than 2 minutes. The first strategic moves of the blockade strategy were accomplished. Soon ships would not be able to safely enter or leave Haiphong Harbor, effectively cutting North Vietnam's main seaborne supply line.

### Preparing to Land a Heavier Blow

Around 0100 the next morning, DESRON 31, now comprising the *Buchanan*, *Fox*, and *Hanson* (DD-832), spotted the *Newport News* about 45 miles south of the Do Son Peninsula. The cruiser, whose call sign was "Thunder," had arrived in the Gulf of Tonkin the previous day after setting out from Norfolk on 13 April. She was one of the most beautiful ships designed by the U.S. Navy. Basically

unmodified in armament since her commissioning in 1949, the *Newport News* was the only remaining member of the three-ship *Des Moines* class of heavy cruisers.

A renowned spit-and-polish Atlantic Fleet flagship, she represented the greatest source of sea-based firepower available to the Navy, as it had decommissioned its last active battleship, the USS *New Jersey* (BB-62), in 1969. The most notable features of the *Newport News* were her nine 8-inch/55-caliber guns, housed in three triple turrets. Together the guns could fire 90 shells per minute at targets more than 30,000 yards away.

Two other warships that would participate in the mission cruised nearby, the *Providence* and USS *Oklahoma City* (CLG-5). Originally *Cleveland*-class light cruisers, their two after 6-inch gun turrets had been replaced by guided-missile launchers in the late 1950s. The *Providence* now featured a twin Terrier and the *Oklahoma City* a twin Talos surface-to-air launcher. Each also had a single triple-barrel, 6-inch/47-caliber turret and a single dual-barrel 5-inch/38-caliber mount forward.

At around 1600 on the 9th, two of Admiral Robinson's staff officers had flown aboard the *Newport News* to brief the cruiser's commanding officer, Captain Walter F. Zartman. They brought the waterlogged duplicate operation plan carried by Commander McCulloch in the previous day's helicopter crash. Having already been informed by

advised his friend to "follow me," and swung the *Buchanan* and the two other destroyers to the north and increased speed to 25 knots. Zartman, as officer in tactical command, then formed a column with the *Newport News* in the lead followed by the *Oklahoma City*, with Admiral Mack embarked as senior officer present afloat, and the *Providence* in the rear. The destroyers were on a line of bearing 057T from the *Newport News*, the cruiser being the guide.

At around 0200, Zartman ordered the formation into a line abreast, the *Hanson* to the far left, then the *Providence*, *Newport News*, *Oklahoma City*, and *Buchanan*. Fox was ordered farther to the northeast to act as a blocking element in case of enemy patrol-boat activity and to cover the rear of the formation when it would eventually turn to the west and onto a firing course. At 0345, Captain Zartman came over Navy Red and simply said "Mark Point Alfa," upon which all five warships turned to the firing course of 240T, roughly parallel to the longitudinal axis of the Cat Bi airfield. At the extreme range of *Newport News*' 8-inch guns, the Cat Bi military complex was the raid's primary target.

The completely darkened warships together commenced firing at 0347, and the night exploded into a flash of blinding white light (none of the ships were using flashless powder). Seventy-seven of the *Newport News*' massive 8-inch shells slammed into the military installations around Cat Bi with

earth-shaking rapidity, while hundreds of rounds from the 6-inch guns of the two light cruisers and 5-inch guns of the cruisers and two destroyers pounded enemy targets on the Do Son Peninsula. When shore batteries opened up, effective cruiser-destroyer counterbattery fire silenced them.

Less than 30 minutes later, the action was over. Enemy fire had been somewhat more sporadic than the day before, and none of the ships was hit. Quite possibly the overwhelming fire from the cruisers and destroyers caused most of the North Vietnamese

gunners to run for cover, and by the time they remanned their positions, the task group was retiring. Still, the enemy had fired numerous 152-mm shells at the column of ships as they steamed past in the darkness, and the Sailors in all the ships felt the shells' explosions.



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On 9 May, the USS *Buchanan* and three other American destroyers bombarded North Vietnamese surface-to-air, antiaircraft, and artillery batteries on the Do Son Peninsula. Minutes later, at 0900, precisely when President Richard Nixon publicly announced the mining of nearby Haiphong Harbor, U.S. Navy and Marine aircraft dropped 36 MK 52 sea mines across the harbor's mouth.

Admiral Mack that he would be responsible for the mission, Zartman called for his executive officer, Commander Robert Leverone, and they and the two staff officers began to study the plan and discuss how they were to accomplish the attack mission with the forces assigned.

#### *The 10 May Mission*

Later, when the *Buchanan* and the other two destroyers hove into view, Zartman called over "Navy Red," the Navy's secure UHF radio circuit, to his close friend Commander Thearle. Asked if he had any recommendations, Thearle

#### *Fallout from the Missions*

What is most amazing about the bombardments on 9 and 10 May is that they were successfully conducted without the benefit of their command staff, most of whom were

killed on the 8th. The disparate warships from different fleets were able to work together as if they had been practicing many weeks for the mission. According to Rear Admiral Kenneth Haynes, commanding officer of the *Providence*, the professionalism of all the crews—from skippers to seamen—during the operation highlighted the skill of the U.S. Navy at that point in time.

More than 85 percent of North Vietnam's military imports passed through its ports. However, the surface attacks on 9-10 May, the 9 May mining of Haiphong Harbor, and the subsequent mining of North Vietnam's other major ports effectively cut off the country's seaborne shipping, directly reducing supplies for the North's offensive in South Vietnam. Thirty-one merchant ships were trapped in Haiphong Harbor. To further pressure North Vietnam, President Nixon also unleashed aggressive air campaigns—Linebacker (10 May–23 October) and Linebacker II (18–29 December)—that included Navy and Air Force tactical air strikes as well as an ever increasing tempo of B-52 raids on Hanoi and Haiphong.

On 8 January 1973, the Paris negotiations resumed, a cease-fire was signed several weeks later, and the last U.S. ground forces left Vietnam in March. As part of the agreement, between February and July 1973, the U.S. Navy removed the mines it had so carefully planted the previous year outside Haiphong and other North Vietnamese ports. Of course, the war did not end with the cease-fire. For the South Vietnamese, the worst was still to come, with the 30 April 1975 fall of Saigon and its aftermath.

The Do Son Peninsula still pokes out like a finger into the Gulf of Tonkin. But instead of massed SAM and artillery sites, a glittering casino is now there, built for the enjoyment of foreigners only—mainly visiting businessmen from Haiphong and Hanoi. As these entrepreneurs gamble and drink, it is unlikely any realize that not too long ago gray shapes slid by in the distance and unleashed two of the most significant shore bombardments of the Vietnam War. ⚓

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*The Newport News arrived in the Gulf of Tonkin on 9 May, making the trip from Norfolk in 26 days. Less than five months after her 10 May bombardment, 20 of her crewmen were killed when an 8-inch projectile jammed in the center gun of Turret Two and exploded.*

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Commander Robinson, the son of Rear Admiral R. C. Robinson, USN, served in a variety of ships, including cruisers, destroyers, and amphibious ships, and in various advisory groups in Asia and South America before retiring from the Navy in 1993. He thanks the many crewmembers of the ships involved in these events for their shared recollections. Without their help this article would not have been written. Commander Robinson dedicates this article to the memory of Rear Admiral R. C. Robinson; Captain E. B. Taylor Jr, USN; Commander John Leaver, USN; and the officers and men of Task Unit 77.1.2.