

USS Taylor (DD/DDE 468) Vietnam War History — 1965–1969

On 17 March Taylor got underway for the western portion of the South China Sea. She arrived off the coast of Vietnam on 21 March and patrolled there for the following five weeks. On 27 April Taylor headed back to Yokosuka for a brief stop, from 3 to 6 May, before returning to Hawaii, arriving at Pearl Harbor on 13 May. She then conducted local operations in Hawaiian waters until 6 December when she entered the drydock for another overhaul which was completed by mid-January 1966.

In August 1965 Taylor would stand duty as a recovery ship for the GEMINI space capsule. James O'Neill, who was LTjg on Taylor from 1965 to 1967, wrote a story for the Tin Can Sailor Quarterly Magazine, summer 2016 edition.

“The USS Taylor (DD 468) was assigned to be a GEMINI space capsule recovery ship during the period of 21-29 August 1965. In preparation for this assignment, Pearl Harbor Naval Shipyard installed a large recovery rig on the port side of the fantail. I guess the design philosophy was ‘just stick it somewhere’ because the rig increased the ship’s normal three-degree port list to five degrees.”

“As part of the GEMINI assignment the Taylor was placed on a four-hour standby for the entire period. The question now became how to manage liberty for the crew; i.e., just how much liberty can the crew have and still be available to get underway within four hours? The solution was obvious. We would set up a three-section watch bill and put a sign-out log on the quarterdeck. Any crewman going off the ship would be required to provide a contact phone number where he could be reached. Thus, liberty would be normal with the exceptions of the phone contact requirement – problem solved.”

“... during one of the first evenings of our assignment period the call came down. We were to get underway for a recovery ASAP. The XO rushed to the quarterdeck, grabbed the log book, and called the first number. He reached an organization called ‘Dial a Prayer.’ With a rotary dial phone [the only phone on the ship] in his hand and ‘Dial a Prayer’ as the initial response, the XO soon realized just how much trouble we were in. The XO quickly divided the sign-out log pages up and assigned pages to one or two others who ran off to find additional phones. After eliminating the listings that had the number for ‘Dial a Prayer,’ the result was some limited success in getting a bartender or two to roust people out of the base EM Club, a bar or two on Hotel Street, and a few other hangouts. In practical terms, there were just too many phone calls to make and not enough time to make them ...”

“We got underway with essentially an enhanced duty section, probably about one-half of the crew ... All in all, we were called out twice and each time we came home without a capsule or an astronaut. I do recall that on one of the missions the USS Chipola (AO 63) highlined the body of a deceased sailor over to us. We stored the body in the reefers. Almost needless to say, having a corpse stored in with the provisions became the source of a plethora of sick humor concerning the menu on the mess decks. We would have made Hannibal Lecter proud.”

On 7 February 1966 Taylor departed Pearl Harbor with the other ships of Destroyer Division 111, destination once again the western Pacific. Arriving at Yokosuka ten days later, she spent eight days undergoing voyage repairs. On 25 February she departed Yokosuka to join Task Group 70.4 off the coast of Vietnam the following day.

Taylor patrolled Vietnamese waters until 15 March, when she headed north to patrol the Taiwan Strait. While in Taiwanese waters, she paid a port visit to Kaohsiung. When her relief arrived on 12 April, Taylor departed for Hong Kong for a five-day visit.

On 21 April Taylor returned to Yankee Station, a point in the Gulf of Tonkin about 90 miles east of North Vietnam, from which carriers launched their strikes against the enemy, to resume operations in support of American and South Vietnamese forces ashore. These operations included “plane guarding,” following close astern of the aircraft carrier during flight operations, and screening carriers from potential hostile intruders. Taylor was also assigned to “the Gunline,” providing close-ashore or “brown water” naval gunfire support for ground forces between 28 April and 1 May. She then departed the South China Sea heading for Sasebo, Japan, for necessary maintenance. She conducted anti-submarine warfare drills from 26 May to 10 June before resuming patrols in the Taiwan Strait on 11 June. Clearing this area again on 5 July, she rejoined Task Group 70.4 on 7 July and entered Yokosuka the following day. After a week of preparations, she departed Yokosuka to return to Pearl Harbor, where she arrived on 22 July.

On 2 August Taylor began a tender availability period alongside Prairie (AD 15) which lasted through the end of the month. Following a short cruise for gunnery practice, Taylor commenced a restricted availability which lasted until late in November. During the first two weeks in December she made a round trip voyage to Pago Pago, American Samoa. Crossing the Equator, Taylor once again observed the ancient tradition of

inducting the pollywogs into King Neptune's Court in order to become shellbacks. She returned to Pearl Harbor on 16 December for holiday leave and upkeep.

During the first three months of 1967, Taylor conducted local operations around Hawaii, made repairs, and generally prepared to return to the western Pacific in late spring. Following an Operational Readiness Inspection in mid-April, she departed Pearl Harbor on 18 April to join the Seventh Fleet in the Far East. On 25 April, she changed operational control from the First to the Seventh Fleet and three days later steamed into Yokosuka. Shortly after this, Taylor departed Yokosuka with USS Hornet (CVS 12), USS Davidson (DE 1045), and USS Walker (DD 517). The task group headed north around the northern end of Japan to the Sea of Japan. During this transit the American ships were shadowed by three different Soviet ships, ATR Gidrograf, Besslednyy (DD 022), and an older Krupnyy Class guided missile Soviet destroyer (DDG 025). At times the task group would be overflowed by Soviet bombers. The Soviet ships appeared separately, but each tried to harass the Americans and slip through the screen in order to get near the carrier. The American destroyers took turns trying to keep between the carrier and the Soviet ships. It took a great deal of maneuvering and excellent ship handling by the officers of the deck to cover for the carrier.

James O'Neill, LTjg aboard Taylor 1965-1967, gives an example of the ship handling during this incident. "I was serving as a Junior Officer of the Deck on the USS Taylor (DD 468) during these encounters. I think the record shows that the Taylor did as much shouldering as the Walker, although it did not suffer the misfortune of a collision (or two)."

"I remember one sequence in which, during the course of shouldering, the Soviet ship backed down and swung astern of us from starboard just as we were coming up on the stern of the Davidson. I am not sure whether that Soviet ship was the DD 022 or the DDG 025 because we shouldered both ships, as well as a Soviet trawler, during this period. I do recall looking down onto the deckhouse of the Davidson and waiting for the crunch of metal on metal as we carved a big hatchet mark into its stern."

" 'All engines back emergency full, right hard rudder' came the conning order from skipper, Commander James D. Taylor. Just as the bow of the Taylor slid slightly to the right and opened a perceptible gap to the starboard of Davidson, 'shift your engines, shift your rudder' came the command, and the race was on. The Soviet ship headed down the port side of Davidson, the Taylor down the starboard side. When the bow of the Taylor cleared the Davidson by about a ship length (@440 ft), CDR Taylor brought

his ship left under the bow of the Davidson and just to the starboard side of the Soviet Ship as the pair continued on toward the Yorktown. This kind of maneuvering went on for hours at a stretch. Scary stuff for a Junior Officer, but CDR Taylor thrived on that kind of challenge – his legendary seamanship—a story for another day. I am glad we stopped doing that.”

“My review [of USS Taylor deck logs] showed, among many interesting entries, that our task force was overflown by two TU-16 Badgers on two occasions, once with a US A3D Sky Warrior escort. Entries also clearly show that our focus was on shouldering to prevent harassment of the carrier while following the rules of the road. Appropriate whistles sounded, and flag hoists were displayed ... no deck log captures the level of detail and the sheer excitement of the moment that I just described.”

Joe Kuhar who was a radioman first class on Taylor in 1967 tells his story. “We left Yokosuka, Japan, and we were going around the northern tip of Japan, down to the Sea of Japan and right after we made the turn to go south on the Sea of Japan, we were only maybe like 200 miles from Vladivostok, Russia, ... one day on the horizon from – this looked like an old junker of a ship. It wasn’t a military ship, but it had probably 20 big antennas on it and what they were doing was they were spying on us and trying with their antennas here, trying to measure our radar frequencies, our radio frequencies and they followed us and harassed us, trying to get inside the circle of destroyers for a couple days.”

“And after we chased them off, then a Russian destroyer appeared and was playing the same kind of games, trying to break into the inner circle of destroyers. Well, while they were trying to do that, this Russian destroyer, all I remember it had a number 022 on it, collided with the USS Walker and so that Russian destroyer limped away and we continued on and the Walker sustained some structural damage, but nothing to stop it from continuing.”

“And the next day a Russian guided missile destroyer, 025, came on the scene and they tried the same maneuvers to get inside of our circle, and Walker again had a collision with this Russian destroyer 025 ... So this Russian destroyer, this 025, sent a flashing light, international code flashing light, to our ship and wanted us to board their ship to check the damage that was done. So our commodore sent a message to the admiral who was riding in the aircraft carrier and relayed the message that they wanted us to board to check out their damage.”

“Well, I was lead radioman, so I was getting all of our portable radio equipment ready and we had an officer on board ship that spoke Russian, so we were getting this little boarding party ready to go aboard this Russian ship to see – check their damage out. Well, we had to wait for the okay from the admiral, and so we sent the message telling the admiral we see this flashing light request that we board their ship and the response from the admiral was since when can you copy international flashing light? So, we never did go aboard, never did go aboard.”

“And also during that period of time there was Russian like U2 planes, I think they might have been called Bears, and they would swoop down on the carrier to try to keep them from putting their planes in the air, and the anti-submarine carriers all they carry is fixed wing and helicopters, they don’t have jet fighters or nothing like that. So these planes, Russian planes, would be swooping around the area and we sent off to the Thirteenth Air Force in Japan and they’d send out some U.S. fighter planes and U.S. fighter planes would chase these Russian spy planes away.”

“There was never any shots fired or anything like that. They’d like fly underneath them and then fly up in the air and just like either going to move or we’re going to have a collision, that’s what it looked like.”

The story made the Honolulu Star Bulletin with the headline “Russian, U.S. Warships Collide in Japan Sea.” In the story it reported “The Soviet vessel made several close approaches to the ships of the task group including at least two which came within 50 feet ... “ One of those 50-foot approaches was off Taylor’s starboard quarter.

During the first half of June, Taylor participated in exercises with units of the Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force and ships of the Republic of Korea Navy. This seemed tame after the encounters with the Soviet ships. After two days in port at Sasebo, she got underway on 19 June for her first line period on Yankee Station. Between 22 May and 25 June, she plied the waters of the Gulf of Tonkin, planeguarding for Hornet (CV 12) and providing gunfire support for Allied forces operating ashore.

On 27 June Taylor put into Subic Bay. After a tender availability at Subic Bay and a visit to Manila, she put to sea on 10 July to participate in SEATO exercise “Sea Dog.” Between 26 and 28 July she visited Bang Saen on the Gulf of Thailand. After three more days on Yankee Station, from 28 July to 1 August, Taylor departed for Taiwan where she arrived on 3 August, remaining there until 15 August, when she headed back to the coast of Vietnam.

From 19 August to 11 September Taylor cruised along the Vietnamese coast providing Naval gunfire support as needed by the forces operating ashore. During this period, on 28 August, Taylor celebrated her twenty-fifth birthday while anchored in the mouth of the Saigon River just off Vung Tau. Grilled steaks and a giant birthday cake made everybody happy.

Taylor departed the coast of Vietnam on 12 September heading for Hong Kong and a five-day stop. She then returned for another tour of duty in the Gulf of Tonkin, after which she returned to Yokosuka on 11 October.

On 16 October Taylor departed Yokosuka to return to Hawaii, arriving at Pearl Harbor on 23 October. She then commenced her regular overhaul on 11 December. Repairs and modifications occupied her time through the first three months of 1968. Taylor completed overhaul on 22 March and conducted sea trials during the first week in April. Later, engineering problems forced the postponement of further operations until the end of the month. She then began preparations for refresher training which was conducted in May and June.

On 27 June Taylor departed Pearl Harbor for San Diego, California. She conducted operations, primarily gunnery drills at San Clemente Island from 3 to 11 July, after which she headed back to Hawaii. En route Taylor conducted shore bombardment exercises at Kahoolawe Island, then entered Pearl Harbor on 17 July.

Three weeks later, Taylor departed Pearl Harbor on 5 August setting a course for the Gulf of Tonkin. After fueling stops at Midway, Guam, and Subic Bay, she arrived on station off Vietnam on 21 August. After screening and plane guarding duty for Intrepid (CVS 11), she then departed Vietnamese waters with the carrier and destroyers Maddox (DD 731) and Preston (DD 795) for Sasebo, Japan. During this movement, Taylor and Intrepid swapped some personnel. The general purpose was to see how the other half lived. The Intrepid personnel got a much bumpier ride aboard Taylor than did the Taylor personnel on the carrier.

Following a short stay in Sasebo, Taylor returned to the Gulf of Tonkin on 5 September for air and surface surveillance as well as anti-submarine warfare exercises and planeguarding for the carriers. On 19 September Taylor moved in closer to the coast to provide naval gunfire in support of troops ashore. This duty continued until 6 October, when she departed the combat zone to return to Subic Bay for repairs, supplies, and

ammunition. On 20 October Taylor returned to the coast of Vietnam, again providing naval gunfire support for forces ashore.

This line period was followed by visits to Cebu City and Subic Bay in the Philippines, after which she resumed duty on the gunline during late November and early December.

On 4 December Taylor departed the combat zone with the task group and set a course through the Luzon Strait to Yokosuka, where she arrived on 12 December. Christmas in Yokosuka was a lonely time for everybody. Taylor would return to Yankee Station by New Year's Day 1969.

In mid-January 1969, Taylor departed Vietnamese waters for the last time. Before departing Subic Bay, the crew was given two options: going straight back to Pearl Harbor or extending the cruise in order to go to Australia and New Zealand. By a nearly unanimous vote, the crew opted for extending the cruise. Taylor then departed Subic Bay to visit Manus Island; Wollongong and Melbourne, Australia; Auckland, New Zealand; and Pago Pago, American Samoa. Of course, this would entail crossing the Equator and once again, according to ancient tradition, the pollywogs were treated "royally" by the shellbacks. After all this, Taylor arrived back in Pearl Harbor on 28 February.

For her actions in the Vietnam War Taylor earned six battle stars, a fitting last tribute to one of the United States Navy's most gallant fighting ships.

Final Decommissioning

In May 1969 a board of inspection and survey looked Taylor over with a critical eye and determined that she was unfit for further naval service. Her years of service to her country had finally worn her out. Early in June Taylor was moved to San Diego, California, and was decommissioned. USS Taylor (DD/DDE 468) was stricken from the Navy list on 2 July 1969, and transferred to the Italian Navy at the same time. The crew was dressed in whites as the ensign came down for the last time and the quarterdeck watch left the ship. The Italian crew then went aboard the now designated Italian ship Lanciere (D 560). She would serve Italy until January 1971, when she was decommissioned and struck from the Italian Navy list. Subsequently, she was cannibalized to maintain her sister ship still serving in the Italian Navy.