

WHALE OF A TALE

A little bit of naval history, what is called a genuine "sea story", is in this tale. It is very serious stuff but, also, is on the funny side. The Soviet Union used the AGI trawlers as intelligence collectors mainly in the signals intelligence and electronic intelligence collection activities around the world. Part of their intelligence mission tasking was to maintain close surveillance on U.S. Navy and allied nation naval activities and, wherever possible, harass those activities or create some sort of an international incident that would embarrass their target ships. In the Vietnam war their mission was mostly to collect intelligence and also to alert the North Vietnamese that U.S. Navy aircraft were launching and heading toward a target within Vietnam. Thus, the Vietnamese could activate their fire control radar and anti-air missile batteries, etc., and assume defensive measures. In the below incident the soviet trawler created a very hazardous situation for the naval fuel tanker pilot trying to land and he responded...very well.

Excellent "Sea Story!"

Vietnam 1967, A Whale Tale

The Russian "trawlers" (Russian AGI) with what looked like one thousand "fishing" antennas plied the Gulf of Tonkin on a daily basis...needless to say, it was a cat and mouse game to see what havoc they could expend towards our two carriers operating there 24 hours a day.

Since the U.S. government had proclaimed the waters of the Gulf of Tonkin three miles off the coast of North Vietnam and Hainan Island, People's Republic of China, to be international waters, American ships in the Gulf were bound to obey the international rules of the road for ocean navigation. This meant that if the Russian ship maneuvered herself into the path of an aircraft carrier where said Russian ship had the right of way, the carrier had to give way even if she was engaged in launching or recovering aircraft. The navigation officer was constantly trying to maneuver the ship so that the trawler wouldn't be able to get in position to abuse the rules of the road and gain the right of way. Sometimes he was successful in sucking the trawler out of position, but the room available for the ship to maneuver was limited by our on-station requirements, and sometimes the trawler was successful in interrupting our flight operations. The pilots of the air wing were strictly forbidden to take any action against the Russian ship, but on this day CDR John Wunche, the commanding officer of the heavy tanker KA-3B detachment, had finally had enough of the Russians' antics. John Wunche was a big man with bright red hair and a flaming red handlebar mustache. He was a frustrated fighter pilot whom fate and the Bureau of Naval Personnel had put into the cockpit of a former heavy bomber now employed as a carrier-based tanker. CDR Wunche flew the tanker like a fighter and frequently delighted the tactical pilots by rolling the "Whale," as we all called the KA-3B tanker, on completion of a tanker mission. Consequently John's nickname was "The Red Baron." On 21 July 1967 he proved just how appropriate that name was. The "Bonnie Dick" had nearly completed a recovery. The Russian trawler had been steaming at full speed to try to cut across our bow, and the bridge watch had been keeping a wary eye on the intruder. For a while it looked as if the Russian would be too late, and we would finish the recovery before having to give way to the trawler. But a couple of untimely bolters

extended the recovery time, and the Bon Homme Richard had to back down and change course to comply with the rules. The LSO hit the wave-off lights when the "Whale" was just a few yards from the ramp. John crammed on full power and sucked up the speed brakes for the go-around.

The "Bonnie Dick" began a sharp right turn to pass behind the Russian, causing the ship to list steeply, and there, dead ahead of John, was the Russian trawler. He couldn't resist. He leveled the "Whale" about a hundred feet off the water and roared across the mast of the trawler with all fuel dumps open like a crop duster spraying a field of boll weevils. The Russian disappeared in a heavy white cloud of jet fuel spray then reemerged with JP-4 jet fuel glistening from her superstructure and running lip-full in the scuppers. The Russian trawler immediately lost power as the ship's crew frantically tried to shut down anything that might generate a spark and ignite the fuel.

She was rolling dead in the water in the Bon Homme Richard's wake, the crew breaking out fire hoses to wash down the fuel, as we steamed out of sight completing the recovery of the Whale. The Red Baron was an instant hero to the entire ship's company.