



e-DEFENCE ELECTRONICS NEWSLETTER

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DESTROYER USS JOHN S MCCAIN COLLIDES WITH OIL TANKER

As *eDEN 62* was being finalised, reports began coming in that ten American sailors were missing and five injured after the guided-missile destroyer USS *John S McCain* collided with an oil tanker off the coast of Singapore. The US Navy said the warship had “sustained damage to her port side aft” in the collision with the *Alnic MC* east of the straits of Malacca and Singapore. The US warship was returning “under its own power” to Singapore, the Navy statement said, where it had been due for a routine port visit.

The incident is the second collision in two months involving a ship from the US Navy’s 7th fleet in the Pacific. Seven sailors died in June when the *USS Fitzgerald* and a container ship hit each other in waters off Japan. The US Navy has now relieved the *USS Fitzgerald*’s captain of his command and other sailors were punished after the Navy found poor seamanship and flaws in keeping watch contributed to the June collision. An investigation into how and why the *Fitzgerald* collided with the other ship was not finished, but enough details were known to take those actions, the US Navy said.

“Collisions like these are extremely rare and two in one summer, both from 7th Fleet based in Japan, is stunning,” said David Larter, a US Navy veteran and naval warfare writer. He added it was far too early to assess what caused the *McCain* to collide. “The number of breakdowns that have to occur for something like this to happen make them a rare occurrence. Sailors monitor radars round the clock, they have multiple sailors standing watch on the bridge which also has a radar, and they have at least one lookout posted at the back end of the ship to watch for exactly these kinds of situations,” he said.

The *Alnic MC* is an oil tanker that sails under the Liberian flag. It is 182m (600ft) long and has a deadweight tonnage of 50,760. None of its crew were hurt in the incident. Ship tracking websites showed that the *Alnic* was currently east of Singapore. The ship’s data showed it was “ballasting”, meaning that it was not loaded full of oil for cargo; there were no reports of any oil spills. The waterways around Singapore are some of the busiest and most important on the planet, carrying around a quarter of all trade in goods and oil.

The Admiral Commanding the US Pacific Fleet has been dismissed and an enquiry ordered, and obviously there is major concern within the US Navy at what seems to be a second, puzzling, collision of a vessel packed with the latest radar, mirroring an earlier, similar, collision and occurring only weeks later. We thank the reporters of this latest incident (*Martin Farrer and Oliver Holmes/ Guardian; Associated Press and Reuters*) for their information, and will report the results of inquiries as they come to hand.

Turning to *eDEN 62*, we again span the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries, beginning with a first-class paper by **Brian Austin on Wireless in the Boer War**, with very interesting work both on soil versus sea electrical characteristics, and on thunderstorms in South Africa, as background to the contrasting results obtained by Army and Navy wireless operators. We follow with the report by **English Heritage** on its listing of **the Stockton-on-Tees WW1 wireless intercept station**, in which your Editor took a very modest supporting role, and is delighted to see success! We then move on to the **RAF experiments with radio-telephony in 1918**, and two notes about what really happened in those experiments, as recalled by wireless officer **Captain C E Stewart R.E.**; the notes were preserved by 22 Squadron WW1 pilot **WFJ Harvey**, and our thanks yet again both to his son **Rupert Harvey for permission to use**, and to **Mike Dean** for OCR. Stimulated by **Jeff Jefford’s** recent article, **Ken Brooks** then gives us chapter, verse and a photo on the potential **origin of the Hand and Sparks RAF badge**. **Clive Kidd** provides a most intriguing article about the WW1 and interwar **Autakym**, and can I ask members to search their memories and their attics - both Clive and I would be very interested to find any more about this fascinating piece of equipment.

On then to the fifth of the outstanding series of articles charting the history of **Radio Warfare in the Royal Navy 1900 – 1945**, which **John ‘Jacey’ Wise** most kindly agreed to serialise here in *eDEN*, and next to the latest discoveries in tracing **Oboe’s** missing man, **‘Gav’ Samson**, ZL4AI/ G5ZZ; we have now located his rather neglected grave in Cambridge, and we will see to it that this is properly cleaned. **David Robertson** has also provided a pre-war STC photo which must contain Gavin – can anyone spot him? Further research by our New Zealand member **Grahame Fraser** and **Mike Dean** is ongoing.

Life seems to revolve in circles sometimes, and so it may be with radionavigational systems – there is work now going on to resurrect Loran in the form of **eLoran**, and we provide Reuters’ latest look at this work and the reasons why. Thales’ latest contract is for long-term support of the Canadian Navy, and **Malcom Baird** reviews a biography of that fascinating man, **Nigel Balchin, “His Own Executioner”**. Tailpiece looks at what we hide in our basements – in this case, some weighty **NASA computers** (and no, NASA didn’t want them back!).

Part II this month grew out of the research into **Gavin Samson**, in that Gavin first worked at STC with **C.W. Earp**, who subsequently went on, with colleagues, to design a commutated Doppler landing system. **David Robertson** first referred me to this, and then independently **Robert Soek** contacted me with a series of relevant articles – and the news that he, Robert, had been responsible for all the digital electronics, ground and air, on the project! Part II therefore contains the original paper written by Earp and his colleagues, followed a review of the story as it stood five years later, as it appeared in *Flight International*, and then the retrospective of the story from the perspective of 2003 and *Aviation Today* – note in this last article the cautionary tale of what can go wrong with ILS; one wonders whether this has in fact been the cause of any crashes, wrongly identified as pilot error. Both David and Robert provided me with additional photographs, for which many thanks, and these I have inserted into the articles. **Tailpiece II** is the result of idle musings by your Editor on some of the less usual ‘aircraft’ which must also have made landings – has any DEHS member any experience of flying cars or military vehicles of any sort (your Editor does remember seeing at a Government sale in the 1960s a Land-Rover which had clearly suffered ‘chute failure, and so stood just 3 feet/1 metre tall!).

Part III is an initiative which begins to print the original research into interwar communications funded between **Leeds University**, our President **Keith Thrower**, ourselves as **DEHS** and the **Communications and Electronics Museum Trust**. Kapil Subramanian, the original researcher, unfortunately suffered illness and has had to withdraw, but not before jointly contributing, with **Professor Graeme Gooday**, a chapter to an excellent *Pen & Sword* book edited by Dr Peter Liddle, *Britain and the Widening War 1915 – 1916*; this chapter is reproduced here for DEHS members. The book, which is thoroughly recommended to members, represents the latest scholarship on the middle years of the Great War – 1915 and 1916 – and covers fundamental issues rarely explored outside the specialist journals. The areas covered are diverse - principal battles and campaigns are reconsidered from a new perspective, as are more general topics such as military leadership, the discord between Britain’s politicians and generals, conscientious objection and the part played by the Indian Army. The longer-term effects of the war are also considered – facial reconstruction, developments in communication, female support for men on active service, grief and bereavement, the challenge to religious belief, battlefield art, and the surviving vestiges of the war. Future issues of *eDEN* will print the contributions now being made to the question of how far wartime advances contributed to the development of electronics in the interwar years, a much-neglected topic which DEHS will now set its shoulder to the wheel to address and publish. Again, we will seek to look at the interwar period from the perspective of all nations for developments in electronics were not simply a UK preserve, and to consider how each nation’s individual needs, political priorities and economics shaped their rate of innovation in communication and for defence. **Tailpiece III** illustrates one of the British Army’s important interwar transmitters, the **Wireless Set No 6**, a backbone of the Army Chain. Expect to see more such sets regularly featured!

Particular thanks once more this month to **S/Ldr Mike Dean MBE** for tireless work on the OCR scanning of many of the documents featured in this issue, and without which *eDEN* would not be a shadow of itself. Many thanks, Mike!

As always, suggestions for improvements, offers of articles and all general comments to me at philjudkins@btinternet.com or info@dehs.org.uk.

Dr. Phil Judkins, DEHS Chairman.

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