

Train Busting

By

USS James E. Kyes (DD-787)

Prepared for the

Ship's Company of May 19, 1953

By

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Operations Officer - 1952-1953



Those of you who have been receiving the KYES newsletter entitled **The Searchlight** might recall the frequent mention of the term "Train Busting". And holders of the book **Kyes Cruise of 1945-1973** compiled by Don Webb may recall the account of inshore whaleboat activities, particularly the page entitled TRAIN BUSTING MEMORIES. We even find Train Busting referred to as "one of the prime missions of destroyers" in the U.S Naval Institute book "The Sea War in Korea" and in the book "Destroyers .. 60 Years" by Captain William Schofield.

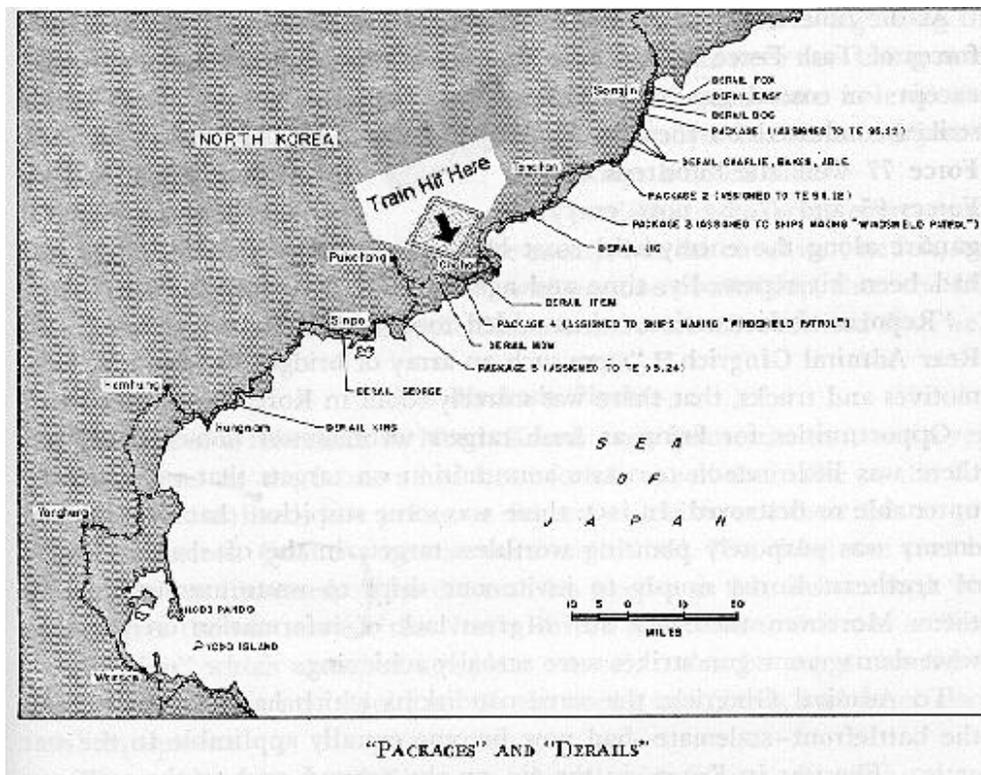
One might ask just what was Train Busting, why was it important, and how did we manage to do it?

What it was is rather obvious - it is self evident.

Its importance can better be understood if we look back at the reasons for the Navy being in the Korean theater in the first place. The main mission of the fleet was to keep our supply lines open and to disrupt the enemies supply lines - to interdict.

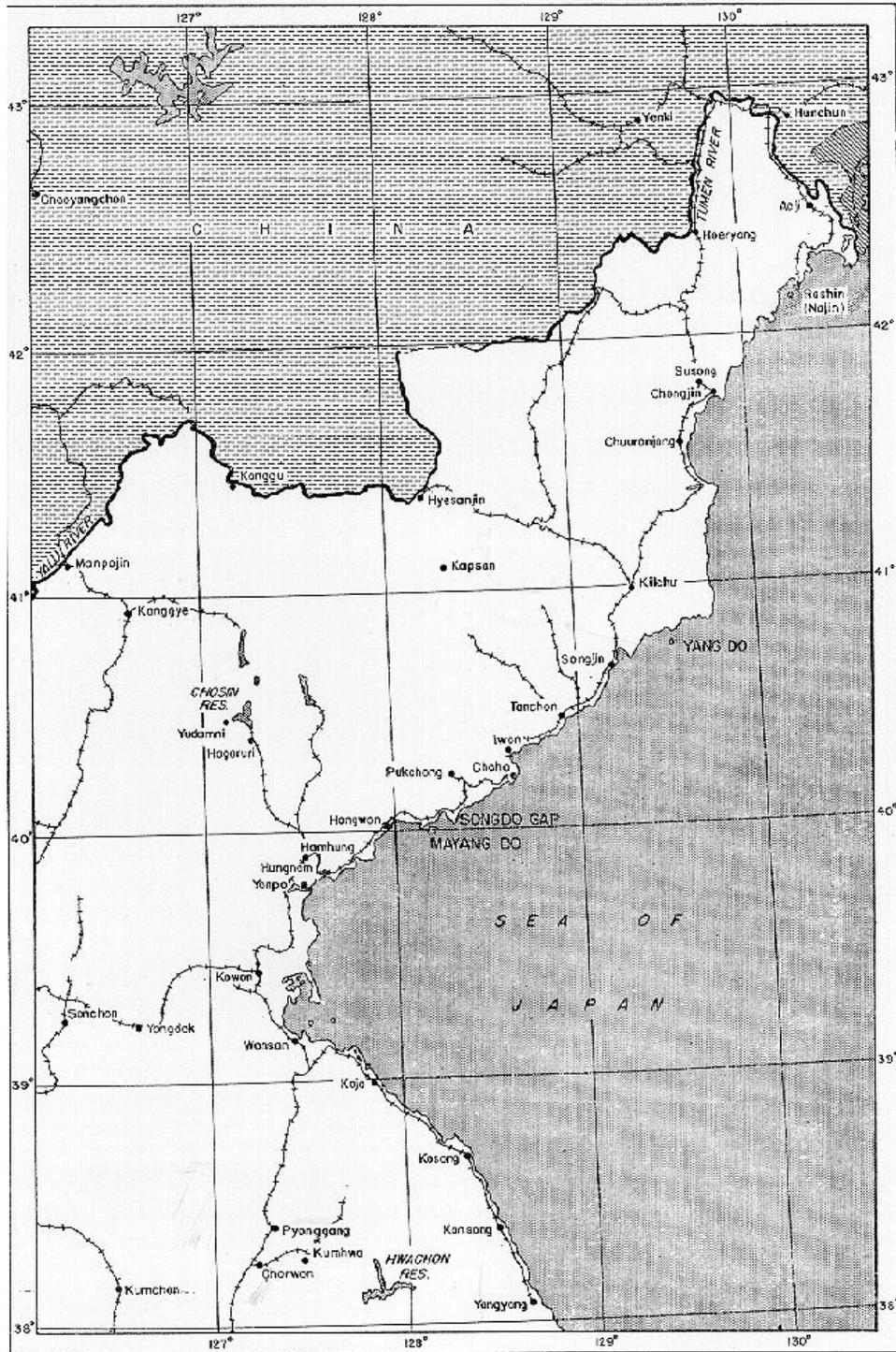
As part of TF 77 (Fast carrier task force), KYES supported the carriers whose planes did the actual interdiction by bombing and strafing trucks, bridges, rail facilities and even ox carts moving supplies to the front. This was reasonably effective by day when weather permitted carrier flight ops. It was not very effective at night or under heavy cloud cover. Since the North Koreans were no dummies, they moved their supplies at night or under cloud cover.

Destroyers therefore were also deployed close to shore as part of TF 95 (Blockade and escort task force) where they had better visibility in dark or poor weather conditions. Even so, their field of vision was very limited. At night we could be attracted by lights, but roads were often not visible from seaward. About the only circumstance wherein we even had a chance to bust a train was when the rail line ran close to the shoreline. There were 5 of these spots where we could get a clear shot at the track. These were known as "packages" and shown in map below.



On either end of the clearing (beach) at the Package was a tunnel mouth through the adjacent mountain. If we were to nail a train, it would therefore have to be at one of these Packages.

The significance of the rail line on the North Korean east coast as a supply route can be seen in the below map entitled **The Tightening Blockade**.



THE TIGHTENING BLOCKADE

Now we can get to more detail about how we "busted" a train.

Since the time lapse for a train to traverse the open area was only a few minutes, it was a very difficult task to (1) detect the presence of a train by seeing the flickering of the firebox, then (2) fire star shells to illuminate the area so our gun director crew could get on target, then (3) fire destructive shells.

To make matters worse the cunning of the North Koreans raised its ugly head again. Sometimes the engineer would run his locomotive out a short way, then retreat into the tunnel to see if we were out there by drawing our fire. He might do this several times for different distances. Sometimes they would put the locomotive in the middle of the train - or at the rear. It all led to our confusion and a lot of wasted ammo.

One day Ensign Jack Kay, along with Ensign Ron Watts, came to me with an idea to outsmart the train crew. They wanted to get my opinion on such an operation and to get help in developing a detailed plan.

Simply stated, if an observer could get up close to the tunnel mouth, we could reduce the guesswork about what was going on and cut down our reaction time. This idea then expanded to providing up close gunfire spotting. The whaleboat/gig could undoubtedly get a spotter close, but could we do it safely?

We really had no way of measuring our risk, but we knew the beach would be patrolled by the enemy. We also knew of the possibility of small boat mines and underwater swimmers. And finally, we also knew that none of us was experienced in this sort of activity. We decided to go for it - with an all volunteer crew.

In case of detection by the North Koreans who might have 50 caliber machine guns, we wanted long range firepower with us, so one crewman was equipped with a Browning automatic rifle. Another had a Thompson sub-machine gun for close quarter rapid fire. We had 2 or 3 riflemen in the boat. There was no shortage of volunteers, so we made selections based on familiarity with the weaponry. The boat officer, radioman, coxswain and engineer had sidearms. On my trip, I also carried a carbine.

Other preparations included rations for 3 days in case of separation from the ship, and timing the boat's departure from the seaward side of the ship during dark of moon.

Jack Kay took the first night's run, because it was his idea. I took either the second or third run and Ron Watts the other. Frank Adams, the XO, wanted the next run, and Chief Gunners Mate Painter took one accompanied by Dan Garland. Other participants can't be recalled.

On the run I took we had a laughable incident. During our pre-departure briefing, I warned about the possibility of encountering swimmers. No one was to shoot without clearing it with me. If a swimmer should drop anything into the boat, our nearest man should grab it and toss it back at the swimmer. I'm sure I was not the only one with mixed feelings when we left the ship on our unusual adventure. As we approached our point of cutting the engine, someone stood up, swung his weapon around and said "Swimmer...I saw his head!". "Don't shoot", I whispered. The "head" was gone by now and everyone was looking in the water. "There it is again" someone else said. "Don't shoot", I warned...then we could see a glass ball the size of a head bouncing around...a fisherman's float. That was a tension breaker for the next half hour or so as we sat in the cold watching the guards on the beach warming themselves by a big bonfire. We could also see a locomotive in the mouth of the tunnel with small jets of steam clouding the entrance. Then he started to move out into the open -- then he backed up into the tunnel. We did nothing. Another playful emergence a little further out, then another. The last retreat into the tunnel was followed by a lot of clanking of metal and hissing of steam. Soon the whole tunnel mouth was engulfed in steam. We could hear his wheels spinning, and it was obvious he was going to make a run for it! We radioed the ship to be ready to fire. As the locomotive cut loose, we called for fire and got the hell out of there. When the first shells hit short, I spotted them up while we were moving out. Then one shell hit so far off target it was on the opposite side of us from the train and

not too far away! We did not "bust" a train that night but we kept trying.

Finally, on the night of 19 May 1953, we hit pay dirt as evidenced by the official ship's log entry which reads in part. " 2121 Put gig in water for inshore search for enemy trains. 2210 Gig reported northbound train. 2211 Commenced firing. 2246 Ceased firing having expended 132 rounds and having derailed the train." The account from "The Sea War in Korea" reads as follows, "KYES did her best night's work the 19th of May while in company with Eversole (DD-789). At Cho-ho, where enemy guns had fired upon her so often and Kyes herself had fired at trains several times, Kyes and Eversole at last succeeded in hitting and stopping a nocturnal train. Illuminating the area with 128 star shells, the two destroyers pumped 418 rounds of 5 inch shells into the doomed train. This time there could be no doubt of the train's complete destruction."

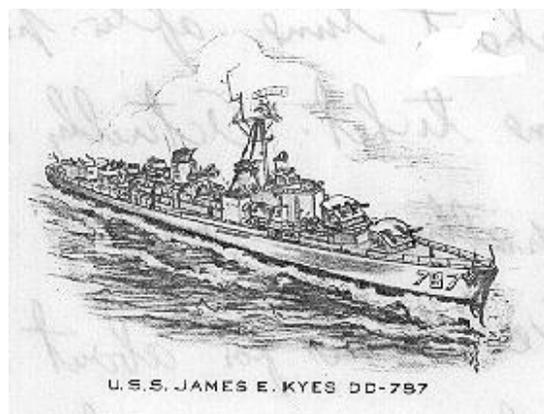
For this action, the KYES was awarded a certificate of membership in the elite fraternity of blockade ships, called the "Train Busters". The award issued by Commander of TF 95 reads in Part "For her contribution to the United Nations cause against Communist aggression in Korea by destroying one Communist train. In recognition of a job well done".

But the KYES was not a bucket of bolts...an inanimate hulk...she could not have successfully performed her many tasks without her ship's company, operating as a team. This teamwork is what gave life to her missions. The award therefore should be shared by all who played a part in her being there and doing what she did.

For this reason, our Reunion Association President, Wes Hammond, has had prepared a "Train Busters" packet of appreciation for all who were aboard the night the ship earned the award. They were the ship. The packet includes a replica certificate of membership in the "Train Buster's" club, the Ship's Log and the Engineering Department Night Order Book for 19 May 1953, as well as a complete ship's roster for that date.

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(Ship's Store Stationery Letterhead -1953)