

Collected Memories of the 1958-59 Western Pacific “Cruise” of the USS Piedmont, AD-17

By Bruce R MacAlister, ex-FT2, USS Piedmont, about 1958 to 1959



USS Piedmont date unknown but after removal of 20mm armaments

The Source

My discovery of the USS Piedmont reunion group (www.theusspiedmont.org) happened by accident. (I describe the “accidental bragging” in the first entry below.) The e-mail traffic of a “plank owner” (a crew member when the ship was first commissioned in 1943) about a storm he was recalling brought out all sorts of memories of my time on our 1958-59 “cruise” (as a 6-month or more deployment is called). Bill (William H) Kastens, head of the reunion group, passed the e-mail queries around. The answers made me hopeful that if I sent my memories of the time, others would fill in and correct what I remembered.

What follows are contents of e-mail notes from fellow crew members of that time including mine. Mine dominate because I've written the most. Hopefully others will add longer notes or entire pages to fill out this collection. It was shared with the reunion group at the 2011 reunion.

Author: Bruce R MacAlister, ex-FT2, USS Piedmont, about 1958 to 1959, USN #362-99-98

The 823 Incidents – the bombardment of the islands of Quemoy and Matsu by the “Red” Chinese

See “Official background on the 823 actions” on page 6.

823 e-mail comments and memories

This is what started it:

--- On Sat, 7/30/11, Bruce MacAlister <[email]> wrote:

Bill,

After seeing the traffic from the plank owners and the 1943 storm, I realized this might help me with my memories of the 1958 Quemoy-Matsu crisis. From my research I've learned that the Taiwanese



823 Award given by the government of Taiwan to U S military serving during the time

refer to it as "823" for 8 (August) 23, the date of the bombardment of the islands. We all received some sort of badge from the Taiwanese military that we were told we could accept but not wear on our uniforms. Mine long ago disappeared.

Like most young sailors I was a late teenager who wasn't so interested in what was going on between the "Red" Chinese and the "Republic" of China. I remember that, first, a crisis in Lebanon and, second, the Quemoy and Matsu crisis meant we weren't going to Australia as planned. Our older mates told us Australia was quite an adventure, a pleasant land, great beer and the women really, really liked American sailors (wink, wink). You know where a late teenager's mind spent most of its time.

What I've found out is that it was a bigger deal than this teenage sailor realized. Both the US and Taiwan thought it was China's precursor to invasion. That's why we were there, tied up just downstream of the raw sewage outlet of Kaohsiung (whew).

I remember going to sea with lots of other US and Taiwanese ships as "Red" Chinese jets flew overhead. We went to general quarters with me in the belly of the Piedmont manning the fire control computer. It was a place that we would never get out of if the ship went down and we knew it. As I remember it, we were locking the fire control tracking radar and computer on the jets but left the gun mounts disconnected so as not to seem like we were challenging them. The plan was we'd put the mounts in lock-in and fire if the jets began strafing us. We also knew that the computer and the mounts could never track a jet across midships. This 1940's system was never designed for jets! I also remember we painted the Stars and Stripes on the top of the gun mounts hoping, I guess, that they wouldn't confuse our ships with the identical ships of Taiwan. They were identical, of course, because the US gave them to Taiwan.

The resources I've found so far are:http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Taiwan_Strait_Crisis, www.taiwanvets.com, and www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2008/08/23/2003421138.

My back story is that I have a friend who was career Army and who served two tours in Vietnam. We were telling war stories, bragging in front of our wives, not unusual for two old guys who are regressing to teenage male behavior. Anyway, knowing his heroic work in "Nam" I countered with my "threat" over the Quemoy and Matsu crisis.

That joking around led me to research the crisis. That led me to discovering the USS Piedmont Reunion group and more about the crisis, related above.

So I invite the sharing of memories of this time.

Regards, Bruce MacAlister, FT2, USS Piedmont, 1958-59

--- On Wed, 8/3/11, Tom Sayles <i> wrote:

Subject: Re: Quemoy and Matsu Crisis; and "823 Badge of Honor"-Bruce MacAlister

To: "Wm H KASTENS" <i>

Date: Wednesday, August 3, 2011, 2:55 PM

Bill-- That was my cruise on the Piedmont, 58-59. I tried to tell a friend about this but he didn't want to believe me. Now I have some info to give to him the next time I see him, thanks..... Tom Sayles MR R-2 Div. 1957-59

--- On Wed, 8/3/11, BowlerRW wrote:

From: BowlerRW@i

Subject: Fwd: Quemoy and Matsu Crisis; and "823 Badge of Honor"-Bruce MacAlister

To: i

Date: Wednesday, August 3, 2011, 4:01 PM

Bruce MacAlister, FT2 1958-59

Bruce. I wrote many stories in a book to leave to my grandchildren and hopefully more to come in the future. Only a suggestion, but this story would be good to include in your legacy, if you so choose. I did not write about the Chinese and Japanese girls I met, wink, wink, in the book. Besides, they all looked alike and it's hard to remember at my age.

Bob Wood IM3 1950-51

823 823 17K Download

Bruce MacAlister to BowlerRW

Bill,

Thanks for your reply and the file "823". Unfortunately my Windows computer can't figure out what kind of a file it is since it doesn't have an extension like "doc" on the end of it. I tried LibreOffice (the successor to OpenOffice) that can usually open anything but I couldn't make sense of it. Let me know what I can open it with.

You indicate that you were 50-51 but "823" would mean you were a part of that 58-59 crew. I look forward to hearing more from you.

Regards, Bruce

Bruce MacAlister to tsayles4, Wm

show details Aug 3 (7 days ago)

Thanks for the note, Tom. I wouldn't know anything (or admit anything) about those lovely Asian women.

I remember on our departure from that WestPac cruise we had some sort of big departure party to which much of the crew attended. I had duty so I only heard about it. What I heard is that our really great Chaplain, Zeller I think his name was, had a tough time. Some crew members had hired a stripper to rub herself all over him while she was mostly naked. The Chaplain may have been the only married man on the ship who didn't stray from his marital vows, so after 7 months that must have been very difficult for him.

Do you have any memories of that party? I think I got stuck with petty officer of the watch that night.

Regards, Bruce

--- On Sat, 8/6/11, Charles Laurent; wrote:

Subject: Re: Quemoy and Matsu Crisis; and "823 Badge of Honor"

Date: Saturday, August 6, 2011, 6:05 PM

I also remember those days on the Piedmont. It was not a fun time for us in the ship's office. I don't know why, but it was a busy time for us. I have a couple of those medals, and would be glad to part with them; first come will get them.

Charles E. Laurent, Ret. PN CPO

2802 Coronado Bay

Evans, CO. 80620

On Sat, Aug 6, 2011 at 7:18 PM, Wm H KASTENS wrote:

Try this URL

<http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2008/08/23/2003421138>

And then e-mail Bruce MacAlister and see if he has more details.

--- On Sun, 8/7/11, Charles Laurent wrote:

From: Charles Laurent

Subject: Re: Quemoy and Matsu Crisis; and "823 Badge of Honor"

Date: Sunday, August 7, 2011, 2:56 PM

Bill-- I still have two badges to give away to those who have lost theirs or just threw their's away. Let me know , I will mail them one and even pay the postage.

Charley Laurent, Ret. PNC 58-61.

--- On Mon, 8/8/11, Bruce MacAlister <i> wrote:

From: Bruce MacAlister

Subject: Re: Quemoy and Matsu Crisis; and "823 Badge of Honor"-Bill Peters

To: i

Cc: "Wm H KASTENS"

Date: Monday, August 8, 2011, 1:57 PM

Bill,

Thanks for the URL. My research shows that the badges are no longer offered. The best site I've seen is <http://www.taiwanvets.com/>. You could try contacting the organization based on the website. It's hard to tell if it's still active. If it is, let the rest of us know since we might want one of those badges also.

Regards, Bruce (MacAlister, FT2, USS Piedmont 58-59)

--- On Mon, 8/8/11, Victoria Peters wrote:

Charley--

I would really appreciate it if you could send me the 823 Badge of Honor. My address is:

Bill T. Peters

4476 South Manor Ridge Place

Salt Lake City, Utah 84124 (telephone number redacted for privacy)

I would gladly pay postage and handling or any other cost . Thank you for your help on this matter.

Bill T. Peters, RM3 56-59

from Wm H KASTENS

to Bruce MacAlister

date Mon, Aug 8, 2011 at 5:18 PM

subject Re: "823 Badge of Honor"-Bruce Mac.

signed-by i

Bruce--We got Bill T. Peters taken care of because Charley Laurent, PN CPO, 58-61 in the ship's office, has some of those medals left over and is willing to get rid of them. I am going to gather up all the responses and send out to Piedmont Sailors soon.

From: tsayles4@i

Subject:

To:

Date: Wednesday, August 10, 2011, 11:54 AM

Bill, if you could put out a question and see if anyone has the two papers that were given to us by the Chinese Government. One was a 11-14 rice paper in Chinese and the second one was a 8-10 in English. I lost mine in a move years ago. I would like a copy of them.

Ref; to the 823 Medal

Thanks. Tom Sayles, Las Vegas MR 57-59

BILLY CALDWELL

(Compressed a little.)

to bruce macalister

date Fri, Aug 19, 2011 at 4:55 PM

subject RE: Memories of the USS Piedmont 1958-59 WestPac deployment and the Quemoy-Matsu crisis

Hello Bruce,

I have been following this with all the emails that have been sent out. I can't remember one day of what is being talked about. At the time, I was in operations serving as a QM. Warren Hopkins was my LPO and Chief Lord, CPO. Would need to see a cruise book to be able to tell you others in charge. In reading through your PDF, I recall Peters from Utah. If I recall correctly, he was in the Post Office at the time.

When this came down, I guess, we left port. While we were in Kaohsiung, Gary Meltzer was helmsman on Special Sea and Anchor Detail. While in port in Kaohsiung, he transferred to a tin can. I took over his duty, after several lessons at the helm, from him. I can only remember being at the helm one time, leaving Kaohsiung. I was relieved of that position before entering San Diego.

When we left San Diego on this trip, our stay in Hawaii was only two days, I'm almost sure. And the swim call was in the Mariana Trench east of the Philippines. I was Quartermaster of the watch when the swim call came down and had to get someone to relieve me so I could do the swim. The swim call, I recall very well. I was logging the ocean depths at the time and was shocked and amazed at the depth of the ocean at the time of the swim call. Better than seven miles deep, if I recall correctly. I didn't want to miss out on being able to say I swam in water that deep. Plus I remember what was happening during the swim. Some large swells, making it hard for the guys to get back aboard. Being dragged against the bottom of the ship, getting cut up by the barnacles. I waited till a swell rolled in, grabbed the rope ladder and hung on for dear live, till the next swell came along. While swimming, the current was taking us away from the ship. I remember that, because one of the life boats came along and said we were getting to far out from the ship. Was almost like a rip tide. Didn't know what a rip tide was then. The last thing I recall about the swim. After getting back aboard, I had to return to duty on the bridge, when looking at the ocean on the port side, you could see when and how the ship had drifted. No swells were present in the path of drift, which I thought surprising. I also thought, "Why didn't we swim on this side."

The "Kite" I also remember well. In fact, I was on watch again, when one of the deck seaman serving as look out, came in and made a report of it to the OOD. "Kite on Port Side, Aft, bearing, etc, etc." His reply, "Very well." Which quickly changed to, "What?"

At a young age of seventy three, it's a bit hard to recall all that happened during the time aboard the Piedmont. In fact, Robert Humphrey, ships librarian wrote about a watch he and I were standing in foul weather, and I don't remember a bit of it. Remember returning home on that trip and the swells we encounter. Good fun memories, but not to do over again.

Thanks for the info, Bill Caldwell SMSN 56-59

from *BILLY CALDWELL*

to bruce macalister

date Fri, Aug 19, 2011 at 5:13 PM

subject RE: Memories of the USS Piedmont 1958-59 WestPac deployment and the Quemoy-Matsu crisis

Hey, Just made contact with Tom Sayles and we are going to meet next week end and travel down memory lane a bit. When it comes to names, I'm not the best. Serving in ops, I had to do the ship's clocks, underway and in port. Met a lot of the guys doing that, but without the book, most are just faces in my past. Speaking of memories, one of the best was, the transporting of the pigs on their handcarts, there in Koashiung and the blessing of the fishing boats. I was almost a Hillbilly kid from Stillwater, Okla and when you graduate, they said, "Now the doors to the rest of the world has opened up to you." Going in the Navy, I found that out. I didn't know Jack about the world. What a trip. Thanks again, Bill

Official background on the 823 actions

The Wikipedia article titled "Second Taiwan Strait Crisis" at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Taiwan_Strait_Crisis is a good place to start. Until reading the article I didn't know that there had been a first Taiwan Strait crisis. A lot more Taiwanese troops were killed in the artillery barrages than I realized. I had been briefly stationed at Pt Mugu Naval Air Missile

Station while the Sidewinder missile was being tested. It was pretty important during the battle since the ROC (Republic of China aka Taiwanese) planes weren't up to the quality of the PRC (People's Republic of China aka "Red" Chinese) MiG fighters.

I found – but then lost – the website for a proclamation by then-president Dwight D Eisenhower siding with the ROC against the PRC over the bombardment of the two islands. On finding it I saw for the first time just how serious was this conflict. It appears that both the U S and the ROC thought the bombardment was a prelude to an invasion of Taiwan. That's why our ships were sent to Taiwan.

Another surprise discovery was the website for "823 Badge of Honor Association USA" at www.taiwanvets.com. There were a lot more than just us sailors and our ships in Taiwan for this crisis. The "vets" included all of our services. The badge and ribbon are shown in the figure on page 1.


I remember getting the badge from a contingent of ROC officers before we left Taiwan. There was also some kind of letter or certificate that went with it. Our Navy superiors told us we could accept the "medal" but not wear it on our uniforms since it was not U S military issue. Both the medal and the certificate have long since disappeared in my 50 years of wandering since. All of us also got a letter of appreciation from the repair officer in charge thanking us for our hard work. It went into our personnel folders. Although my copy of this also disappeared, another former Piedmont sailor of the time had his and forwarded it. The text that was the same for all and is reproduced in this figure.

Subj: Letter of Appreciation

1. From 23 June 1958 to 30 January 1959 the U.S.S. PIEDMONT (AD-17) was deployed to WESTPAC to overhaul and repair ships assigned to the SEVENTH Fleet. During this period of time you were a member of the crew assigned to the Repair Department.

2. Your willingness to accept and accomplish a much greater than average workload assigned the Repair Department, your willingness to sacrifice liberty and recreation hours, and your many long hours of work helped the PIEDMONT accomplish an important mission with outstanding success.

3. The efficiency record of PIEDMONT has been excellent through your continuing effort, cooperation, and "can do" attitude.


F. L. CHERRY
LCDR USN

The final piece of official information found was an editorial in the Taipei Times commemorating the "823" crisis and the role of U S forces in it. This website shows the editorial:

www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2008/08/23/2003421138. At the time (2008) the Taiwanese government was reissuing the badge and ribbon given at the time of the action.

From San Diego to Yokosuka, Japan

Three parts of steaming to the Western Pacific stick in my memory; touring Hawaii, swimming in the open Pacific, and flying our high-tech kite off the fantail.

We steamed into Pearl Harbor. I think we were there a week. It was long enough for all of us to get some daytime liberty to explore the place. I swam at Waikiki Beach. One of my shipmates had a relative there with a car. We borrowed it for a day and toured Oahu. It was a strangely beautiful island. I remember a place we called the “bowl”, a type of valley of great beauty that, I think, was also a grave site for the military.

Bill Caldwell's memory of it was a little different and also offers more detail, see page 5. “When we left San Diego on this trip, our stay in Hawaii was only two days, I’m almost sure.”

Out of Hawaii we stopped in the mid-Pacific, dropped cargo nets from the side hatches and went swimming. Sharpshooters on the heights of the ship and in ships-boats circling us looked out for sharks. The swell was low. The nets were difficult to climb down since we had to drop into the ocean at the correct point of the swell. It gave me an interesting understanding of what our WWII forebears had to do entering landing craft to assault a beach.

Bill Caldwell: “And the swim call was in the Mariana Trench east of the Philippines. I was Quartermaster of the watch when the swim call came down and had to get someone to relieve me so I could do the swim. The swim call, I recall very well. I was logging the ocean depths at the time and was shocked and amazed at the depth of the ocean at the time of the swim call. Better than seven miles deep, if I recall correctly. I didn't want to miss out on being able to say I swam in water that deep. Plus I remember what was happening during the swim. Some large swells, making it hard for the guys to get back aboard. Being dragged against the bottom of the ship, getting cut up by the barnacles. I waited till a swell rolled in, grabbed the rope ladder and hung on for dear live, till the next swell came along. While swimming, the current was taking us away from the ship. I remember that, because one of the life boats came along and said we were getting to far out from the ship. Was almost like a rip tide. Didn't know what a rip tide was then. The last thing I recall about the swim. After getting back aboard, I had to return to duty on the bridge, when looking at the ocean on the port side, you could see when and how the ship had drifted. No swells were present in the path of drift, which I thought surprising. I also thought, 'Why didn't we swim on this side.'”

Then there was the kite...

I was deeply involved with this one. I don't know who came up with the idea but we decided to make a large kite and fly it off the fantail. We got together with the crew in the boat shop who had good, strong hickory strakes we could use for the spine. We picked 8-feet high by 4-feet wide. From some other shop we got thick brown craft paper to make the body. Probably from the laundry we got damaged pieces of cloth to make the tail. Then, we thought, if we could make it reflective of radar, we could track it with our fire control radar! Someone came up with the idea of using the aluminum wrapping on the cartons of export cigarettes we could buy cheaply aboard ship. Lots of scrounging later we had enough to glue to the paper. Now for a sting to attach to it. We had an ancient spool of nichrome wire for which there was no known use. It wasn't even something we needed in inventory. Why we had it no one knew. We also got a piece of wood to use as the axle for the spool and heavy gloves to keep our hands intact as the kite reeled out.

It deployed very well. It was so strong that someone devised a braking mechanism (we were an

inventive lot) to keep some control. Fortunately, it didn't fly directly off the stern but, owing to wind currents, slightly off to starboard as I remember it.

We cranked up the fire control director, pointed it at the kite, turned on radar tracking and began following it. My memory of the statistics is probably not very accurate, but here they are:

- It got out a good quarter mile.
- It rose to 300-feet.
- We began getting shocking static charges down the nichrome wire that required us to rig up a ground to the ship.

I don't remember that we got anyone's permission to do this but it's certain that all the way to the captain what we were doing was well known. (See Bill Caldwell's comments below.) As the afternoon wore on, we got word from the bridge to cut it loose. Not wanting to lose all that work, we got a large spar – an old beat-up 4by4 or such – and tied the wire to it. The pull of the kite was so great that tying the spar was very difficult with lots of us holding and working with it. We then threw the spar off the stern.

We kept tracking it with our fire control radar. Again, some fuzzy statistics 50 years later:

- We tracked it for 15 or 20 miles. We stopped tracking at sunset or maybe it was because of chow call.
- At one point in the rangefinder of the fire control director we saw it go through a rain squall and drop almost to the surface. We thought we were going to lose it, but out of the squall it rose again.
- It's maximum altitude got to about 500-feet.

We wondered amongst ourselves if a trans-Pacific airliner with it's weather radar running would pick up this “UFO” flying at a few knots at an altitude few hundred feet across the Pacific. Some of the ship's radio crew listened to hear any reports but none were heard.

Decades later when I worked as a leader of computer people I realized that letting us do that kind of thing was both morale boosting for an otherwise boring trip and encouraging the kind of creativity that you want in a technical team.

Bill Caldwell: “The 'Kite' I also remember well. In fact, I was on watch again, when one of the deck seaman serving as look out, came in and made a report of it to the OOD. 'Kite on Port Side, Aft, bearing, etc, etc.' His reply, 'Very well.' Which quickly changed to, 'What?'”

The return from Kaohsiung, Taiwan to San Diego

From Kaohsiung we stopped in Hong Kong for about a week. I got two suits, a pair of dress shoes and a classy suitcase custom made. I took the ferry to Kowloon not knowing it was a pretty rough place. I got lost, got on the wrong street and was being followed by some pretty rough looking characters probably planning to mug me. I got to a populated street just before they got to me. I also took the funicular up to Victoria Peak and the tram and bus to Repulse Beach. A series of sampans painted the sides of the ship above the waterline. I assume their price was low and we needed the paint.

ship including taking the crew down to a skeleton force. But that's another story for another time.

- i The e-mail addresses were removed. They change frequently and we lose some of the sailors and so don't need to burden their survivors with e-mail notes. The roster on the Piedmont website lists the e-mail addresses of those willing to be contacted.