

ASC History Newsletter



Gulf of Tonkin Commemoration

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This Month in Military history

- **1794:** Whiskey Rebellion begin— desultory outbreaks ensue
- **1917:** New York National Guard activated for duty on the home front
- **1918:** During a German raid on 82nd Division lines, YMCA worker Bernetta Miller walks the trenches handing out hot chocolate, cake, and cigarettes
- **1927:** Peace Bridge connecting US and Canada is opened
- **1931:** Albert Einstein urges scientists to refuse military work
- **1944:** General Patton's Third Army begins 281 continuous days of operations
- **1945:** US air dropped mines sink or damage 47 Japanese ships on the Yangtze
- **1993:** "Black Hawk Down"— Insurgents ambush US troops in Mogadishu, Somalia

This August marks the 50th Anniversary of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution- which is a good place to mark the beginning of US involvement in the Vietnam War. On 2 August 1964 three North Vietnamese (NVN) patrol boats attacked the USS Maddox in order to disrupt DESOTO patrols off NVN. DESOTO patrols conducted electronic surveillance operations in international waters. Earlier that day, there had been a clandestine raid on the NVN coast by South Vietnamese gunboats. Two days after these events another US gunboat, the USS C. Turner Joy, joined the USS Maddox in the same area. The evening of August 4th radar, sonar, and radio reports indicated another attack. Firing wildly into the night at radar targets, both US ships reported defending themselves from incoming attack. Once word reached the United States, Congress reacted quickly to authorize retaliatory strikes against NVN while simultaneously blocking re-

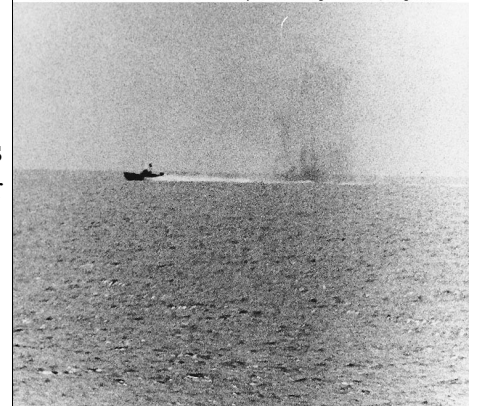
lease of information on any incidents that may have provoked the NVN attacks. The incidents led Congress to pass the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution on 10 August. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution allowed the President "to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force, to assist any member ... of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty requesting assistance in defense of its freedom."

In the aftermath of these rapidly occurring events there was time to more closely investigate the incidents. Once this process had begun, suspicions arose that the reported second attack had likely not happened. Many believed that over-excited crews fired at false radar images. No evidence was spotted the next morning by American aircraft flying over the scene of the 'battle.' The Captains of the US ships remained firm in their belief that an attack happened, but doubt arose. NVN officials soon made statements claiming and admitting to the first attack on the USS Maddox but denying the second at-

tack. However, as Congress had already acted to pass the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, the results of the inquiry were buried. Now, the United States could carry out military action in support of South Vietnam without requiring a declaration of war.

This decision led the United States into conflict on the ground in Vietnam. Despite the rush to combat, the American gusto toward joining the war would not last for long.

Photo # USN 711524 North Vietnamese motor torpedo boat attacking USS Maddox, 2 Aug. 1964



The Red Ball Express



A common phrase used today is 'distribution to the last tactical mile.' ASC and the DMC often focus on providing materiel to the last tactical mile in support of our forces. This is critical because shortcomings in distribution rapidly lead to problems on the front lines. This focus is nothing new for the Army. During World War II, one of the more famous transportation systems was called the Red Ball Express.

Created on August 21, 1944, the Red Ball Express was an ad hoc development in France that made sure the Allies would be able to get needed supplies now while more permanent supply lines, such as railroads, were being built. The Red Ball Express consisted of convoys of trucks that would run a loop of highway from St Lo northeast to the front lines. The trucks carried mainly fuel and ammo to the front lines, although other mandatory supplies were also transported.

On an average day 900 fully loaded vehicles would transverse the one-way route using round the clock drivers. These drivers were about 75% African American because at the time US commanders felt they were not suited to combat positions within the Army.

The route the trucks followed was marked by red balls placed alongside the road and signs depicting daily goals and inspirational messages to keep the drivers going. Civilians were kept off the specified route in order to prevent traffic jams and convoys had strict rules placed upon them. Convoy trucks were to stay at 60 yard intervals to avoid presenting big targets for enemy bombers and not to exceed 25 miles an hour; passing on the road was also not allowed.

The Express lived up to its name, it was quick; but this focus on speed in a hastily created transportation system also caused problems. The rigorous nature of driving around the clock and the dangers of driving started to wear on the soldiers. Drivers began to ignore speed limits, weight limits for cargo, and their own fatigue. Night driving was especially hazardous as the trucks were only allowed "cat eyes", or slitted headlight covers in order to reduce the chance of being seen, but this reduced driver visibility as well. Reckless driving led to more and more single vehicle incidents, including veering off the road, collisions, and getting stuck. Maintenance was ignored and

trucks broke down blocking the routes. The greatest problem was simply fuel consumption. Combat forces were racing across France further than the Red Ball could deliver fuel. By late September 1944 the trucks needed more fuel to get to the front than they could carry, even in bulk tankers. Without fuel deliveries to the last tactical mile, the advance across France ground to a halt until better distribution networks could be established. The Red Ball Express only ran for 82 days but left a lasting legacy of support.

