

Navy frigate ship casts imposing shadow

By Larry O'Connor
staff writer

This is definitely not the Boblo boat.

How can one tell? Especially one whose nautical experience has been limited to playing battleship in the bathtub. Well for one, there's no place to buy any popcorn.

And two, the good ship Boblo doesn't have the artillery to leave the city of Wyandotte in a pile of rubble. Enough said.

This is the USS Antrim, a United States Naval guided missile frigate. The ship is 453 feet long, 47 feet wide and weighs in at 3,900 tons. We're talking strictly heavy metal here, folks.

And nothing looks more ominous than 3,900-tons of gray frigate coming up the Detroit River. The USS Antrim recently docked for four days in Windsor.

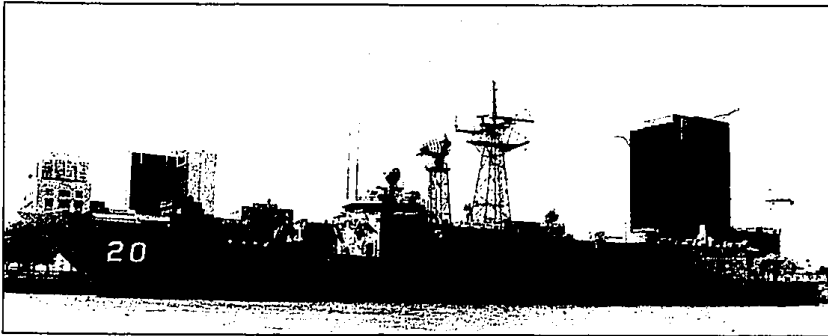
Now anyone can board a frigate when it's docked. The real challenge is boarding it while the sucker is moving at 24 knots.

The plan of attack included taking a ride from Belle Isle on a United States Coast Guard boat and meeting up with the vessel near Amherstburg, Ontario, Canada. Sounded simple.

SO HERE we all were, a crew of six journalists, gazing up one side of this big, gray metal boat wondering how the heck to get on. Above were a bunch of young men dressed in gleaming white uniforms looking at us like we were all nuts.

Then came the ladder.

This was the scariest looking lad-



Life aboard the USS Antrim is one big adjustment for landlubbing reporters.

ART EMANUELE/staff photographer

der. This tired collection of knotted rope resembled something made by arthritic Boy Scout Troop 001. The Pentagon probably got it on sale for \$750,000.

Anyhow, once the group shook, rattled and rolled up the ladder, Cmdr. J. Adam Lopez was there to offer greetings.

"Welcome aboard," said Lopez, in charge of public affairs for the ship. "Watch your step."

Lopez, who spoke in a Texas drawl, took the entourage on the standard Navy tour (Meaning, of course, no one was allowed to play

with the Harpoon anti-ship missiles. Aw darn).

Inside the cabin, everything was gray and smelled of Pine Sol. The passage ways were so small that two anorexics couldn't get through without saying, "excuse me."

Also at each doorway there's a six-inch elevated metal ledge that would send the average civilian not paying attention crashing headfirst into the cabin.

"WATCH YOUR step," Lopez said. Claustrophobia sets in after about

10 minutes. Before you can exit, there's another ladder to climb.

"Watch your step," said Lopez, who shoots up each ladder like Rudolf Nureyev. The rest of us are left huffing and puffing.

Back on deck, Lopez begins to rattle off some facts about the ship. For instance, the frigate is powered two gas turbine engines similar to those used in a DC-9 airplane and can cruise 30 knots (34.5 miles per hour).

The USS Antrim can carry up to two medium-sized helicopters. The ship also has a library, a gym, a TV room and a barber shop.

But this ship's holster really pucks a wallop.

Included in the USS Antrim's armament are a Phalanx close-in weapons system, an Mk 13 guided missile launcher, a Harpoon anti-aircraft missile, 76mm Mk75 Rapid Fire Gun and Mk32 ASW Torpedo Tubes (two triple mountings nonetheless).

Somebody in the journalistic huddle inquires if any of the weapons are of the nuclear nature.

"I can neither confirm or deny that at this time," Lopez said. Love

that military talk.

The ship is named after Rear Admiral Richard Nott Antrim, who received a medal of honor and a bronze star for his heroic actions in a Japanese POW camp during World War II. He interceded on behalf of a junior officer who was being beaten by a Japanese guard. Close to death, Antrim offered to take the punishment himself instead of the officer. The Japanese guard, started by Antrim's actions, stopped the beating.

Anyhow, the ship starts to close in on the Detroit riverfront. The view is impressive.

Along shore are the skeletal remains of closed factories with busted windows, marking the city's once thriving industrial base. Close by is the construction of new office buildings, ushering the technological era.

Before long, the ship pulls into Windsor. Some of us have a hard time putting Volkswagens in the garage. Imagine trying to parallel park a 3,900-ton frigate.

When the ship docks, there's about 75 sailors ready to bolt. Liberty time is 1-6:15 p.m. when the ship is at port.

Cdr. Ed Bellamy, who stopped by for a quick minute to say hello, doesn't sound too worried.

"We never had any sailors get lost," said Bellamy, who has been in the U.S. Navy for 19 years. "Sailors can always find their ship."

Another thing about these sailors, there was no profanity. Not even so much as a "golly geez" on this trip. Just when you start to worry, though, things are back to normal.

One sailor asks another for directions to Jason's.

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