
REFUELING AT SEA

By David M. Schulz

All Navy and Coast guard ships must refuel at sea in times of war, so training for this operation is always needed. This is the first refueling detail I had been involved with on the *Coast Guard Cutter Chase*. As a Fire Control Technician my normal duties involved maintaining the radar tracking system for the five inch thirty-eight gun. At the start of a trans-Atlantic crossing the ship stopped in New London, Connecticut to pick up Cadets at the Coast Guard Academy. For some of them this was their first sea voyage. Their duties on board varied from the engine room to being the Officer of the deck on the bridge. With half the ship's crew made up of inexperienced men and women, any major exercise can be deadly and refueling at sea is a dangerous activity. "Now set the refueling detail" came the pipe over the ship loud speaker system.



When I came up on deck the *Merrimack* was about 2000 yards off our port bow. The sea had 4 foot swells and the weather is slightly overcast; not too bad for the refueling detail I thought. She was not a

bad looking ship for an oilier; the paint still looked new. Her length was about 600 feet, it had gas turbine engines like our ship, the superstructure was seven decks high and it had a helicopter pad on the fan tail. The fuel lines hung from four cranes, three on one side and one on the other. They could refuel two ships at once maybe more!

We took up our station on the port side life boat deck. My position was to keep tension on the sound powered phone line to the other ship. In front of me was the torpedo tube launcher, it was gray with room for three torpedoes and stood about four and a half foot tall. To my right is Lester, three other line tenders and the sound powered phone talker. The sound powered phones had a head set and a mouth piece that you talked into. About fifteen feet to my left past the refueling support structure, Coup as we called him was at his station as a support line tender. He and about five other guys had to control a two inch line that went through a block pulley to the other ship. The two engineers that had the refueling station had to attach the steel cable with the pelican hook to the bulkhead and connect the four inch fuel line. They had all their tools ready because our ship was pulling up along side the *Merrimack*.

Our ship pulled up along side the oilier that was going on a straight course. Slowly we got closer to her starboard side. I could see the sailors on the other ship; one of them had the thin cotton line with the monkey fist getting ready to throw it to Coup. The ships where thirty feet apart going about 5 knots when the sailor wound up and let his line fly. The line landed on flight deck and Coup and his crew started pulling it across, attached was the sound powered phone line and the support line. They passed the sound powered phone line up to the line tenders and myself. As we got the phone line in place and the phone talker had communications with the other ship, Coup and his crew had already put their line through the block pulley and were pulling the steel cable and fuel line over.

The engineers put the steel cable over the refueling support structure and ran it over to the bulkhead and attached the pelican hook to a ring

that is welded to the bulkhead. The pelican hook looks just like a pelican beak when closed except it has a locking ring that slips over the end to lock it in place. The fuel line is a black colored heavy gauge rubber 5 inch hose that has a brittle aluminum connector on the end. This connector is brittle because if needed, the engineer can take a sledge hammer and break the connection in an emergency. The two engineers attach the fuel line to our refueling connector with the three clamps that are on the end connector. "All secure" the engineer calls out to the ship to ship phone talker. She calls to the Merrimack and tells them we are ready to take on fuel. A few seconds pass and she calls out to the engineer "They've started" he acknowledges her. Everything is going well so far; the sound powered phone line is not too hard to handle. The phone talker calls out to the engineer "1000 gallons." We are only going to take on three thousand gallons this refueling. She calls out "2000 gallons." Some time had passed since she called out her last report when our ships' engines started to speed up.

It seemed odd to me that we would be speeding up now. The phone line began to pull away from my hands so I let it out some more. The ship has to slow down I thought. No! We were starting to break away from the ship! The phone line, I can't control it anymore! So I let it go, as did the other line tenders. Lester who was standing next to me got his leg caught in the line, and he is being pulled over the torpedo tubes! I grabbed him, he grabbed me and the line pulled his leg up onto the torpedo tube. The line started slipping around his leg for what seemed an eternity, then for some reason the line gave up some slack and Lesters leg just dropped out of the loop. The end of the phone line came and phone got pulled off the phone talker. Remarkably everyone around me was okay. Now my attention turned to what was happening at the fuel line. The engineers were trying to get the pelican hook disconnected. One of them was hitting the lock ring on the pelican hook with a sledge hammer but it was not coming loose; the steel cable is being stretched between ships. My God! If that snaps there is no telling where the cable will go. What is that whining sound? It sounds as if it's coming from the other ship, it must be the winch that the steel cable is wrapped around. Every time the sledge hammer hit the pelican hook I

think it's going to break free. He swings again and he misses so the other engineer takes the hammer and starts to hit the pelican hook. This guy swings harder than the other. On the third swing, the hook broke free and the coupled fuel line snaps off and goes overboard. It's over! Coup got a nasty rope burn when he tried to hang on to his line but he is okay, thank God no one was killed!

This was a training exercise turned disaster. The refueling team got away with one injury and two heroes, the engineers that freed the pelican hook. They stayed at their station and did their job knowing that if the steel cable snapped they could have been seriously hurt or killed. Refueling at sea is a necessary part of Navy and Coast Guard readiness, but when two ships are tied together it is a dangerous activity.

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