

Disaster on the USS Mullinnix

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A high-line approach operation during the 1969 WESTPAC deployment

This is a story about the only crew member I am aware of who died while the USS Mullinnix was deployed to WESTPAC in 1969. The story is based on fading memories, information from multiple sources, and second-hand information. The intent is not to sensationalize the incident, nor infer a cover-up, nor assign blame. It is just a story about an incident that many of us remember and of which few of us know the actual details.

In 2016, an email conversation started among a few USS Mullinnix Association members relating to the accidental death of the only known Vietnam casualty of the 1969 USS Mullinnix WESTPAC cruise. All of us could remember the actual event, where we were, and what we were doing. However, none of us could remember the name of the crew member at first, nor did we know what really happened. All we remembered were rumors, second hand information, and fading memories from nearly 50 years ago.

Details about this incident were found to be limited. The logs of the USS Mullinnix contained entries concerning the boiler explosion, but not about an injury or subsequent death. All anyone really knew was that a sailor had been injured in a boiler explosion, and he died later. The boiler explosion occurred during breakaway from a high-line replenishment operation. Most crew members were aware of the incident but not the circumstances, the sailor's name, or what happened to him.

He was injured on March 26, 1969. He died April 29, 1969. His name was James Allen Jensen. This past March marked the 48th anniversary of the accident.

Information for this story came from website searches, the ship's log, email exchanges with Roger Bocek, and email and conversations with Jim Freeman in Albuquerque, New Mexico, during and after the 2017 USS Mullinnix Association Reunion. Jim Freeman was a Boiler Tech on the USS Mullinnix during the WESTPAC deployment. Early in the cruise, Freeman had trained Jensen for about a month on boiler room related equipment and duties. After Freeman became the "Oil King", Jensen received additional training from other qualified Boiler Techs during the months leading up to the accident. The job of an Oil King was to monitor and balance the fuel storage tanks.

The incident occurred during a "high-line" replenishment operation. The purpose of high-lining is to transfer food, ammunition, fuel, and personnel from one ship to the other by high-line. For non-sailors, a high-line operation requires two ships to pull alongside within yards of each other and sync their speeds. A high-line is a strong transfer cable passed from one ship to the other by way of a hand thrown "monkey fist" or a "shot-line".

A monkey fist is a woven weighted ball of line that is manually thrown from one ship to the other in the style of an ancient sling-shot...whirled overhead and released at the proper moment to send an attached line across to the other ship. A shot-line is just that, a line connected to a projectile shot from a shotgun-like launcher from one ship to the other. Either line is attached to a heavier rope, that is in turn attached to the transfer cable. The transfer cable is then pulled across from one ship to the other and connected to a pulley system to keep the line taut while the ships pitch and roll. Once the two ships are connected, cargo is then transferred on pallets, in baskets, or in containers from the supply ship to warship on the transfer cable while both ships are underway.



USS Mullinnix rearming detail - 1969

The term "breakaway" refers to dismantling the high-line after which the warship makes a sharp turn from the supply ship and steams away at 20-25 knots to report to its gun-line station. Jensen was injured in the boiler explosion that occurred during a breakaway.

Freeman said that although a lot of details had faded, he could still remember some of what he had seen. According to Freeman, three 2-inch "down-comer" tubes that ran between the "steam drum" and the "mud drum" ruptured in boiler #3. Jensen was the "Water Tender" on the second level in the Fire Room. His duty as Water Tender was to monitor the critical water levels in the drums. Boilers on the USS Mullinnix operated at temperatures of 1,000 degrees F and steam pressures of 1,200 PSI. Freeman does not know why the tubes ruptured, nor if an investigation was done, nor what conclusions were reached. He said that sediment in the boilers could cause such failures, but he was unaware if that situation had occurred or was the cause in this case.

The current President of the USS Mullinnix Association, Roger Bocek, remembers other details. He was the Petty Officer in charge of the midships high line detail under LT Kerrigan. The explosion came from the aft stack, and black smoke and particles began spewing into the air. The ammo detail had been passing projectiles and powder casings

down a hatch and stacking them on the mess deck below us. At the time of the explosion, smoke (later determined to be steam) appeared to pour out of the hatch from the mess deck below. Bocek gave the order to man the fire hoses, and the ammo detail began saturating the ammunition on the mess deck.

Personal memories of this writer about the explosion are the clamor of the high-line operation, a clear, hot, sunny day, the sounding of the ship's horn on breakaway, and the vibration of the ship as her props powered her away from the supply ship. A loud boom came from behind, and I turned to see what I remember as flames and smoke shoot from the stack. There was instant confusion, and crew members began throwing 5"-54 projectiles overboard. However, since there was no fire, the operations officers immediately stopped them from doing so.

After the tubes ruptured, steam at temperatures of 575 degrees F or higher probably rose to the top of the Fire Room. If Jensen had descended to the lower level and entered the emergency escape trunk via a water tight door and exited on the main deck through a scuttle in a water tight hatch, he may have avoided injury. The escape trunk is an enclosed shaft about 3 feet square. However, Jensen apparently tried to exit the Boiler Room by way of the ladder to an interior hatch on the main deck. That meant Jensen passed through the cloud of steam that accumulated at the top of the enclosed space. He was probably burned over most of his body and even his lungs.

Freeman remembers going to the infirmary and speaking with Jensen while the Corpsman worked on him. He remembers the crimson color of the exposed skin on the visible parts of Jensen's body. He thinks he can remember the Corpsman applying a cream to Jensen's burns. According to Freeman, Jensen told him in the infirmary that when the rupture occurred, he made a mistake and went up the main ladder instead of down and into the emergency escape hatch.

Some of us may remember the helicopter operation that removed Jensen from the ship, but none of us knew for sure what happened to him after that. Jensen died April 29, 1969, from pneumonia and kidney failure brought on by burn complications. Rumors on the ship were that Jensen died of multiple infections at a burn center in Texas. According to Freeman's



Helo Transfer Operation, USS Mullinnix, Vietnam 1969

recollection, after Jensen was taken from the USS Mullinnix by helicopter to the hospital ship USS Repose, he was then flown to the San Antonio Burn Center in Texas.

James Allen Jensen was from Anoka in my home state of Minnesota. He was nineteen years old when he died. His name is on the Vietnam War Memorial Wall – Panel W26 Line 78. Those of us who attend the 2018 USS Mullinnix Association Reunion in the DC area may want to stop by The Wall and pay our respects to a fallen crew member.