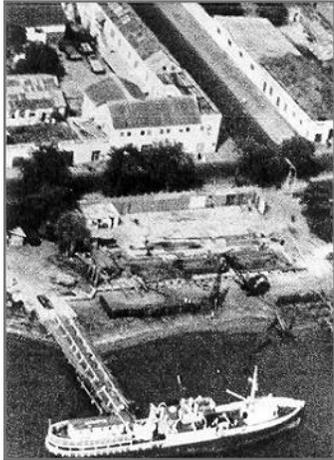


“Toro, Toro, Toro!!!” – Story and graphic by Don Carter

A search of internet websites for information about “troubled communities” of the West African coast shows little of what we experienced a half-century ago. Most, today, are international ports and the industrial hubs of their various nations. Some appeared to have promise even in the 60’s. Others, like Bathurst, Gambia or Abijan of the Ivory Coast, seemed unlikely candidates for much of anything positive. They were little more than waterfront communities with cluttered, ramshackle housing, rampant poverty and people, though content, hanging on to life by the slimmest of an economic thread.



Bathurst, Gambia - 1950's

On 14 January 61, two days after arriving in Bathurst, Gambia aboard USS Graham County, the 3rd Platoon of G-2-6 disembarked the LST and embarked upon USS Gearing. With space being at a premium aboard a destroyer, the squads were split up, assigned and quartered among the ship’s various Departments.

My fire team was assigned bunks in the torpedo section at the ship’s aft, adjacent to the noisy as hell screws. We quickly found that the torpedomen a likeable bunch, made friends and pulled liberty with them. In my case with, to the best of my failing recollections, a Seaman Reeves. And it is here that the story really begins.

The smell of the town was particularly offensive, not unlike that of a city dump found anywhere across America. A dock of sorts jutted out from the shoreline, with room enough only for the Gearing’s liberty launch and a large barge used to initially store and later transit cattle to waiting ships offshore.

This piss ant collection of weathered wood was at the base of a wide, poorly paved gently upward-sloping road that passed a residential community which thereafter emptied into the town square.

Aside from a few natives, the area was deserted. Reeves and I found our way to the only bar, a hovel with a thatched roof and an obviously often mended clothe awning meant to protect the wooden porch and the surface of the small open-air bar. Except for the native bartender, there were only American servicemen present.

After initially sipping whiskey from wooden bowls we shifted to bottles...numerous bottles...of warm Heineken, while our conversation shifted toward women. More precisely, the fruitless pursuit of same under the circumstances. Bored, we chose an early end to our “Cinderella liberty” and, leaving the bar, proceeded back through the outrageous odors and unlighted streets toward the dock area and the launch.

Just about then and barely outside the square, standing in the moonlit shadows of what was likely the one tree in town, we heard the tinkle of a bell, the sound of muffled hooves, the mooing and sight of “Oh’ my Gawd, cattle!” moving our way. Reeves asked if I knew much about cows.

“They give milk.”

He snickered and suggested we “Run them into the fuckin’ ocean!” The die was cast.

Skulking about in the shadows, we saw the silhouetted forms of the herd’s drovers. They numbered few and meandered to the left and then right rear of the animals, keeping them moving ever onward toward the waterfront and the barge tied to the wharf. We would help them do that. Indeed to the wharf...and beyond. “Ooorah!”

As we closed on the herd’s starboard side, Reeves and I mimicked the deep throated rantings of every black-hatted-and-hearted rustler we’d ever seen in those Saturday matinees across America at the time. Having no horses we instead, like Hemingway, ran with the bulls. Glorious we were too...with screams of “Yeehaw!, Yah-Hoooo!, on Donner and Blitzen!”

The tons of steak stirred, grew agitated, sped up and continued past the road’s ending onto the beach. Approaching the shore’s end of the wharf, the column slowly narrowed, stepped upon the wooden decking and



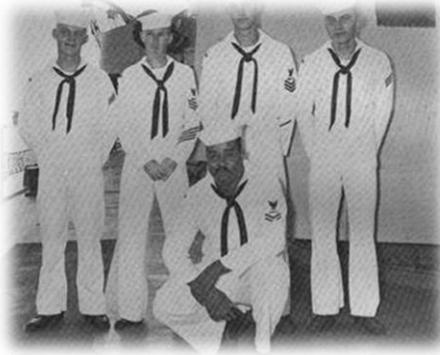
Photo by York County crew - 1960.

rushed toward its destiny. With access to the barge blocked, the herd ran right off the dock into the shallow waters of the bay.

How is it said? "Mission Accomplished!!!" If it had only ended that way.

You see, my cohort and I now had to escape the wrath of the irate drovers and find a way...other than the launch...to return to the Gearing. So, we adjusted, improvised and moved on. Acquiring a dugout, we proceeded to paddle our way from the darkened beach area toward the anchored destroyer ...unsuccessfully. You see, while the cattle were bright enough to make it to shore, one of us [a clueless culprit] stood up, gestured wildly, loudly disparaged the drovers' parentage...and capsized the dugout. Retrieved by the Gearing's launch crew, we were brought to the waiting arms of the Quarterdeck's OD, subsequently and appropriately punished. Oorah?

Days later, Reeves and I each had something of an unofficial hearing: He with his navy equivalent of the Marines' 3rd Platoon commander, Lieutenant Thomson. They had obviously worked out what they believed a fair punishment for our "adolescent and unmilitary-like" behavior and awarded us thirty days of "peel, slice and dice" in the Gearing's portside 40mm gun-tub. A chore that might have created a life-long distain for potatoes...were I not Irish.



SM Reeves (right rear) – USS Gearing

The entire episode was an extraordinary event for a city bred mutt like me, and like so much of Solant Amity I, difficult to forget.

Like 18th century pirates, we drank our rum-like spirits from wooden bowls in a place only three years before I might have only read about, in the dull setting of a classroom, as being part of the world's "Dark Continent."

We played 19th century badlands cowboys and "rustled"...well, more accurately, stampeded...cattle, as we'd not really attempted to steal any.

And, we "ran with the bulls," if not like so many others in 20th century Pamplona, Spain then better yet in Bathurst, Gambia on a seacoast of the Gulf of Guinea.

We did it.

We chosen few of 19 and 20 year olds.

