



LARRY KEIGHLEY PHOTO

Captain's talker Ben Long, skipper Robert H. Close and Lt. Comdr. Howard C. Teaford show how they stood on the Collett's bridge during those forty-eight fateful minutes off Wolmi Island.

# The Trick That Won Seoul

By WILLIAM L. WORDEN

The captain's orders were to anchor his ship within point-blank range of the enemy. He probably would draw murderous fire—but the lives of thousands of marines hung on his being a successful decoy.

## SASEBO, JAPAN.

**T**HE destroyer Collett of the United States Far Eastern Naval Forces is moored to a repair ship in Sasebo Bay at this writing. As she bumps occasionally against the larger ship, the deck resounds to the yammering of an air hammer and is thrown into strange relief by the cascade of light from a cutting torch.

The Collett does not look much changed from the ship which took on fuel and ammunition and fresh vegetables in this same harbor a month ago. Neither the half-dozen holes in her thin steel skin nor the tangle of wires in what once was her fire-control equipment is enough to tell the story of the changes made in her by forty-eight supercharged minutes at

Inchon. Nothing indicates that for just so long she was away out in front while everything else in a war waited. Nothing shows that since last month the Collett has found her muscles.

The story of the change really started on the day the Korean war began—a day which changed almost everything out here on the left flank of the Western world, a perimeter held by the thinnest of defense threads. The Collett was one of those threads. A tired ship as destroyers are counted in wartime, she had successively lain at a mooring in San Diego, operated with half a crew in the naval doldrum days of 1948, participated in war games which impressed nobody, and finally had been assigned to the Far East in the spring of 1950.

## THE KEY TO KOREA

General Douglas MacArthur himself is authority for the fact that the fall of Wolmi Island, made possible by the forgotten destroyer action described in this article, was the key which opened Korea to amphibious invasion and accomplished the sensational American turnabout in the war. The general has allowed it to become known that he personally sailed with the fleet for the purpose of calling off the entire Inchon invasion, if the capture of vital Wolmi, commanding the harbor, had failed. The feat of the USS Collett and five sister destroyers is, therefore, one of the great if overlooked chapters in American naval history. —*The Editors.*

The radar was out of date, the guns were far from new and the duty was dull. The ten officers grew tired of one another's company and the men mourned the complicated events which had lost to the fleet the most famous liberty ports of the Far East. They baked in Subic Bay in the Philippines. They showed the flag in Hong Kong, for political reasons; and in certain out-of-the-way Japanese ports, for the effect on the population of an occupied country. It was an old business, practiced for generations by the sea powers of the world—appearing here, entertaining there, swinging endlessly and tire-somely at anchor somewhere else.

The Collett, which sometimes was one half the entire available destroyer force in these waters, was at Yokosuka and at Okinawa, even briefly off the port of Inchon in not-quite-occupied Korea—where the crew went ashore and spent some of their stored-up pay. There were small skirmishes with shore police in Manila and Sasebo. And a fat fireman who could sing almost broke up a professional entertainment at one base, making the whole ship unpopular with the shore command. But mostly, officers and crew only waited, more or less patiently, for the end of a six-month assignment, when they would be allowed to head for home.

On the day the Korean war started, the Collett was off an invasion beach—but it was a mock invasion, not far from



DD 730, the USS Collett, moored alongside sister vessels at Sasebo, Japan, after hull repairs.

Yokohama. And all the ship did was to steam up and down while gunnery officers thought about what they might be shooting at on the shore if the games were real. The gunners on the Collett were not sure whether they could shoot or not. There never was enough practice ammunition available to find out.

News from Seoul ended the amphibious practice, and the Collett suddenly went to sea—once more confounding the fleet post office, which always had trouble delivering her mail. Within days she was convoying long lines of troop ships across the narrow seas to Korea. And at long last the covers were off the live-ammunition cases—although two destroyers herding more than a dozen loaded troop carriers wondered vaguely just what they would be able to do about any real attack, either from the air or by submarine.

The troops went ashore at Pusan and at other ports as long as we held them. They found themselves engaged in the miserable and bloody retreat which did not seem real, certainly not as if it could be happening to an Army which did not know it had a peer anywhere in the world. But the Collett shed no blood and made no retreat. For her, there was only dullness again. There were other destroyers now. For a time they cruised the eastern coast of Korea, looking for trouble.

Trouble never showed up. A few times the land fighting was close enough so the Collett and other destroyers could throw some shells to gain a few minutes or a precious hour for retreating Americans and South Koreans. On a black night another destroyer sent a raiding crew ashore to blow up a bridge or a tunnel and scuttle back to the ship.

Now and then, troops ashore would call for shells on a road intersection or a line of vehicles. More often the ships simply shelled likely-looking spots behind the North Korean lines, probing for anything which would blow up or any gun which could be harried into a duel. Other ships saw enemy aircraft, but the Collett, none. Others reported

periscopes singly and in young forests along the routes of their patrols. But the officers of the Collett—Comdr. Robert Close and Lt. Comdr. Rue O'Neill, his executive officer, are both submariners who brought underseas ships close to these shores during the last war—only shrugged. Much more often than not, the periscope anybody sees is the dorsal fin of a basking fish or the marker for a floating net.

Like an unhappy cat, the Collett lay offshore from a short stretch of track where a railroad emerged from one tunnel and plunged into another. There she waited, but no train ever came out. Perhaps they slipped by or the rail line was broken somewhere else.

High points in this month of patrolling were few. Before the war broke, one of the minor duties of the destroyers had been to patrol waters between Japan and Korea, on the lookout for shy South Korean fishermen poaching on waters reserved for the Japanese. Now the fish-boat patrol began again, but the shyness was gone. Every fishing boat hurried to raise a South Korean ensign as soon as a destroyer was sighted. Most of them claimed ignorance of any war. Even the Collett's South Korean lieutenant and interpreter inevitably known as Kim, like

most other South Koreans to most Americans—could not shake the fishermen's stories. Time after time, he and his two enlisted men boarded fishing boats only to find what was to them incontrovertible evidence of truth and good intent—women and children huddling in the holds of the boats, having scurried there at the first sight of the destroyer and staying still as mice until routed out by the boarding party.

Only once was there any change. On a boat with drying fish hanging from every available inch of its railings, one small Korean sailor found a man carrying a Communist Party card. Without hesitation, the sailor attacked the fisherman, beating and kicking him—and Lieutenant Kim drew his big pistol. An American officer barely succeeded in reaching the Korean lieutenant's side as the safety clicked on the .45. Even then, the pistol continued to waver for long moments before the safety clicked a second time and the gun went back into the holster. Lieutenant Kim was frustrated and confused. When you find an enemy in Korea, you shoot him. Even normally urbane Commander Close in this instance had trouble explaining exactly why not. He doesn't think he ever did make Kim understand in full.

In all, there was more than a month of frustration for everybody—no enemy ships, no planes, neither subs nor important small boats aiding the communist advance on land. There was only a little bombardment—results generally uncalculated by the retreating Americans ashore—and on otherwise quiet nights, harassing fire. To deliver harassing fire, a ship lies in close to a shore. Inshore, a spotter suggests targets of opportunity—targets which might be worth shooting at, although nobody can be sure in the dark. Every three minutes, the destroyer fires a single shell. For a ship, harassing fire accomplishes no results which can be measured or are worth recording for the official history of the vessel.

For battered Americans fighting on shore, this was far from a phony war. There, tragedy piled on tragedy and today's recruit was buried tomorrow in a shallow grave, his name meaning nothing to the men with whom he fought so briefly. But afloat it was an uneasy half-light, somewhere between all-out war and police action. There was a war, but nobody to fight. Until September thirteenth.

On that day, the destroyer Collett had aboard new officers and men so recently assigned that they could barely find their bunks or battle stations. Some of the gun mounts removed in peacetime to save topside weight were still missing. The radar still did not work at top efficiency. Steward's Mate First Class John C. Williams still had in his locker on a lower deck a fine brown civilian suit purchased from a Hong Kong tailor, a new topcoat and a Japanese lounging jacket, all to be worn on some wonderful day when there was a good liberty town for a man from Louisiana. Ens. Robert Lalicker had every confidence in the fire-control computer at his battle station. Lieutenant Commander O'Neill was looking forward to reading the fifty paperbacked mystery novels lined up in the wardroom bookcase. Captain Close still had aboard the fancy gig he'd been allowed in peacetime, to help make an impression in Oriental ports.

And the Collett was back again at the port of Inchon, where she'd been showing off the flag for policy's sake only a few weeks before. This time there was no need for flags or policy.

This time the Collett had company—five other destroyers in her own division; beyond that, cruisers, destroyers and aircraft carriers of Great Britain, Canada and Australia as well as our own; behind them a whole galaxy of transports and amphibious assault craft—rocket ships, tank carriers and assorted monsters developed during the last year for the one purpose of approaching hostile beaches.

Any amphibious operation is funnel-shaped. Ships are spread all over the sea, carriers far out, heavy-gun ships a little closer, transports and assault craft the closest of all. But always, they all point, in effect, toward a single spot—the beach which will feel the brunt of all their fire and bombs, and over which, in the end, men will have to wade ashore.

Inchon followed the pattern, only more so. The beach was terrible—mud flats, fast-running tides, a sea wall to be climbed. All this has been told and retold. But in addition, there were two other hazards—Wolmi Island, half a mile in diameter, and South Wolmi, much smaller. Wolmi lies directly off the beach selected for the invasion and is connected to it by a causeway. A second causeway, at right angles to the other, connects the two islands. The whole thing—two islands and their causeways—forms a huge L with its top against the shore, its right serving as a boat harbor somewhat protected against the tides and wind. Both is-

lands command the length of the landing beach. The mud flats and shallows interdict landing elsewhere.

On September thirteenth, Wolmi was a rather high and wooded island, green with the bright coloration of these latitudes. South Wolmi was more barren.

A day before the Collett and her sister destroyers—the Mansfield, the De Haven, the Swenson, the Gurke and the Anderson—steamed in toward the islands, the planes had been there. Carrier-based dive bombers had screamed down, raining napalm and high explosives. Fighters had raked the treetops with their guns sputtering. Nothing moved on Wolmi except the green trees.

Perhaps nothing was there. But in the waiting troopship were old marines, officers and men. Maj. Gen. Lemuel Shepherd remembered the green shores of Guam's Agat Bay, where nothing had moved, either—until marines were in the boats and the boats were almost ashore. Then Japanese stuck machine-gun barrels out of caves which had withstood bombardment and bombs—and the men in the boats for deadly minutes had no answer.

And many a grizzled sergeant and reactivated captain saw in the islands off Inchon a strange similarity to things remembered. Tarawa had been visited by planes, too, and had lain smoking and silent, its low mounds lifeless—until the marines were in the boats, help-

less and dying in the boats because those mounds had not been as lifeless as they seemed.

All these people—generals and company officers and long-remembering sergeants—shook their heads. Perhaps nothing was left alive on Wolmi. But somebody had to go in and find out.

In the Navy, men sometimes volunteer, but ships almost never. Nobody asked six destroyers whether they wanted to take a very close look at Wolmi and South Wolmi. What the flashing light said to the Collett was: "Fall in at the end of the column." Steward Williams' new suit and top-coat and jacket swung gently on their hangers as the Collett fell into line.

A destroyer operates well at thirty to forty knots and shoots effectively with its 5-inch guns at five or six thousand yards. Six destroyers in a line moved slowly toward Wolmi, first at twenty knots, then ten and five, and finally, stood still. As they passed barren South Wolmi, spotters located three gun positions. The sharp crash of the 5-inch guns converged almost into a single, continuing sound. On the little treeless island, gun positions dissolved under clouds of dust and broken sandbags, and curiously fluttering white things which might have been the shirttails of the gunners. At two thousand yards, firing was no problem. It would have been almost impossible to miss.

Off Wolmi proper the destroyers slacked speed to zero. And as the tide dragged at their hulls chains rattled. Destroyers fight well in high-speed battle, twisting and turning, firing at full speed while the muzzles of the guns swing in rapid arcs. These destroyers dropped their anchors, and the tide slowly swung them until they were broadside to the beach, their bows headed out. The Collett was at the end of the column. At the guns the crews waited. In the engine room men stood with their hands on the controls and waited. On the bridge Captain Close, for once without his pipe, also waited.

There was a prepared plan. If nothing happened, the destroyers were to look for round spots which might be gun positions, slight indentations in the hills which might be caves. Koreans learned their fighting from the Japanese and still use the methods of that artillery. Three minutes passed and a destroyer battery fired . . . at what, he might not have been sure. Another battery probed tentatively, and dust rose under the trees.

In any war with gunpowder, the most frightening sound is silence. Now there was the creak of the anchor chains, the occasional bark of a ship's guns—and a great and mounting silence. A few more batteries fired. Five minutes had passed with the destroyers at anchor less than a thousand yards off the island, their guns depressed to point-blank range.

Seven minutes passed, and eight. One gun fired from the shore. Possibly no one will ever know exactly why that gunner could stand the silence no longer or why he forgot that his gun had not been placed to fire on ships, but to wait for the marines in their boats. But he did fire, and the tension was broken. Green, excited troops of any nation can be stampeded by a single shot fired from their midst. Americans massacred innocent palm trees all the way across the Pacific because some single youth thought he spotted movement in the fronds above his head.

And on Wolmi one shot was enough. Other gunners could stand waiting no longer. Even riflemen poked the bar-

rels of their weapons over the edges of parapets and out of the concealed mouths of caves. One observer called this a necklace of fire which ran suddenly around the island, big guns and small guns firing at six small and anchored ships, so close to the shore that the flash and sound of the guns—a sharp hiss from the muzzle rather than the more distant whine of artillery—came simultaneously.

On the Collett nobody had time to develop similes for artillery sounds. The Collett was ideally located for the gunners ashore—in the sights of at least a dozen guns. Nothing had moved on Wolmi, but the guns were there, under the trees, right where the marines had been afraid they would be.

The destroyers fired back at targets they could not miss, now that these were so clearly marked by smoke and opening eyes of flame. The Collett used everything she had—the 5-inch rifles, the stuttering pom-poms, the little antiaircraft guns which never had been much good against planes. For a while the firing was directed, the plotting room operating with clocklike precision.

Then there was a sharper, tearing sound. In the plotting room, Ensign Lalicker saw a man take three steps with blood spurting from his leg, but not knowing yet that he had been hurt. Lalicker's quick tourniquet stopped the pulsing flow of blood until a medical corpsman could reach the casualty. But when Lalicker looked back at his com-

plicated fire-control mechanism, he could only spread his hands. Those broken knobs and bits of wire could compute nothing now.

The Collett went on firing anyhow. No control was really necessary when the targets were so close. The flashes of the guns ashore were perfectly round for the most part. This indicated to the gunners of the Collett that they were aimed right in their direction.

Presently there was a small hole in the forward stack—a hole so small it might have been made by a high-powered rifle. There was an irregular, high and beelike sound over the bridge—rifle fire again, along with 3-inch shells which missed. By the wardroom there was another crash, a splintering of metal—and fifty precious unread mystery novels were shredded paper in the wake of a shell which came in through one door and drilled a hole in another. A gunner clutched his shoulder, and another found blood on his arm. The ship shook. From below, a repair party reported that the stewards' quarters was a shambles, full of salt water—and the remains of a brand-new brown suit, a topcoat and a Japanese leisure jacket, none of which would now be worn in Jeanerette, Louisiana, or anywhere else.

In all, half a dozen shells tore through the steel of the Collett. How many of her own ripped apart the pillboxes and cave positions on the island, no one can be sure. They worked too fast to say what good they did.

They do say that eight minutes of waiting can seem like an hour, and the next forty minutes pass in a flash. When the signal to get away came at last, the man with his hands on the engine controls did not hesitate.

"Hell," said one ensign, "we were doing twenty knots before the anchor was off the bottom."

Behind the destroyers, Wolmi was wreathed in smoke and sullen fires burned. Out in the funnel-shaped fleet ahead, gunners and aviators were already looking at the beautiful pictures of Wolmi, every position plainly marked by the muzzle flashes of the guns they were supposed to hide. Now the whole fleet knew where those guns were. As soon as the destroyers were clear, cruisers standing off commenced fire—careful, deadly accurate fire against specific spots on that island. On the carriers, planes warmed up and took off—carrying more napalm, more high explosives to be pin-pointed rather than to be dropped indiscriminately and wastefully on the island.

Wolmi burned all night. All night the methodical shelling of gun positions went on, the killing of the gunners who had not known enough to wait, the relentless artillery pursuit of the troops who had fired those foolish rifles.

The destroyer Collett had a hole in her side, one man seriously wounded, half a dozen others less dangerously. Oil and salt water sloshed on sections of the ship. But a patch could fix the side and even some gummed tape came in handy to mask an above-water hole for the sake of the nightly blackout. Captain Close and his officers stayed in the area long enough to have one more good look at Wolmi—burned out now, trees gone, gun positions horrid scars on its ruined hill. Then they exploded a few black and shiny mines on the way out, and came here for repairs. But they stayed at Inchon long enough to see the marines going ashore, while the whole funnel of the invasion fleet helped with that precision business.

Marines were killed on the beach and as they started inland. But this was no Tarawa. Nobody died from the fire of the carefully concealed guns on Wolmi Island. The Collett, the Mansfield, the Swenson, the De Haven, the Gurke and the Anderson, small ships all, took care of that the day before.

So today, the destroyer Collett, neither new nor pretty, lies in Sasebo harbor and looks unchanged from a month ago. The talk of wardroom and crew still centers on the question of whether—and when—they may get to go home from the war which is not quite a naval war because there is so little for a navy to fight.

This is a convivial crew and in the shore-base clubs at night they sing the old and worn-out Navy ditties—including the one about the captain's gig, which won't go any faster, but makes the old brass hat feel big. They envy the Australian sailors their beer, the French their wine, and the shore sailors and soldiers their close acquaintance with the port belles. But right now they enjoy the songs more than they used to, and envy other people less than they used to.

Because Inchon was no Tarawa, and marines have six "sitting-duck" destroyers to thank for the fact that it wasn't. The Collett will go down in history as one of those. In forty-eight minutes she found muscles she didn't know she had. She can hit something, and take hits, and has.

Sailors can always be proud of a fighting ship, even in the strangest of wars. Especially of a ship which does everything she is not supposed to do, according to the book, and carries out a vitally successful mission in this wrongdoing. Above all, sailormen like to be different.

THE END