Preface: U.S.S. Vincennes and Iran Air Flight 655

Patrolling the restricted waters of the Persian Gulf was a trying activity for most U.S. warships, designed, armed, and trained as they were for far-ranging “blue water” operations. This was particularly true for the officers and crew of the USS Vincennes. One of the first of the Ticonderoga-class “Aegis” cruisers, the Vincennes is a fast, lightly armored ship—a cruiser built on a large destroyer hull—specially optimized for fleet air defense. Although armed with various surface-to-surface guns and a variety of systems for close-in air defense, her real “main battery” consisted of the Standard SM-2 anti-aircraft missiles stored deep in her magazines.

In her normal mission of providing air defense to an aircraft carrier battle group, the Vincennes’s advanced Aegis fire-control system was capable of projecting a visible image of an air battle of many hundred square miles, tracking and distinguishing friendly and potentially hostile aircraft at ranges of tens of miles while engaging a variety of potential targets ranging from high-flying reconnaissance aircraft to high-speed cruise missiles. Bottled up in confined waters, this billion-dollar bundle of sophisticated and advanced technology was not much more able to defend herself from mines and Iranian speedboats than a destroyer, and was almost as vulnerable.

But the U.S. Navy, with its focus on broad-ocean task forces and quasi-strategic “maritime strategies,” had not built a coastal patrol navy, relying on its European allies to perform this function for them in NATO waters. So, on the morning of 3 July 1988, the Vincennes, like many of the U.S. ships on Persian Gulf patrol, was engaged in a sweep of the shallow waters of the Straits of Hormuz, a mission for which traditional Navy skills such as ship-handling and gunfire were more important than the high technology aboard. Also in the vicinity were two U.S. frigates, the USS Elmer Montgomery (FF 1082) and the USS Sides (FFG 14). With the memory of the attack on the USS Stark the previous year still fresh in every sailor’s mind, all aircraft detection and warning systems were up and fully manned.

On the previous day, several armed small boats of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) had positioned themselves at the western approach to the Straits, and were challenging merchant vessels. Late that day, the Montgomery had come close enough to a ship attack in progress to fire warning shots at several of the IRGC boats.
Early in the morning of 3 July the *Montgomery*, at the northern end of the Straits, reported an attack by seven small IRGC boats armed with machine guns and rockets. Shortly thereafter, another wave of thirteen such boats was reported, in three groups, one of which took a position at the *Montgomery*'s port quarter. At 7:42 A.M. local time, the *Vincennes* was dispatched to the area to investigate the situation. At about 9:45 A.M., one of the helicopters sent out to monitor the situation having been fired upon, the *Vincennes* went to General Quarters and took tactical command of the *Montgomery*, and both ships proceeded toward the incident at high speed.

As they approached the position of the boats, several were observed to turn toward the U.S. ships and close in a threatening manner. Taking this as *prima facie* evidence of hostile intent, Middle East Joint Task Force Command gave permission to engage, and the *Vincennes* opened fire at 10:13 A.M., starting a surface melee that was to continue throughout the incident. The IRGC boats, fully aware of the advantage conferred by their small size and maneuverability, did not flee, but turned to engage, hoping thereby to inflict some damage on the far more expensive and valuable U.S. ships.

At 10:16, the *Vincennes* opened fire with her 5" main guns. Four minutes later, a round that would not fire fouled the fore 5" mount, forcing the Tactical Operations Officer (TAO) to maneuver the ship radically—using 30 degrees of rudder at a ship's speed of 30 knots—to bring the aft 5" mount to bear on the most threatening of the small boats. This drastic, high-speed maneuver caused the ship to heel dramatically, sending loose equipment flying throughout the ship. The Combat Information Center (CIC), which contains not only the Aegis displays but all other displays and consoles from which the ship is fought, was not spared; books, publications, and loose equipment went flying off desks, and many of those on duty had to grab for the nearest support to avoid following them to the deck. The surface engagement ended at 10:33, the *Vincennes* having expended seventy-two rounds of 5" ammunition and the *Montgomery* forty-seven. The IRGC boats were then in retreat, one of them having been sunk by U.S. gunfire.

That same morning, while the *Vincennes* and *Montgomery* were hightailing it toward the small boats north and west of the Straits of Hormuz, the captain and crew of Iran Air flight 655 were at Bandar Abbas airfield in southern Iran, preparing for the routine 150-mile flight over the Gulf to Abu Dhabi. It was one of the many ironies of the "half-war" in the Gulf that such commerce proceeded almost routinely, in, around, and through what amounted to open combat zones. Even the status of Bandar Abbas itself was ambiguous, as the newly arrived flight of Iranian F-14 fighters so clearly demonstrated.

Scheduled departure time was 9:59 A.M. local time, with the usual mixed load of business men and relatives making the quick hop to the comparative peace and luxury of the eastern Gulf. The flight was assigned routinely to commercial air corridor Amber 59, a twenty-mile-wide lane on a direct line to Dhubai airport. Owing to the short distance, the flight pattern would be more or less of a trajectory—climbing out to an altitude of 14,000 feet, cruising for a short time, then beginning a gradual descent into Dhubai.

After taking off from runway 21, Iran Air Flight 655 was directed by the Bandar