



China Then and Now **By William Edwards, August 2022**

On Thursday, November 25, 1982 – almost 40 years ago - I landed in China for the first time in the city of Canton. In those days, Guangzhou was called Canton and Beijing was known as Peking. This is a true story of how in the midst of a major sea disaster the U.S. and Chinese navies worked very close together to the benefit of both countries and mankind.

First a little background. My first career was as an oil & gas explorationist working for Atlantic Richfield (ARCO) in three countries in Asia plus in Alaska and the continental USA. ARCO was the first USA oil & gas company granted a license to explore for oil & gas offshore China after the country opened to foreign investment in the late 1970s. Our area to explore was south of Hainan Island off the southwest coast of mainland China. Our shore operations base was next to Zhanjiang, one of the largest Chinese naval bases. We were close to the Vietnam border and about 300 miles over land southwest of Guangzhou and 260 miles by air from Hong Kong.

ARCO drilled its first offshore well in early 1983 and on August 4, 1983 discovered a gas major condensate field called Ying Ge Hai. We drilled in 300 feet of water using a state of the art offshore drill ship, the Glomar 'Java Sea', which carried a crew of 81 Foreign and Chinese sailors and engineers. Early on the morning of November 1, 1983 the Glomar 'Java Sea' sunk in 300 feet of water during a massive storm with the loss of all crew.

When communication was lost with the drill ship, ARCO immediately notified both the Chinese navy and the USA navy based in the Philippines and in Okinawa, Japan. Within hours the USA navy sent Lockheed P-3 Orion four-engine maritime surveillance aircraft to fly over the site from their base 840 miles southeast in the Philippines. The Chinese navy then moved many ships of all types to the site to search for survivors. Chinese military helicopters from the south coast of Hainan Island and those on loan to ARCO for rig support flew 100s of sorties in very bad weather looking for life rafts, debris and possible survivors. ARCO put its own language interpreters on Chinese navy vessels to communicate directly by VFR radio with the USA Navy P-3s flying 10-15 hour sorties from their base near Manila.

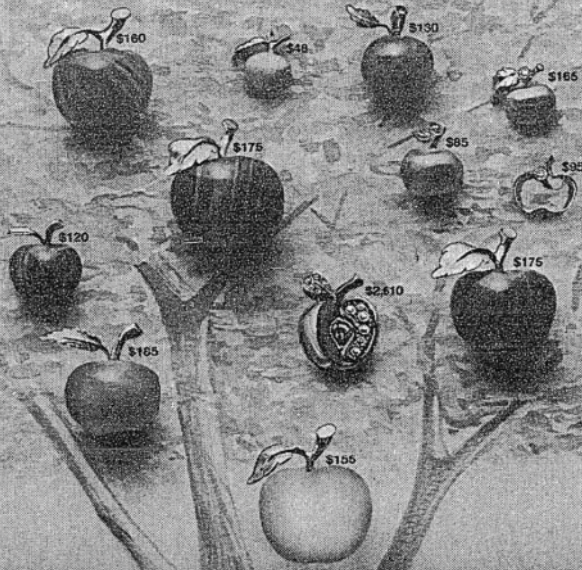


This massive joint effort went on for almost 4 weeks but no survivors were found. I was at the ARCO Zhanjiang base camp for the entire time assisting in communications. I remember listening to the USA interpreters on the Chinese Navy ships talking to the USA P-3s and being amazed at how the Chinese navy ships followed the P-3 instructions to look at sightings of debris in hopes there were survivors.

This truly unique joint effort was to try to save some of the 42 Americans, 34 Chinese and 4 Brits and Australians on the Glomar 'Java Sea', no matter who they were or where they were from. Subsequently, the US Coast Guard formally congratulated the Chinese navy for a joint effort far beyond the call of duty. 40 years of doing business in China later, I remain honored to have been a very small part of the USA and Chinese navies working very close together for a common humanitarian goal.

Attached: New York Times article dated November 2, 1983

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U.S. OIL SHIP SANK IN SOUTH CHINA SEA

Chinese Identify the Wreckage — Search for 81 on Board Hampered by Weather

BEKING, Nov. 1 (UPI) — The Glomar Java Sea, a United States oil-drilling ship with 81 people aboard, sank in the stormy South China Sea and its wreckage has been identified by Chinese searchers, officials said today.

The week-old search for survivors, still hampered by bad weather, continued without result. The 81 people aboard included 42 Americans, 34 Chinese, 4 Britons and an Australian. Two of the Americans were identified by their families as John Lawrence, 35 years old, of Odessa, Tex., and Bernard Patrick Cates, 39, of Midland, Tex.

"We found nothing today," said a spokesman for the Western Pacific Search and Rescue Center reached in Okinawa. "It's still raining and visibility is poor. For now we will continue the search but I don't know for how long."

The Glomar Java Sea, owned by Global Marine Inc. of Houston and on lease to the Atlantic Richfield Company of Los Angeles, sank off the south China coast in a tropical storm.

Chinese search vessels said they had located the wreckage last Friday under 300 feet of water but were unable to identify it at first.

Oil company officials here said another vessel with divers was heading toward the drill site south of China's Hainan Island and about 40 miles from Vietnamese waters.

The divers' first task will be to determine how many of the 81 aboard went down with the ship.

Built to ride out hurricanes, the drill ship had already weathered several fiercer storms since it arrived in the South China Sea last January.

Taking part in the search for survivors were more than a dozen Chinese ships, three Vietnamese ships and three United States Navy search planes from Okinawa.

The Vietnamese sent out vessels to search their own waters after refusing to allow Chinese ships to enter them, diplomatic sources said.

Ship Located by Special Sonar

HOUSTON, Nov. 1 (UPI) — The wreckage of the ship was identified by Chinese ships using special sonar, a spokesman for the ship's owners, Global Marine Inc. of Houston, said today.

The vice president of Global, Dick Vermeer, said, "They have definitely confirmed the fact that our drill ship, the Glomar Java Sea, has been sunk at the drill site."

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