

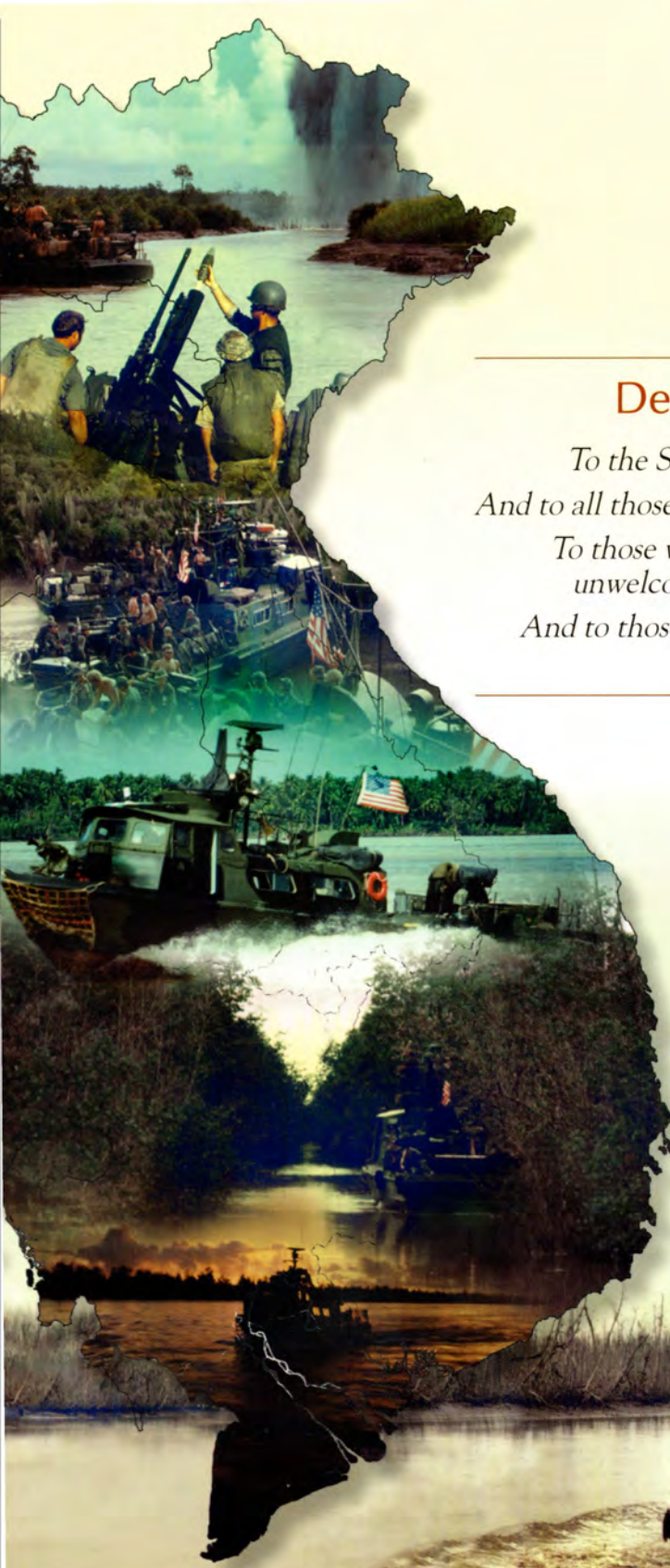
Restoration of a Legacy

Swift Boats and Their Sailors

Edited by Neva Sullaway
and Guy Gugliotta



Maritime Museum of San Diego



Dedication:

*To the Swift Boat Sailors,
And to all those who served in Vietnam,
To those who returned to an
unwelcoming homeland,
And to those who did not return.*



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Swift Boats and Their Sailors

A Special Publication of

MAINS'L HAUL

A Journal of Pacific Maritime History

Vol. 50: 1 & 2 Winter/Spring 2014



Maritime Museum of San Diego

1492 North Harbor Drive

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from a variety of perspectives that need a unifying interpretation. Seldom, however, is any reflection as challenging as this one – to distill from a collection of vantage points a common theme. For even after the passage of decades and the expenditure of millions of words in books, articles, speeches, and memorials; the Vietnam War still defies our attempts to render it understandable. In the end, understanding may come to reside in the things we can touch, feel, and sense as the archetypal embodiments of human experience. Of all the objects humans have ever created, ships are possibly the most adept in such a role, and arguably, the smaller the ship the more personal the experience conveyed by it.

Readers expecting this book to answer every question they have about Swift Boats and their operational history may well be disappointed. Instead, they will find an anthology of personal stories, of what it was like to go to war in one of the smallest combatant vessels in naval history. The stories are linked by the common experience of service in Swift Boats in the coastal waters and rivers of Vietnam, but with that obvious attribute, there are in addition five other elements that these stories share:

These accounts may well mark the end of an age in human experience. We are accustomed to classifying large scale human endeavor by material culture: the Stone Age, the Bronze Age, the Iron Age, the Age of Sail, the Gunpowder Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, etc. In keeping with our own subject, it should be mentioned that with the invention of the naval ram, after 1200 B.C. ships, for the first time, became more than conveyances of people, goods and military power; they became weapons. From that point forward, a warship's identity subsumed the personalities of all who comprised her crew and bound them into a cohesive unit by the technical requirements of deadly purpose and by common fate to a degree unknown, with groups of people who possess the potential to disburse, including units of soldiers. As always ships and those who sail in them face the terrible power of the sea, but warships also contend for survival with others of their own kind, as well as with shore-bound adversaries. For more than three thousand years, such conflicts took the form of kinetic violence unleashed on the enemy in close and personal proximity – Salamis, Trafalgar and Jutland were only large scale exclamation marks in a story of oceanic battles where ships vied with one another for survival within line-of-sight contact, until the Vietnam era, and then...it stopped. People still go to sea in warships, face the perils of the sea, and wage naval war in the depths, on the surface, and in the air over the oceans, but they do so with a plethora of technological intermediaries that abstract human senses and remove the close and immediate presence of human adversaries, rendering them into digitized representations. Nelson's simple assertion that no captain could do very wrong if he placed his ship alongside the enemy was just as relevant to Swift Boats as it was to his ships-of-the-line, but it's no longer true and may never be true again.

The experience of war is immediate. In the never-ending search for cause, historians tend to take long and analytical views in their assessments of war. They tend to focus on relative industrial capacity, technological and geographical advantages, logistics, long campaigns, great decisive battles, attrition, politics, and economic organization. Yet, regardless of how expansive the campaign or gigantic the battle, the actual experience of those who participate in such things is a myopic mix of tedium, confusion, and terror restricted to the immediate range of perception. This is, of course, a common observation applicable to all combat, but within the introverted and self-contained world of a tiny ship in battle the experience is, by most accounts, intensified. Combat in a miniscule, fast, heavily armed, yet unarmored Swift Boat, usually against prepared adversaries waiting in ambush was an intense and personal experience indeed.

In the midst of war's inevitable brutality, there is also humanity. This is a feature of so many of these stories submitted by the authors, who were unaware of each other's accounts, but shared the same humanity. Whether it's concern for shipmates, for the people of a distant

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Courtesy of Maggie Walton, MMSD

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P24 (PCF 816) arrives at MMSD - September 18, 2012

Courtesy of Neva Sullaway, MMSD

Foreword



By Ray Ashley, Ph.D., President and CEO of the Maritime Museum of San Diego

As many readers of *Mains'l Haul* will surmise, the Foreword is the last piece to be written. This is because, as a publication with many contributors, the central theme is illuminated from a variety of perspectives that need a unifying interpretation. Seldom, however, is any reflection as challenging as this one – to distill from a collection of vantage points a common theme. For even after the passage of decades and the expenditure of millions of words in books, articles, speeches, and memorials; the Vietnam War still defies our attempts to render it understandable. In the end, understanding may come to reside in the things we can touch, feel, and sense as the archetypal embodiments of human experience. Of all the objects humans have ever created, ships are possibly the most adept in such a role, and arguably, the smaller the ship the more personal the experience conveyed by it.

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In the midst of war's inevitable brutality, there is also humanity. This is a feature of so many of these stories submitted by the authors, who were unaware of each other's accounts, but shared the same humanity. Whether it's concern for shipmates, for the people of a distant

Editors' Note:

The narratives presented in this book are anecdotal first-person accounts and not necessarily based on naval records or archival materials. The peer-reviewers differed on their opinions of the events and the sailors portrayed in some of the stories.

land – an unfamiliar culture on whose behalf the war was presumably being waged, for unknown comrades and allies who required close support regardless of the risk undertaken, or years later, for the offspring of deceased veterans seeking closure on behalf of their loved ones, the message is that, in the end, humanity triumphs over violence, over loss, even over death itself. Perhaps there was something about a Swift Boat and its combination of power and vulnerability that helped translate the precarious nature of human existence into the projection of sentiment, giving it voice and action that still resonates decades later.

In some respects, the veterans who served in Vietnam are still there. More than in any of America's other conflicts, there was an ambiguity of purpose. Vietnam played a role in a much larger and complex struggle that spanned generations: America was conflicted about the wisdom of sending its own young people to war in a remote and inscrutable land; combatants rotated in and out of war zones independent of the war's progress or unit cohesion; the nation had no mechanism for managing transition between the war zone and "the Real World". All these factors combined to deny veterans of this conflict the sense of closure afforded veterans of other wars. As a nation we have come to recognize this and in years since have tried to make up for it in countless ways: memorials, commemorations, and most importantly, making an effort not to repeat the mistake with the veterans of subsequent wars. Despite these attempts, there still remains a bitter legacy in collective memory of warriors returning home unwelcomed. This is one reason why we struggled so hard to obtain PCF 816 and restore her to service – by bringing her home, perhaps she can, in turn, help in the process of healing old wounds. Every Vietnam veteran who embarks on PCF 816 will be welcomed home.

Living memory is not forever. These stories are an attempt to distill experiences onto the printed page regardless of how outlandish and devastating, and their context is formed equally of past events and the reflection of subsequent years. But, however attenuated the impact of life remembered, there will come a time when the veterans reunions will cease for lack of attendees and ultimately, there will be no more veterans of that conflict left for PCF 816 to welcome home. At that point in the story of great events historians usually take full ownership, observing that the only remaining echoes of distant battlefields reside in silent memorials, words on a page, faded photographs, and place names on a map. They would say, in their relentless search for cause, that the experiences related herein are only that. The Swift Boat sailors and the thousands like them will have passed beyond all living memory, leaving neither independent impressions nor historical significance.

But in this instance they might be wrong. Perhaps significance is not entirely the province of dissertations and textbooks. Perhaps some kernel of understanding the course of great events can after all reside in the smallest and most unassuming of things. If so, then living memory might have a chance for a kind of immortality unachievable in any other way, so long as an echo of it can still be heard in the roar of 12V71 engines in the distance – hallmark of the last Swift Boat still on patrol. 



Patrol Craft Fast

Swift Boats

By John W. Yeoman

Illustrations and Photos Courtesy of the Author



Lt. (jg) John W. Yeoman skippered PCF 37 and PCF 692 in Vietnam. He also served as tactical commander of combined PCF, SEAL and helicopter attacks in the canals of the Mekong Delta. After leaving the Navy, he earned an MBA from the University of Chicago. He then worked as an investment banker in New York, as a skipper of megayachts and tugboats in San Francisco, and then moved to Maui, and into a position as a Financial Advisor for Morgan Stanley Wealth Management. In 2012, John created a booklet about PCF 816 to solicit donations for its restoration.

The U.S. Navy officially called them Patrol Craft Fast – PCFs for short, but the men who served on them during the Vietnam War have always known them as Swift Boats. The Navy first used them on coastal patrol as a part of Operation Market Time to interdict seaborne supplies on their way to the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army in South Vietnam. Later, the boats moved into the rivers and canals of the Mekong Delta and the Ca Mau peninsula to conduct special operations: gunfire support, troop insertion and evacuation, and raids into enemy territory. To the U.S. Navy, Swift Boats were weapons of war. For the officers who commanded them, Swift Boats were a chance at independent duty at a young age – most men were under twenty-five years old. For the sailors who crewed them, Swift Boats were an opportunity to abandon big-ship confusion and bureaucracy for a small combatant, where every man counted and where every man could trust his shipmates and befriend them like family.

Throughout the war, from 1965 to 1970 when the last U.S. boats were turned over to South Vietnamese counterparts, the Navy made special efforts to train crews together and keep them together in-country. Each boat had an Officer-in-Charge (“O-in-C”), usually a Lt. (junior grade) and five crewmen, generally 2nd- or 3rd-class petty officers, with an occasional seaman striker. Usually, but not always, the crew included a boatswain’s mate, a gunner’s mate, a quartermaster, an engineman and a radarman.

On patrol, the O-in-C rode in the pilothouse next to the helmsman, with the twin .50 caliber machine gunner standing on a raised platform in the turret above them. A tail gunner was in charge of the over-and-under fantail mount that featured another .50 caliber machine gun perched atop an 81-millimeter mortar. The two other crewmen, armed with M-60 machine guns, generally flanked the after gunner port and starboard. In many cases, however, one of the side gunners was moved to a prone position on the bow.

From 1965 to 1969, as a participant in Operation Market Time, Coastal Squadron One deployed the Swifts to five different Divisions: in Da Nang, Qui Nhon, Cam Ranh Bay, Cat Lo and An Thoi. In 1969, the boats began raiding the rivers and canals in special operations known collectively as Sea Lords, and by the next year the boats were conducting all their patrols inshore and had a permanent presence at SeaFloat, a base made of pontoons anchored in the Cua Lon estuary that cut through the jungle and swamp at Vietnam’s southernmost extremity, the Ca Mau peninsula. Starting at Qui Nhon in 1969, the squadron began turning over each of the divisions to Vietnamese crews.



SeaFloat

These events, part of a country-wide process known as Vietnamization, ended at Cat Lo in December, 1970, when the last American Swift Boats were given to the South Vietnamese Navy. From 1965 through 1970, some 3,600 Americans served aboard Swift Boats or supported them – 600 officers and 3,000 sailors. Four hundred were wounded in action and fifty men died.

The Swift Boat story began February 1, 1965, when the Naval Advisory Group, Military Assistance Command Vietnam, published a staff study entitled: “Naval Craft Requirements in a Counter Insurgency Environment.” The Navy wanted a small, counter-insurgency watercraft to perform “many missions” as yet unspecified. The boat needed to be “reliable and sturdy,” with a non-wooden hull, a patrol range between 400 and 500 miles and with a top speed between 20 and 25 knots. It needed short-range radar, radio equipment that could communicate with the Army and Air Force as well as the Navy, a fathometer, a searchlight and armament “for limited offense.” It would have space for berthing, but not for eating.

The Navy had nothing that fit the requirements, but a civilian staffer at the Navy Bureau of Ships recalled that Sewart Seacraft, a Gulf Coast shipyard in Berwick, Louisiana, made aluminum boats about fifty-feet long that it sold to local companies that needed them to service offshore oil rigs. The Navy asked Sewart and other bidders for a design.

Sewart started with its own basic hull and superstructure, but added several modifications. A gun tub was to be mounted atop the pilothouse for twin .50 caliber machine guns. A fantail tripod was needed to mount a swivel-based piggy-back machine gun/mortar combination. A metal box on the fantail would hold mortar rounds.

Below decks the Navy wanted bunks for a six-man crew, storage compartments, a refrigerator, freezer, sink and a small galley. The Navy required more than fifty changes to Sewart’s commercial design, but the firm produced drawings within a week, and two weeks later won the contract. The entire process took little more than a month. The first four boats were delivered to the Navy within forty days. The idea was that Swift Boats would be able to outfight anything they could not outrun.

Sewart numbered the boats in sequence, and sent PCFs 1 and 2 by railroad to the Navy's Amphibious Base in Coronado, California, for shakedown in late August 1965. The two boats were permanently assigned to Coronado as training boats for PCF crews and maintenance personnel getting ready for deployment to Vietnam. The first crews arrived in Coronado in mid-September, 1965, and the first boats were in-country before the end of the year.

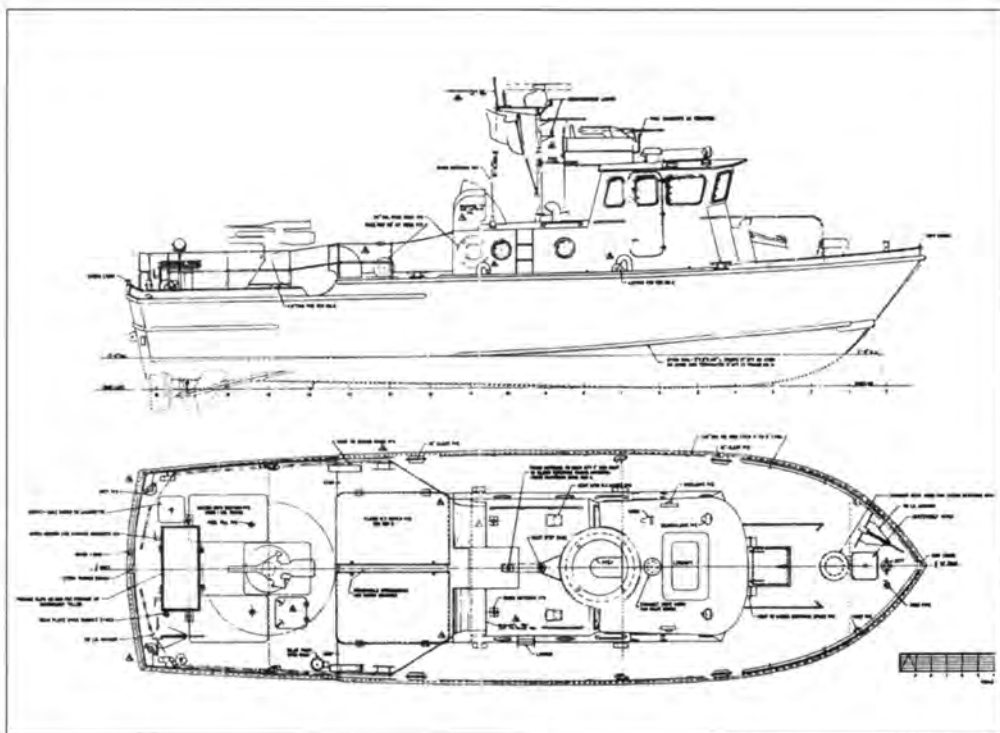
The Swift Boats' primary mission was to participate in Operation Market Time – stopping infiltration of arms, munitions and supplies coming by sea to insurgents in South Vietnam. Swift Boats were assigned the innermost of three coastal “barrier” patrols in the South China Sea and the Gulf of Thailand. Destroyers and destroyer escorts comprised the outermost barrier and oceangoing minesweepers made up the middle barrier.

In October 1968, the Swifts began expanding their inshore activities with a series of intelligence probes and raids up the rivers of the Ca Mau peninsula, and by 1970 all the American boats were doing inshore patrols. In 1968 the Navy began a program to train Vietnamese Swift Boat crews, who first inherited the Operation Market Time patrols and then moved into the rivers by the end of Vietnamization.

In all, between 1965 and 1970, Sewart built 171 Swift Boats in three different designs designated Mark I, Mark II and Mark III. Each one cost approximately \$175,000 in 1965 dollars. PCF 816, which came to the Maritime Museum of San Diego in 2012, was a Mark II. It was in use at the beginning of 1968 as a training boat in Coronado, before it was sent to the Maltese Navy in 1971. 



This is the only known photo of PCF 816, taken between 1968 and 1970, at Naval Base Coronado. The refurbished PCF 816 currently plies the waters of San Diego Bay, under the auspices of the Maritime Museum of San Diego. Its new mission is to educate visitors on the history it represents, both in Vietnam and in service to the Republic of Malta, and to provide a mobile educational platform, from which to experience San Diego's Naval History.



Mark II Swift Boat Specifications

Length: 51 feet 3.75 inches

Beam: 13 feet 7 inches

Full load draft: 6 feet 9 inches

Construction: hull/superstructure 1/4 inch aluminum alloy construction. Bow height was raised by one foot and the pilothouse was moved aft by approximately three feet, from the Mark I construction plans design.

Weight: 34,934 lbs. empty.
45,093.8 lbs. with full war load of fuel and ammunition.

Displacement: 43,035 lbs.

Engines: Two General Motors 12V71"N" Detroit marine diesels; port model #7122-3000, starboard model #7122-7000, each equipped with two 4-71 blowers and rated at 480 horsepower with Twin Disc 1.5:1 reduction gears, and two counter-rotating 28 inch bronze screws.

Fuel: 828 gallons, diesel or JP-5 in three fuel tanks.

Construction: The PCF was divided into seven compartments: forepeak, crew quarters, pilothouse, deckhouse, stowage compartment, engine room and lazarette.

FOREPEAK

The forepeak was used as a storage area and access to this compartment was through the forepeak hatch located just forward of the pilothouse and in the main deck.

CREW QUARTERS

The crew quarters contained berthing for six personnel, storage area for personal equipment and a head. Access to the crew quarters was through either the escape hatch located on the forward main deck or a ladder down from the deckhouse.

PILOTHOUSE

The pilothouse was equipped with the necessary controls and indicators to operate the propulsion engines, diesel generator, two .50 caliber machine guns (located in the gun tub mounted in the aft center overhead), and electrical systems to navigate the boat.

DECKHOUSE

The deckhouse contained a galley area with griddle, refrigerator and freezer, sink; radio/radar area with three radios; small arms locker; storage cabinets and two CO2 fire extinguishers. Access to the deckhouse was through the main deck hatch on the aft end of the deckhouse, a ladder down from the pilothouse or the ladder up from the crew quarters.

STOWAGE COMPARTMENT

Below the deck in the deck house, the stowage compartment contained ammunition storage, the forward fuel tank and the two engine control units. The remaining space was utilized for storage. Access to the compartment was through the bilge hatch located in the deckhouse, under the ladder going up to the pilothouse. Three access hatches were provided in the deckhouse, one for the forward fuel tank and two for the ammunition stowage.

ENGINE ROOM

The engine room housed the two propulsion engines, diesel generator, two 24 volt battery sets, storage access for service manuals and tools, exhaust systems for the engines and generator, a five-gallon lube oil can, piping for the bilge system, engine and generator seawater cooling systems, fuel system, 24v DC source of power switch and the AC source of power switch. Access to the engine room was through two hinged hatches on the main deck aft of the deckhouse.

LAZARETTE

The lazarette housed the two aft fuel tanks, fresh water tank, steering gear, rudder tillers and two five-gallon lube oil cans. Access to the lazarette was through an access hatch located on the aft port corner of the aft deck. Two soft-patch hatches, on the aft deck, were provided for access to the fuel tanks.



11

Rescue on the Mekong

by Senyint Chim

In May of 2011, I had the honor of addressing Swift Boat veterans of the Vietnam War in San Antonio, Texas, where I formally thanked the sailors who saved my life more than forty years ago. Two years later, I spoke to them again at their Swift Boat reunion in San Diego, relating the story of how I came from Cambodia to the United States.

During the first years of the war in Vietnam, Cambodia was officially neutral, favoring neither side. However, the Communist Vietnamese used my country as a haven to transport men and matériel as they pursued their revolution in South Vietnam. This was silently approved by the government in Phnom Penh and our Chief of State, Prince Norodom Sihanouk. On March 18, 1970, Prince Sihanouk was forced out of office and a pro-U.S. government, under Lon Nol, took over.



Senyint Chim eventually settled in San Diego, California, where he married and started a family. He became a middle school math teacher for San Diego Unified School District.

Shortly afterward, the Communists, including the North Vietnamese Army, South Vietnamese Viet Cong and Khmer Communists, took over the area around my village, Trapeang Svayplous, on the Mekong River. I was living in Phnom Penh at the time, where I was a student at the only school teaching English as a second language. When I heard about the takeover of my village, I returned home to try and persuade my mother and siblings to get away. Most chose to flee, but my mother refused to abandon our rice mill, which was the family's main source of income. I stayed behind to help her and my youngest brother.

As we went about our daily activities, I helped run the mill, all the while keeping my eyes and ears open to see how the Vietnamese Communists ran the village. My mother went off to visit different officials of the Angka Leu, the Khmer Communist high command. She told me I was not to charge those people who brought rice to our mill in big ox carts because this rice was going to feed the troops. I reluctantly complied, and this kept the Communists from interfering with our operation.

Meanwhile, most of the villagers around my age were being pressed into joining the revolutionaries. I avoided recruitment by offering my English translation skills to the North Vietnamese officer in charge of the village. Shortly after their arrival, the Communists set up a command post on the east bank of the Mekong River not far from my house. I watched them attack Cambodian Navy patrol boats, one of which they sank. Later, I went to the same North Vietnamese major and requested permission to go to Phnom Penh, pretending I wanted to visit my ailing sister. The major approved, but he reminded me that I must return in one week as I still had my mother and brother there. I understood this to mean that if I failed to come back on time my family would be in danger. The major gave me a note granting safe passage through Communist-held territory.

On April 21, 1970, I made my way to Phnom Penh, passing through both government and rebel security check points. As soon as I arrived in the city, I went to see the commanding officer of U.S. Naval Intelligence and described to him in detail the communist presence in my village.



Courtesy of the Author

In 1970, Senyint Chim was a twenty-year-old Cambodian student. As the Communists advanced, taking over the village where his family lived, Senyint was forced to flee for his life.

Senyint Chim's story, though out of chronological order, introduces the following Swift Boat stories; it exemplifies the plight of those who sought freedom and those who sought to defend that freedom.

I returned home one week later, as I had promised the Vietnamese major. That night, the Communists took control of nearby Neak Loeng. Four days later, government forces launched a retaliatory attack, targeting the rebel base in my village. Like the other villagers, I was forced to find safety in a bomb shelter. The Communist command post near my home was destroyed and my house was hit as well.

It soon became clear that an informant had betrayed me to the rebel commander. Some of the villagers warned me, and I knew my life was in danger. I felt confident they would not try to capture me in public as my family was respected in the village. However, this would not stop them from trying to take me at night.

I was frightened but kept my wits about me. On May 8, I took a chalkboard and wrote out an SOS message in English: I AM CAMBODIAN. I HAVE SOMETHING FOR YOU. I WANT TO GO WITH YOU. I set the board on the roof of my house in the hope that it would be spotted by one of the American helicopters flying back and forth. For the next two days I stayed in open places where no one could grab me and take me away. At night I slept in the homes of two Vietnamese friends where I felt I would not be found.

By May 10, I was still anxious. That evening I tried to behave as though nothing was wrong as I went out to the river to bathe. A neighbor girl on her bike stopped and told me I should leave, saying it might be my last night. She stealthily pointed out that I was being watched by armed men, and urged me to "go away, fly away!"

After thanking her, I went into my bomb shelter where I had set up an altar with my father's ashes. There I burned three incense sticks, lit a candle, and prayed to my father to help me escape this crisis. Then I went back to my house and pulled down the SOS sign. As I carried it toward the river, I saw a beautiful sight: two U.S. Navy Swift Boats with American flags waving! A Vietnamese neighbor boy named Nghia came and asked what I was doing. He noticed the writing, but fortunately he could not read English.

A South Vietnamese sailor on one of the two boats was scanning the village with binoculars. Suddenly, he pointed in my direction. I raised my sign and waved it in the air. He lowered his binoculars, wiped his eyes, then looked at me again. He went away and soon returned with a tall white man, whom I later identified as Clayton Howze, the Officer-in-Charge of PCF 56. The man went on the radio and both boats were placed on alert, the crews taking their positions and donning helmets and flak jackets. They did not know if it was a trap. Using the boat's loudspeaker, the officer told me to swim over to the boat.

Accepting the invitation, I removed my student ID from my wallet and quickly undressed. I wrapped a neck scarf around me as a loincloth, as if I were going for a swim, then handed my clothes to Nghia and asked him to give them to my mother. As I was about to enter the river, Nghia said that someone wanted to talk to me.



I ignored him and began to swim toward the patrol boat with my ID in my mouth. Rebel soldiers were watching from the bamboo groves on the shore, but they did not dare shoot at me for fear of starting a firefight with the Swift Boats, whose 50-caliber machine guns were trained on the shore. I was a poor swimmer and when I got about ten meters from the boat my energy flagged and I called out for help. One American sailor dove in to assist me while another went in after my ID card, which had fallen out of my mouth when I yelled.

Once on board, I stood shivering and asked for a shirt and pants.

The sailors gave me a light blue shirt and a pair of pants too big for me. Talking quickly, I told the crew that I was in danger and the Viet Cong wanted to capture me. I added that I had information I wished to share with their commander. Not long afterward the crew took me to see Lt. Giles Whitcomb, a Naval Intelligence Liaison Officer.

The lieutenant spoke to me in both English and French. After reviewing the Communist activities in my village, Lt. Whitcomb introduced me to his superior, Lieutenant Commander Jack A. Herriott, the Officer-in-Charge of the Fourth Riverine Intelligence in Vietnam.

And so began my involvement as an operative for the American intelligence services. I provided information on the local political and military situation in Cambodia, and, after one year, I joined the Cambodian Navy, eventually realizing my dream of coming to the United States through the Navy Exchange Program. I have lived here ever since, earning Bachelor's and Master's degrees, finding work in education and raising a family. For my survival and better life, I am truly grateful to the American sailors aboard PCF 56 who came to my rescue.



Courtesy of the Author

After Senyint Chim's rescue, he stands (second lower left) with LCDR Jack A. Herriott (far left), with Lt. Giles Whitcomb (right) looking on. Others pictured are (back row, left to right): "Mossey", Lt. William Powell, John D. Leisenring, Chau Le, "Fuzzy", Bill Reese, LCDR Rick Lippincott (kneeling), and James Riemer. Not pictured - Chim's rescuers who returned to duty.



In 2011, Senyint Chim was reunited with those who had saved his life. Among the rescuers, George Nelson, Quartermaster Second Class, and Lt. (jg) Clayton Howze, skipper of PCF 56 (fifth boat from the left), were at the emotional SBSA Reunion to greet Senyint Chim, after forty years.

Courtesy of H. Clayton Howze

Getting There is Hard... Getting Out is Better

by Dick Olsen

All Photos Courtesy of the Author

I joined the Swift Boats in the fall of 1965. They were brand-new in Vietnam and I was a brand-new Officer-in-Charge of a brand-new crew training at the Amphibious Base in Coronado, California. Every week, as training progressed, the staff gathered us all in a big room so we could find out where we were going.

Early on I didn't pay attention. Crews had numbers, and ours was 68. When I started, they were still in the 40s. But things moved along, and we moved up, until one day we learned we were destined for Cat Lo, the only Swift Boat base that included inland patrols in the rivers of the Mekong Delta. Boats there were getting ambushed and having firefights. We were nervous.

We flew commercial from San Diego to San Francisco, rented a car and spent the day sightseeing, ending up driving across the Golden Gate Bridge and looking back at places we might never see again. Then we took a bus to Travis Air Force Base for our flight. We left in the evening, en route, we thought, to Clark AFB, in the Philippines, and then to the Subic Bay Naval Base. Instead, we flew first to Hawaii, then to Midway, and then perhaps to a couple of other islands. I don't remember. It got dark soon after we took off, and stayed dark. It seemed like the flight—and the night—would never end. Then we landed in Okinawa, and the pilot told us we had reached the end of the line.

"We have to go to Subic Bay," I said. "In the Philippines." We were 1,000 miles short.

"That may be," the pilot said. "But this plane stops here."

We checked around. There were no flights that day to Subic, and the Air Force wouldn't put us up. We took a bus to Naha Naval Air Station and hung out there for three or four very long days. It turned out we needed official authorization to get off Okinawa, and we spent our time trading messages back and forth with the Swift Boat command in Coronado until we had it.

Eventually we did reach Subic, where we spent another five days training and shaking down some boats that had just arrived from the states. Only when we finished with that did we get our orders to Cat Lo.

I gathered up the crew and went to see the Officer-in-Charge of the Swift detachment. "How do we get to Vietnam?" I asked. He laughed.

"That's up to you."



Lt. (jg) Dick Olsen left the Navy in 1967 and retired in San Francisco after a 40-year career as an investment advisor.

We went to Cubi Point Naval Air Station. They had flights, but not enough seats. I told my Chief Petty Officer to take the rest of the crew and get going. We would all meet in Saigon, I said, at the Naval attaché's office—wherever that was.

Late in the day I caught a World Airways cargo flight that landed at Tan Son Nhut airport about 2 A.M. the next day, April 12, 1966. The base, the ground crew told us, was under mortar attack, and we should "get out of here" as soon as possible. I didn't see any explosions, so I grabbed my gear, left the plane, found a cab and went to Saigon. What a great welcome. I found my way to a building that housed some sort of Navy command. The front door was unlocked, so I went in and fell asleep on a couch. Shortly after sun-up a lieutenant woke me up.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded. I was only a lieutenant (jg). I told him. Somehow I rounded up my crew and called up the folks in Cat Lo to let them know we had finally arrived. They sent a boat upriver to pick us up.

Our new home was a small village near the tourist city of Vung Tau on the northeastern edge of the Delta. Mostly we did Market Time patrols, searching junks and sampans along the coast looking for contraband to keep it from getting into the rivers and into the hands of the Viet Cong.

Upon arrival



Six months after arrival



Cat Lo



These patrols typically lasted twenty-four hours. We left the base before noon, relieved the boat on station, and stayed until we were relieved at noon the next day. Then we returned to the base, took showers, relaxed, ate, slept, ate again and left again the following day. Patrols were generally uneventful except during the monsoon season, when heavy seas tossed us about, and immense waves snuck up on us in the night.

The river was somewhat different. Besides searching junks, we had to watch for pieces of wood or other floating objects tethered in the water to something that might be an underwater explosive. If a boat approached the float, the VC triggerman on the beach pushed the plunger. We tried to avoid anything on the surface that didn't move with the current.

During the day there was a lot of traffic on the rivers, but as the afternoon gave way to nightfall, the locals went home. There were no boats on the river after dark. Except us. The riverbanks were heavily overgrown, perfect for ambushes. We liked dark nights and hated the full moon. We saw flares, heard B-52 bombing runs that sounded like thunder, saw C-47s spraying torch-like stripes of tracer from their miniguns.

Time passed, and we began to anticipate the day we would go home. One morning my commanding officer summoned me to his office and handed me my orders.

"What about transportation?" I asked.

"That's up to you," he said.

Stupid question. I had extended my time in the Navy so I could go to Vietnam, and now my time was up. I said goodbye to my crew, who still had about a month left, hitched a ride to a nearby Army helicopter base and began asking around to see if anyone was going near Tan Son Nhut. One pilot said he was going to Long Binh—about 38 klicks (24 miles) away. Close enough, except the pilot wasn't sure he could get off the ground with me on board. What the hell, I tossed him my gear.

We struggled into the air and made it to Long Binh. It was late in the day and there were no rides to Tan Son Nhut, so I found a vacant building and slept on the floor with a bunch of Army soldiers, all of whom were in the same fix – orders to Tan Son Nhut, no way to get there.

Early in the morning we heard there was a bus leaving Long Binh. We jumped aboard and managed to get seats. The unpleasant news was that the windows were covered with heavy mesh screens to protect us from bad guys throwing grenades. The good news was that the bus traveled very fast to avoid the incoming, and we got to Tan Son Nhut in no time at all.

My plane didn't leave until later, so I wandered around. As the day progressed, I spotted a lot of soldiers and airmen walking toward a big amphitheater-type place, so I joined them. It was Bob Hope doing a show – just like in the newsreels and on TV. It was great seeing him in person. I laughed at the jokes by Bob and Phyllis Diller, applauded songs by Vic Damone and Anita Bryant, and ogled Joey Heatherton and Carole Baker.

And then I was on the plane. No more Military Airlift Command. This was a charter jet with stewardesses. I had a glass of real milk and real ice cream. When we took off, a feeling of exhilaration and relief hit me so powerfully that I felt the tension drain right out of my body. And then early the next morning I looked out the window and saw the Golden Gate Bridge.

During our training in San Diego a buddy of mine asked me why I volunteered to go to Vietnam. I told him I wanted to see if I had what it took to look danger in the eye and not blink. I did. 



S.E.R.E.

by Rod McAlpin



The formal name for our training was "Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape," but to anyone who ever served in Vietnam it was simply SERE. It lasted a week and was extremely unpleasant, and when we were undergoing Swift Boat training to go overseas, we anticipated it with extreme dread. We weren't stupid.

Here's the scenario: *Your boat gets shot up and sinks in enemy territory. You and your crew make it to the beach, but you have nowhere to go, nothing to eat and*



Lt. (jg) Rod McAlpin left the Navy in 1969 for a career in manufacturing, eventually owning his own business. He retired in Litchfield, Connecticut.

no weapons of any kind, except maybe a knife. You must learn how to forage and survive ...in the jungle, in the desert, in the woods, in the mountains above the treeline.... Soon the bad guys come looking for you, so you run, you hide, whatever it takes to evade them. But in the end, they find you and take you prisoner. And then, in phase three, the prison camp, they interrogate you, starve you, and beat the crap out of you for several days. You have three tough choices: quit, escape or simply endure the abuse. They do the endure part whether you escape or not. When it's over, you're filthy and pissed off, but you've learned a lot of stuff about hunger, humility, mind games and torture that could come in handy if, God forbid, Charlie ever captured you.

So one Sunday during Swift training at Naval Base Coronado in the summer of 1967, our instructors advised us that we would be going to Coronado Beach the next day for some boat exercises. A bus would pick us up at the base at 6:30 A.M. so don't bother to eat breakfast. The school would provide a brown-bag breakfast and lunch. We actually believed this.

We did go to the beach. But not for boat training. This was SERE, phase one – Survival. No beautiful girls sunbathing in bikinis. Just a remote and vacant stretch of seaweed-covered beach in the middle of nowhere, with waves lapping at the shoreline and occasionally offering a dead crab or fish which, little did we know, would soon become part of our desperation menu. The instructor told our group leader, a Navy Lieutenant Commander, that this landscape would be the base for him and his troops—three dozen of us. Then he dropped a couple of small bags of rice at his feet, probably to ensure that we wouldn't starve too soon, and walked off into the sand dunes.

By this time we had figured out what was going on, but we were hungry, so we spent the rest of the day stabbing small fish and an occasional crab in the surf with spear-sticks. We boiled this menagerie in a pot with the rice to make a meager, tasteless sandy stew, but we weren't choosy. Anything to quiet the hunger pangs. This was the opening meal in what would be a week's worth of scrounging for rattlesnakes, rabbits and the like, for SERE stew or driftwood barbecue.

All this was just the intro for the next phase – internment at a prison camp high



up in the mountains of Warner Springs, California, where temperatures ranged from 90 degrees each day to sub-freezing at nighttime. They must have driven us up there in a bus, but I don't remember. The camp, on the other hand, I will never forget.

It was a 60x80 ft. enclosure in a forest, just below the snow-covered mountaintops. The whole place was wrapped in steel mesh fencing topped with spooled barbed wire, with sentry boxes and gun turrets around the entire perimeter. A handful of wooden buildings dotted the dusty courtyard.

Here we were further starved, tortured and morale-busted for the next three days or so. We all visited the dreaded black boxes – coffin-like solo boxes, two man boxes, and a large five-foot-square enclosure designed to handle multiple prisoners. We endured solo interrogation, in which a guard forced you to your knees, sat on your chest, and literally bent you over backwards. His MO was to weaken your resolve to the point where you would eventually disclose more than just your name, rank, serial number and date of birth.

The guards tortured and beat our CO so badly in several of these interrogation sessions that he suffered a broken leg and had to be removed from the exercise. These events, as planned, weeded out the weaker souls who either could not or would not continue. They were pulled out of SERE training and consequently lost their opportunity to go overseas. (And we were the lucky ones?)

The guards told us from the beginning that our main objective as prisoners was to both Resist and Escape any way we could. When I ended up with four others stuffed into a black box, probably intended for three, we decided to kick out the locked door and make a

break for it. The door succumbed quickly, but when we bolted for the nearest camp exit, guards in the watchtowers opened up with 50-caliber machine guns, sending bullets zinging over our heads. The noise of the guns alone was a shock, but the sight of live ammo raking up the dirt in our path brought us to an immediate and complete standstill.

Our captors then rounded us up, made us strip naked and forced us to climb into a trough filled with cold water. They held us under until we nearly drowned. Then, still naked and bitterly cold from the sub-freezing nighttime temperatures, they told us to lie on the ground and roll in the dirt until totally covered in mud. Only then could we put our uniforms back on.

The end finally came in the middle of the night when one of the hated "enemy" guards assembled us and delivered the welcome words: "Exercise Secured." The hot oatmeal and fresh fruit that followed may have been the most well-deserved and relished meal of our lives.

Then from one minute to the next, our captors dropped their foreign accents and began to relate both the positive and negative highlights of our SERE experience. I had an incredibly hard time dealing with this chitchat. These people had become the hated symbols of our week in captivity. They had spent their time mocking us, degrading us, physically abusing us and causing us real pain, and now we were all supposed to be friends? It was almost impossible to move on emotionally after all this, and my instinct to break every bone in their bodies was almost too overwhelming to ignore.

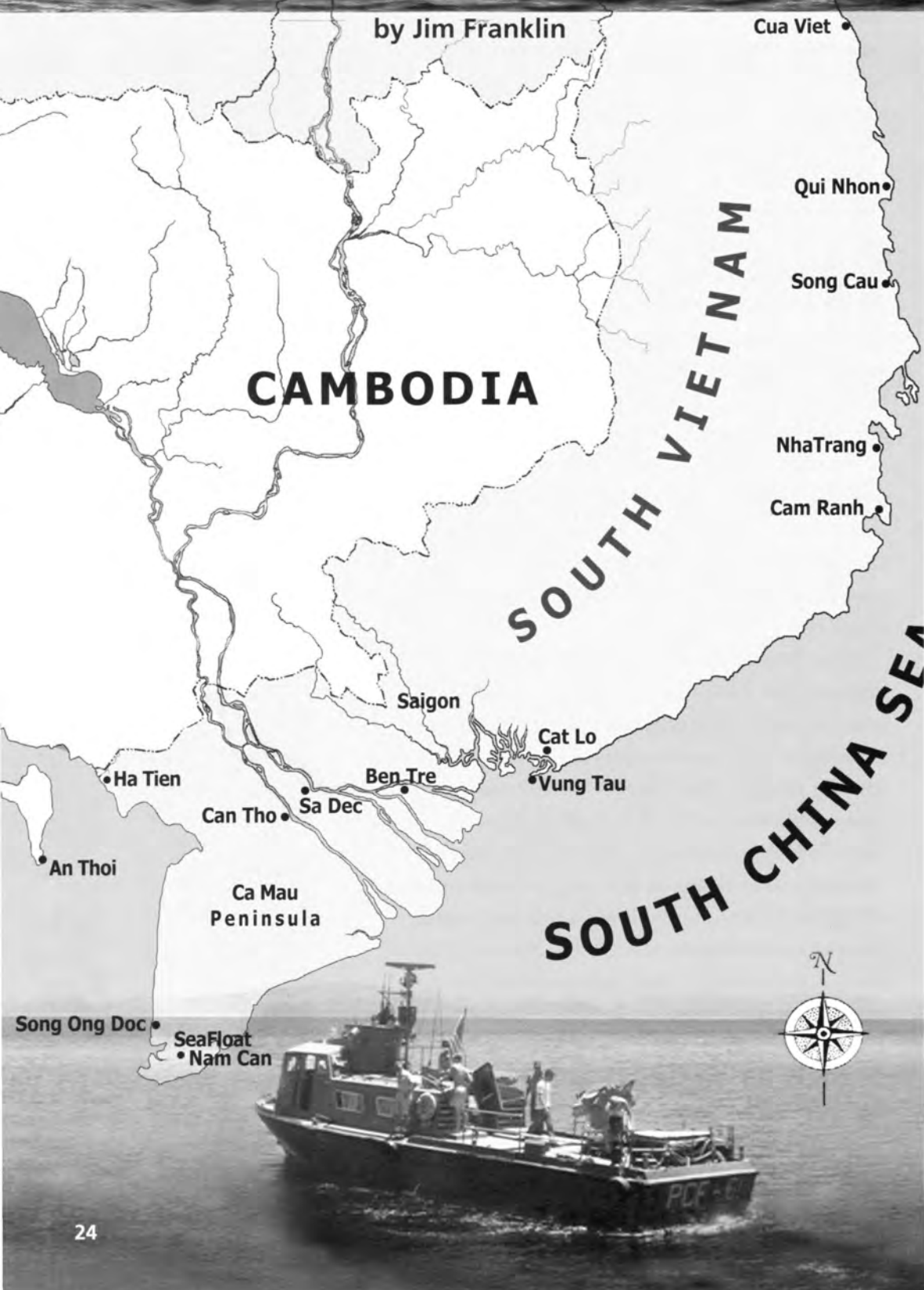
Of course, it was just an exercise.

Imagine if it lasted longer than a week. Imagine if it was the real thing. 



Shakedown Cruise

by Jim Franklin



Lt. Jim Franklin was separated from active duty in 1967 and he worked in banking and as a teacher, retiring with his wife in Seattle.

It was the first real patrol for PCF 61, a brand-new boat for a brand-new Swift Boat division at Qui Nhon, far up the exposed northeast coast of South Vietnam. I was the Officer-in-Charge, and my crew and I had been together since training at Coronado. We already had five months in-country, and we were good, but we'd been working out of An Thoi and the relatively placid waters of the Gulf of Thailand. Qui Nhon was a different story.

We got underway the afternoon of May 23, 1966. The weather was lousy – high winds, rain and big, heavy swells that kept getting bigger. Our patrol area was forty clicks to the south, around the mouth of a large bay leading to the town of Song Cau. Soon we were bucking through seas between three and four feet high. It was a rugged ride, but nothing we hadn't handled before.

Our job was to keep watch on the water traffic in our area and to board and search any boat that piqued our interest. We were looking for VC contraband – weapons and medicine – and we were also ready to provide fire support with mortar or machine guns to U.S. or Vietnamese ground forces in the area if they needed it.

This patrol, however, was all about the weather. Very few junks were at sea, and we couldn't board anything anyway. By 9 P.M. we were about eight clicks north of the entrance to Song Cau bay with seas between five to six feet high, about the limit of what we could handle in open water. Operating close inshore was pretty much out of the question. We decided to head into the bay and find a smoother ride.

The trip to the entrance took about an hour, but we didn't finish it. Instead we picked up a large radar contact about four clicks due east from us, straight out to sea. We went for a look, making slow progress and taking a pounding from the head seas. Eventually we spotted our contact. It was a 50-foot motorized junk, except the motor wasn't running. Instead, the junk was falling into the weather and wallowing in the troughs as waves crashed over the side. About ten or eleven men were on deck, alternately waving at us and trying to bail. They weren't having much success, and the junk was taking on water at a rapid rate.

Towing wasn't going to work, so we decided to offload the crew. Working from the after helm, Connell, our boatswain, brought the boat around to the windward side of the junk, blocking the weather for a moment, then delicately bringing us alongside where we tied up loosely so we could begin the evacuation.



But that's not what the deckhands had in mind. Rather than immediately abandoning ship, they began yelling down to people in the holds below. We knew that junks this big had a large storage capacity. What we didn't know was that the cargo on this junk was people. Mobs of them.

It was a trickle at first, and then a flood. I stood with Grey, our leading petty officer, and Gerich, the engineman, on the fantail. Soon we were helping men, women and children, young and old, onto our deck. I called for more help, and soon our entire crew was distributing the new arrivals everywhere – below decks, crouched on the bow and even clinging to stanchions on the roof of the main cabin.

Sometime in the middle of all this, the passengers began passing up pigs, dogs (the eating variety) and crates of chickens. Suitcases and bales of belongings were also in the mix. Grey gave me a look, and without a word he and Gerich began passing the animals and luggage for me to toss overboard. Luckily, the people were so focused on saving themselves that no one said anything about their belongings. Or anything else. We fired several shots in the air at one point in hopes of imposing some kind of crowd control, but it made no impression. Fear of drowning overcame any fear of weapons.

We had been in radio contact with Qui Nhon ever since we first spotted the junk, and once we saw the extent of our task, we called for help. The destroyer escort USS *Vance*, patrolling offshore, began steaming toward us, but it would be several hours before she arrived. It was going to be our job to stay afloat until that happened. It was going to be complicated.

Despite non-stop pandemonium, our actual evacuation probably lasted no more than 15 minutes. But even as the last evacuees crowded in next to us on the fantail, the junk began to go. We cast off our lines, and within moments the junk foundered and sank. For an instant all of us – crew and refugees – went silent.

The *Vance* was two hours out. I took the after helm and tried to find a slow enough speed and a careful course that would somewhat neutralize the high seas and improve the ride for our passengers. Our freeboard had all but disappeared – I was afraid to look – and it affected our maneuvering ability. I was having a hard time driving, and the refugees noticed. It took them a while to recover from the trauma of one near drowning, but as time passed they began to call out to one another with increasing frequency and higher volume.



We did not know what they were saying, but they had undoubtedly realized that they might simply have exchanged one watery coffin for another. We kept the hatches and doors battened down, and Miller and Ballard, our radarman and gunner's mate, were supervising the below decks survivors. They reported a packed house, with a lot of seasickness and perturbation. The folks on deck were more worried about holding on.

Several times out of An Thoi we had ferried Special Forces units to and from their op areas, and I remember thinking that twenty-five of those guys, heavily armed, was enough for any Swift Boat. Now we had many times that number. I mentioned to Grey how fortunate we were that the Vietnamese were small people.

After more than an hour barely making headway, the *Vance* radioed that they had us on radar. An hour after that they came up on our windward side, like we had done for the junk, and the waves subsided in their lee. The *Vance* dropped several ladders to us and offloading began. The passengers didn't need any coaxing. Once they saw the size of the *Vance* relative to PCF 61, brand-new or not, they were up and out in no time.

The final count was 157 men, women and children. One of our crew counted more than twenty people emerging from the forward cabin alone – an extraordinary number, and every other space on the boat was filled just as compactly. The CO of the *Vance* told us we showed about six inches of freeboard as we approached them, and that we looked like a floating mass of humanity rather than a patrol boat.

We stayed aboard the *Vance* for an hour and then went back on patrol, eventually scooting into Song Cau Bay, our original destination, where we cleaned up the mess. We felt pretty good about our boat and about ourselves. The squadron commander wrote us a letter of commendation.

Our passengers, we found out later, came from a small village outside Song Cau and had decided to leave en masse because of increased conflict with the VC. They were on their way to Nha Trang, about 100 klicks south, and had just picked a bad day to travel. Eventually, however, they made it – minus animals and luggage.

In 2004, my wife and I visited the Song Cau area and tried to find out if anyone remembered our adventure, but no one did. I hope those people found the peace they were searching for. 



Farewell Good Friend

by Dan Daly

All Photos Courtesy of the Author



In November 1967 we had four Swift Boat crews living with the Marines operating near the Cua Viet river mouth, four miles from North Vietnam on the southern boundary of the Demilitarized Zone. I have always wondered why they called it that, because both U.S. and enemy artillery used it as an ongoing target.

We were heading into the winter storm season, or perhaps finishing the summer storm season. It was hard to tell the difference, but one of these seasonal storms had kept us in port for two days.

Now it was moderating, which meant it was time to "probe" the weather. I was Officer-in-Charge of PCF 76 and we were the designated weather prober. The idea was to nose out to the river mouth and decide whether conditions were decent enough for patrol. If they were, we radioed the other boats and continued out to the ocean.

Lt. (jg) Dan Daly was separated from active duty in 1968 and founded several consulting firms in the Boston area. He served as Massachusetts Governor Bill Weld's first Director of Economic Development, and chaired the New England Center for Homeless Veterans.

The task was never an easy one. On this morning, the wind was still up from the storm blowing out of the northeast and the sky was a pallet of multi-colored grey with some light drizzle. We got underway and approached the river mouth through a series of winding turns defined by shifting sandbars. Water depths, currents and channels were constantly changing, and once you reached the river mouth, multiple surf lines required corkscrew course changes, taking each set of waves on an angle and, eventually, getting out to sea.

The first set of breakers soon appeared dead ahead, churning whitewater measuring eight-to-ten feet high. I also had to determine the period of the waves – the time interval from crest to crest. With a long period, say ten seconds, you could climb a big wave, ride down the other side and start up the second one.

But a short period meant that the second wave crashed from above while your bow was still pointed downward on the backside of the previous wave.



This was no fun in a Swift Boat, which had only six feet of deck between the tip of the bow and the pilothouse. Tons of water plummeting into the bow had nowhere to go and nothing to do except bury the boat, blow out the windshields and fill the pilothouse with water.

The only way to calculate the period was to try it out.

Pictured is the crew of PCF 76 with Lt. (jg) Dan Daly, Officer-in-Charge, at bottom right. Left to right: Michael Newcomer, Radarman 3rd Class; Robert Buck, Seaman; Oscar Wells, Engineman 2nd Class; John Muller, Gunner's Mate, and Bill "Boats" Fielder, Boatswain Mate 2nd Class.



I was in the pilothouse at the helm, one hand on the wheel, one hand on the throttles, eyes glued to the breakers bearing down on us. We muscled our way through three or four waves, which was all I needed to tell me that the period was extremely short – four or five seconds. Not enough time.

The second wave struck us as we were heading down the back of the first, and the effect worsened with each succeeding wave. Just holding on was a challenge. Fielder, my boatswain, was wedged into the starboard corner of the pilothouse, and the rest of the crew was in the main cabin or on the fantail, hanging on with two hands to whatever was available.

The situation was untenable. Too far to go. Too much surf. Only one thing to do – turn the boat rapidly 180 degrees and surf back into the river mouth. This could be deadly, too. You wanted to ride the back of a wave, but not go over the crest. If you did, the wave could toss you end-over-end. This was called pitch-poling, and three Swift Boat sailors had died when it happened the previous year.

But before we tried to surf, we had to come around. I yelled to my crew, “hold on,” and spun the wheel hard left to begin a turn to port. At the same time I pushed the starboard engine ahead and throttled the port engine into reverse, enough to spin the boat practically in place.

Not fast enough. We were in a trough and still completing the turn when the next wave slammed into our starboard quarter. The wave crashed across the open fantail and lifted us up. It held us there for maybe a second or two, then simply rolled us over broadside to the oncoming seas. In an instant, we were upside down.

I was tossed hard to my left, losing my grip on the wheel. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the water come crashing into the pilothouse in a grey-green wall. I lunged for the port side window. I was six-feet three-inches tall and weighed 200 pounds, but somehow I squeezed through the 20-inch opening. I don't remember whether I pushed the window out, or if it was already gone.

I found myself about eight feet underwater, surrounded by bubbles and foam. Fortunately, however, it was about 8 A.M. so there was enough light above to show me which direction was up. I could also see the shadow of the boat above me, and another wave was driving it straight down. With a couple of rapid kicks and a stroke or two I managed to avoid being pulverized.

Gasping for air, I swam to the surface. I saw that the boat was still in the surf line closer to shore than I was, but drifting away. Another wave buried me ten feet deep, and then another, and then another. Each time I surfaced I was weaker. Getting to the boat was my only chance, and even though it was only 150 feet away, it was too far. "I'm not gonna make it," I thought. "This is the end."

And then in a moment, my survival instinct kicked in. I don't know whether it was faith in God, training, or discipline, but I was suddenly screaming to my inner self, *I don't want to die*. And I dug deep one last time, swimming full out, arms driving, hands pulling, feet kicking, pushing myself, *one more stroke, one more stroke*.

And then I was there. Quickly, with my right arm extended, I grabbed an exhaust pipe protruding from the stern of the overturned boat. I locked onto it and brought up my other arm. The surf continued to pound the boat, slamming me against the hull, but that was all right. I hung on, took a minute to catch my breath and thought about what I had to do next – climb up onto the bottom of the boat, about four feet above me. I used the exhaust pipes and the slabs of zinc, mounted in housings on the stern to neutralize the electric signature of the boat.

Start climbing, I thought. Fast. And don't stop.

I made it. The bottom was covered with slime, and the boat was rolling heavily, but by wrapping my arms and legs around the rudders I could hold myself in place, avoiding the stopped but sharp propellers.

Looking toward shore, through the mist drifting along the top of the surf, I saw my crew. They were maybe fifty or seventy-five yards away hanging on to the boat's life raft. I felt a surge of joy. I couldn't tell what kind of physical shape they were in, but they appeared to be drifting slowly out of the surf line toward shore. I began to yell to them asking about their condition, trying to keep their spirits up. Just knowing they were alive was a huge psychological boost for me.

But then it suddenly struck me. There were only four of them. Where was Fielder? Ten or fifteen minutes had passed since the boat had turned over. I looked around, but saw nothing. Everything just stopped. The joy of my own survival and that of the rest of the crew disappeared. "Boats" had probably drowned.



I had to push this out of my mind. The rest of the crew seemed to be going in the right direction, but I remained stuck in the surf. I looked around through the haze and saw another Swift Boat exiting the river mouth and heading our way. But it wouldn't be able to get to me. I held on with one hand and waved the new boat off. I pointed toward the life raft, which rode so low in the water the rescuer would have to focus carefully to spot it. But they did. I watched the boat; it was PCF 80, I could read the hull number, as it finally turned toward my crew.

Suddenly, in the midst of all my waving and yelling, "Boats" literally popped to the surface below me at the exhaust pipes. Clad in a white T-shirt and matching boxer shorts, he appeared in decent shape, albeit short of breath and disoriented. I reached down with my right hand and helped him climb up. My mind was spinning with shock and relief. I thought we had lost him forever.

Sitting alongside me, he explained what had happened. When the boat started to roll, he leaped from the pilothouse into the main cabin, lunging to get out the rear door. He never made it. Luckily, there was a substantial amount of air trapped in the inverted main cabin, so he could breathe for a while. He had the good sense to remove his shirt, pants and sneakers, making his movement much easier.

The best exits, he decided, were the sliding windows on each side of the main cabin. These would open easily and, most important, they were big enough to swim through. The problem was that the boat was settling and the windows were now below his air pocket. He had one shot, and he wouldn't be coming back for a second try. He found a window by feel, opened it, shot out of it and drove to the surface, appearing right below me.

So what now? "Boats" was fine, I had a bloody mouth and stiffness in the legs and hips, but nothing broken. PCF 80 was going to reach the life raft, which had drifted into calmer waters, but nothing was happening to us except that the waves continued to pound us. We were stuck.

A small spotter plane appeared overhead. This was encouraging, as was the Huey helicopter that soon arrived. However, it did not have lift capability, so it hovered overhead, keeping us in sight. I didn't know how much time we had. We were still drifting in the surf, and the pounding eventually was going to do structural damage to the boat. None of this was good for us.

But then a U.S. Marine H-34 chopper joined us, and he had a rescue hoist. The other two aircraft backed off, and the H-34 dropped to about 150 feet and lowered the rescue sling – a padded yellow "horse collar" with the two ends closed together by a fitting joined to a lift cable. The rescuee slips the collar over his head and under his armpits. (You've probably seen it in the movies.)

Our next challenge was to not slide off the slick boat bottom while trying to grab the collar, which was swinging wildly in the wind. The pilot was holding position and the crew chief was hanging halfway out the starboard doorway, watching us and relaying instructions to the pilot. I reminded Boats, half in jest, that the captain was the last to leave a sinking ship, so he should get his butt in the sling. He got the message, and when the collar came close he reached out, grabbed the harness with one hand, let go of the propeller shaft and in one motion he slipped the harness over his head. The crew chief winched him up and soon Boats was climbing through the open door of the helicopter.

Now it was my turn. The collar was a bit farther away, and I had to abandon my handholds. I crawled forward on the slippery hull scum, and lunged for the collar waving in the air five feet away. I caught it with one hand, and then with both arms, just as my bare feet skidded and lost traction. A hug never felt so good.

And then I was safe. The crew chief graciously received our heartfelt thanks. Then I made my way to the cockpit. The pilot was pure John Wayne – personalized flight helmet, sunglasses, cigar and wad of gum all functioning simultaneously. I could do no more than crawl up beside him and pat him on the leg. His left hand never left the stick. He gave me a quick, once-over look followed by a thumbs-up. *Semper Fi, Marine.*

Every one of us was miraculously okay, but PCF 76 was not. Unable to escape the surf, the seas eventually broke her to bits, and all that came ashore was a wooden silverware drawer and an orange life ring with “PCF 76” inscribed on it. With great pride I hung it on the side of my tool shed on Cape Cod. 



Irma La Douche

by Virgil Erwin

All Photos Courtesy of the Author

We hunt the Viet Cong at night in the rivers of the Mekong Delta near Vung Tau. They wait patiently for us in mud bunkers and blinds for a chance to ambush us with rockets, as if we were mallards. We risk an attack to get them to tip their hand, so we can blow them out of their bunkers.

It's May and the southeast monsoon has arrived, with endless days of torrential rain. I am the skipper of PCF 67. The hot, humid air is unbearable. Our mattresses are vinyl-covered, and gross pools of sweat collect in the depression my body creates. My green fatigues are like damp dishtowels and Gnau, my quartermaster, tries to dry paper charts limp with mildew. Gunner's Mate Taylor bitches about keeping his guns and ammo dry, and he bitches about trying to catch the Viet Cong.

"Let's set up our own ambush," Taylor says.

"Where?" I ask.

"Some canal, hide in the bushes. Gotta get creative." He points to a small canal on the damp chart. "Here," he says.

Gnau looks at the chart. "Don't know about this," he says, shaking his head. "Pretty tight." The canal looks narrow, but I think Taylor's idea is worth a try.

"OK, we'll do it tonight."

There's no moon as we patrol the winding Vam Co River, but even though it's invisible, the lunar gravity has pulled brackish water upstream from the bay of Vung Tau. The combination of rain and tide has raised the Vam Co nine feet; the riverbanks and rice paddies have disappeared underwater.

Our Decca radar is incredibly acute at capturing the sharp image of anything floating on a smooth river – a clump of vegetation, a swimmer, or a VC sampan. But it is useless for navigation tonight. The swollen Vam Co no longer resembles the chart – our radar can't tell us where the river is deep.

"Slow to five knots," I tell Hoffman, my helmsman. He watches the fathometer, feeling his way over the dark river bottom. We creep into the canal Taylor suggested. Hoffman kills one engine, but the clinking metal flap covering the exhaust pipe still makes too much noise, like a clapper ringing a dinner bell for the VC.

Water level in the canal is so high that tree branches, normally above Taylor in the gun tub, are pushing in through the pilothouse door, creating a floral arrangement on my chart table.

"Shut 'er down," I say to Hoffman.

"Lasso that branch," Gnau tells Stancil. Stancil is the youngest man aboard, still too young to drink, and probably the brightest engineman I have ever met. We sit patiently buried in trees along the bank, watching for VC. Taylor peers through the

Lt. Virgil Erwin left the Navy after Vietnam, and retired to San Diego after a career in sales and marketing. He is the author of *Cat Lo – A Memoir of Invisible Youth*, which portrays his experiences as the skipper of PCF 67 and the years following his service, as he struggled to integrate back into civilian life.

green light of the night scope. I take turns with Hoffman watching the amber sweep of our radar,

Muggy heat suffocates the pilothouse. Rank odor leaks from my sweat-soaked flak jacket, as if some decaying rodent was inside. I have my face buried in the boot covering the radar – the inverted rubber cone hiding its light. The small opening stinks with sweat from my face. It seems like hours have passed. I fight fatigue, shaking my head like a Labrador retriever stepping out of a lake.

"Something's coming," I say softly.

"What?" Hoffman asks.

"Sampan. One, two...a whole string of blips," I say. Wet hair on my neck is electric.

"Sampan, get ready," Hoffman whispers to the crew over his phone.

"Wait!" Taylor says, "I see 'em in the scope, it's a Mobile Riverine Force, HOLD YOUR FIRE!"

"Sh–," I say, "what if *they* fire? Turn on the running lights."

Hoffman flips a switch and little red, green and white lights sparkle around the gun tub. I make a radio call on the only common frequency I can think off.

"This is Elbow Golf six-seven," I say, "I have running lights on, M-R-F unit approaching me. Acknowledge."

"Roger, see ya. Out." The radio voice is so casual, like not a care in the world. Thank god they answered my call.

Goliath monsters emerge from darkness. They're painted black-olive-green. These Mobile Riverine vessels look like Civil War monitors with huge gun barrels. They're sheathed in welded rebar armor and they're low to the water, their bow waves a bare ripple.



The canal is narrow and I stand on the gunnels as they creep passed our port side, a mere ten feet between us. The only sound is a deep throated rumble, like a grizzly sleeping in a cave.

I don't see any faces. Where is the driver; where are the men? It's as if these are ghost ships. They keep coming and coming, passing in a slow, single-file formation. One after another they pass, and not a voice is heard, not a "howdy," nothing.

"Doubt we'll see any Viet Cong tonight," Taylor says.

"Not with that flotilla around," Gnau says.

I don't go to sleep, but my pucker factor drops several notches.

Morning light captures rivulets of water draining from the bank. The moon-driven tide has ebbed. Our bow line to the tree branch is nearly straight up and Taylor stands on top of the pilothouse to untie it. We leave the canal in the same direction as the silent armada last night and enter the Vam Co. I'm eager to be relieved from patrol.

"River's at least nine feet lower than last night," Gnau says. Rice paddies are still draining and now covered in rich savory mud.

We're driving downriver at twenty-five knots and I spot an apparition, like a painting by Salvador Dali. It's a distorted image, but I know what it is – a Swift Boat in a rice paddy, easily fifty feet from the river and nine feet higher than the water. It's sitting in the mud like a cake decoration. It's both comical and obscene, bringing a chorus of sorry laughter from my crew.

We look at this pathetic sight, a beautiful gunboat built for speed, now mired in mud. Hoffman maneuvers our bow into the bank. It seems odd to stand on top of the pilothouse in order to be eye level with the Swift Boat skipper who's knee deep in muck.

"Need any help?" I ask. I laugh, looking at this stranded sailor on the side of the river highway, as if he's blown a tire and doesn't have a spare. He's Ensign Doug Martin. He smiles, but I can feel his embarrassment. I see a water buffalo grazing near the bow of his boat and the local militia standing in the distance, a defensive perimeter guarding PCF 98. The militia soldiers are smoking cigarettes and laughing.

"We had a blip on the radar," Ensign Martin says, "thought it was a sampan. Maybe our radar was on the wrong scale. We were going pretty fast."

Without him telling me more, I can visualize the scene, his face in the boot of the radar scope, the image of the river looking narrow and normal. A flip of the range dial would have alerted him, would have told him that something was wrong with the banks of a small river now seeming to be over a mile wide. Checking the range dial would have told him the rice fields were flooded.

"I guess the blip you were chasing last night," I say to Martin, "was that dangerous and ferocious water buffalo." We both look at a young boy leading the buffalo away.

"VC buffalo for sure," Taylor says.

"Tax collector," Gnau adds.

Going aground is not uncommon for Swift Boats. In some cases it reflects bad navigation, like when I hit a shallow reef. In other cases, it's inexperience or aggressive behavior. Last night, I suppose, it was all three.

"How is he going to get his boat back in the water?" Stancil asks.

"Won't be easy. Almost fifty-thousand pounds," Moison says. Moison is a Boatswain's Mate, absolutely the best at driving our Swift Boat.

"Maybe wait for another high tide?"

"Won't be enough," Gnau says.

The Viet Cong build bunkers along the rivers, constructed of massive tree trunks, packed and covered with mud. The mud dries and the bunkers become virtually impenetrable. Fifty-caliber machine guns and flamethrowers have little effect.

But the Mobile Riverine Force is close at hand. They offer a unique solution to the ensign's dilemma: they have "Irma La Douche." The name is a play on words: *Irma La Douce* is a movie about a Paris prostitute who has a passion for everything that makes life worth living. Someone changed *Douce* to *Douche*.

Irma shoots water. It's an incredible weapon – a water cannon. Irma has two massive pumps that suck water from the canal, each through a six-inch hose. The pumps blast a stream at 3,000 pounds per square inch through a two-inch titanium nozzle. The cannon dissolves mud bunkers as if they were sandcastles on a beach. The water's velocity can rip a man in half.

Irma is called to the frontline to save the stranded Swift Boat. The cannon carves a trench in the mud below the stern of the boat and a steel cable is attached to her stern. Irma pulls with twin diesels, while a constant stream of water lubricates the channel, breaking the suction as the Swift Boat is inelegantly pulled backward into the river.

The sight does not become the lady, a graceful Swift Boat with a passion for life, being dragged by her *derrière* through mud as if punished for adultery.

We head back to Cat Lo. I can't wait to get to the Officers' Club. I have a great story to share. 



Smell Like A Rose

By Rod McAlpin

So it's the fall of 1967 and I'm Officer-in-Charge of PCF 73, doing coastal Market Time patrols out of An Thoi, Phu Quoc Island, to intercept enemy junks and boats trying to infiltrate supplies and personnel into South Vietnam. One day our division commander tells me he has extended PCF 73 the privilege of hosting two rear admirals to give them a first-hand look at Swift Boat patrol capabilities. I should show them our underway routine, and, while doing so, give them a full demonstration of our firepower.

I no longer remember the names of these two gentlemen, but they were evidently desk admirals, filling advisory billets in the Navy's Saigon hierarchy. And even though they presented themselves as tourists interested in witnessing the Navy's newest wartime watercraft in action, I suspected they might also be on an inspection tour, looking to find fault with the Navy's newest young warriors. I noticed right away that they had not dressed down for their experience, arriving on board in pressed khakis with combination covers (brimmed hats) bearing lots of gold "scrambled eggs."

As I politely introduced the admirals to my crewmembers, I could almost see their eyes gleam: these two 50-year-old wunderkinds probably think they've seen



Lt. (jg) Rod McAlpin left the Navy in 1969 for a career in manufacturing, eventually owning his own business. He retired in Litchfield, Connecticut.

it all, they were thinking, but they haven't seen this. Even a ride in moderate chop is akin to an out-of-control roller coaster, the engine noise alone makes conversation almost impossible, and the guns make your head feel like it's going to explode. And if you thought you were somewhat "stiff" to begin with, just wait until it's over. A desk will never look so good!

Our guests first queried me about my unusual crew, which included an Hawaiian (QM1 Ulloa, Senior Petty Officer), a Mexican-American (BM3 Castillo) and a Filipino-American (EN1 Paje). They were impressed with this diversity. Then they asked me how we interacted with friendly locals.

To this topic I suggested we begin our outing with a quick visit to our "adopted" family, who lived on a barrier island along the route we would take to the free-fire zone. Each crew was assigned an adopted South Vietnamese family for the duration of our in-country year, and ours resided on the island of Hon Nhum Ba in the Gulf of Thailand near the Cambodian border. We visited often, bringing clothes and food that our families had sent us from home.

We never got a handle on the family's surname, but first names were easy to remember. Zang was a fisherman. His wife was Madam Marie, and they had two boys (Michel and Be), and two girls (Yum and Wa). We were always treated with great deference and some awe. The arrival of an extremely noisy, fast and heavily armed Swift Boat was an extraordinary event at Hon Nhum Ba, and usually brought most of the village down to the beach.

On this trip we brought some pillows, and some American cookies and canned food. We used a single mooring line to tie up at a tiny, somewhat dilapidated pier, then leapt gingerly to the rickety, bleached-board surface. Our high-level guests were hardly enthralled by the facilities, but managed to land upright with their dignity intact.

We said hello with much bowing and curtsying in return, and used our broken Vietnamese to introduce the new arrivals. The family got it, of course. They could see the stars and the scrambled eggs.

Fortunately for the admirals, perhaps, our mid-morning visit meant we did not have to stay for lunch. In the past, Madame Marie had graciously treated us to interesting meals of curried chicken and pinto beans, cabbage and hot peppers, squash, stewed monkey (or at least that's what we were told), rice and "whickey" (Vietnamese for whiskey). I was always quite relieved that we never were asked to visit the kitchen prior to mealtime.

Nevertheless our stopover on this morning also turned out to be timely because Zang and his fishing junk had been stranded for the better part of two days in a nearby canal while he waited to procure a much needed junk motor and family food supplies. So, after a quick visit, we re-boarded the boat for the twenty-minute trip to the canal, where we rescued Zang and towed his junk and supplies home.

The admirals didn't say much during all this, which I judged to be a good thing. Trying to fit in with the Vietnamese was one of the most important jobs we had, and one of the most difficult, given the cultural canyon that separated us. We were good at it, and the admirals seemed to understand that. But, of course, you never know with admirals, unless they're reaming you out.

After saying goodbye to Zang and the family we got back aboard the boat and made our way to an empty spot in the ocean where we could put on our show. We fired the twin .50 caliber machine guns from the turret above the pilothouse, our M-16 automatic rifles and our M-79 grenade launchers. We'd never used the grenade launchers in a firefight, but the concussion from a well-placed round would kill all the fish within reasonable range of the underwater explosion, leaving them to float to the surface to be easily netted by Zang and his sons. We didn't tell the admirals about this.

The centerpiece of our armament was the 81-mm mortar that was mounted on the fantail. It was dual-purposed. Most often we used it to lob shells at inland targets called in to us by spotters accompanying friendly ground forces on the beach. But it could also be fired at point-blank range at a target like an enormous shotgun. The admirals, tricked out in flak jackets and helmets, were ready for the main event.

They were obviously impressed with the first couple of rounds, but when we pulled the trigger the third time, nothing happened. We'd had a misfire, leaving a live round in the mortar tube. This happens when the propellant for the mortar shell does not properly ignite, or only partially ignites and fails to send the round on its targeted path. The round should not explode until it hits something on the fly, but a misfire, under any circumstances, is not an occurrence to take casually.

For us, the misfire set into motion a series of prescribed moves we had practiced intensively during boat training. For our admirals, however, there was nothing routine about the event. When I ordered everyone to go to the forecastle, I never saw two old salts move so quickly.

Then Gunner's Mate Hart stepped to center stage. As the admirals watched from the bow, he slowly brought the mortar tube to a level position. Then he cautiously bounced the barrel down several times against the stops – slightly below the horizontal – elegantly “walking” the misfire toward the end of the tube until it started to spill out. He froze the tube in place, walked around to the mortar mouth, grabbed the defective round and gingerly carried it to the side of the boat where he dumped it overboard. Sighs of relief were easily audible from the forecastle.

Some days are like that. Even when something goes wrong, everything goes right. My crew had done it all by the book with easy competence, setting up Hart, who performed with Oscar-worthy aplomb. The two admirals could tell Saigon how squared away we were and tell their grandkids an adventure story. In Vietnam that was as good as it got – a modest thrill, no harm done, kudos for the good guys. 



Even the Best of Intentions...

By Rod McAlpin



We were conducting a routine board and search patrol off the Ca Mau Peninsula at dusk when a U.S. Army support detachment called us from their base west of the town of Song Ong Doc, near the river of the same name. They were under mortar and recoilless rifle attack by local VC units and needed help. Could we close on the shoreline and use our 81-mm mortar to drive them off, or at least keep them at bay?

You never argue with a request like that, and besides, anything out of the ordinary was a welcome change. We were off the southwest corner of Vietnam in PCF 73, so far from our base on Phu Quoc island that we were operating from the U.S. Coast Guard cutter *Yainstat*, on station in the Gulf of Thailand about ten miles offshore. We had taken two crews to the cutter so we could swap out every twenty-four hours. That way there was always a boat on patrol, and no need to drive back and forth from An Thoi, a three-hour trip on the best of days and a bone-rattling ordeal in heavy seas during the northeast monsoon. It was wearying, tedious and, when nature was feeling particularly vindictive, occasionally terrifying work. I was the Officer-in-Charge on this trip. It was Dec. 8, 1967.

All Photos Courtesy of John W. Yeoman

Lt. (jg) Rod McAlpin left the Navy in 1969 for a career in manufacturing, eventually owning his own business. He retired in Litchfield, Connecticut.

We closed to within a few hundred yards of the shoreline just north of the Ong Doc River, anchored and began shelling the enemy positions near the U.S. base, about five clicks east of us, with high explosive, incendiary and starshell mortar rounds, working from grid coordinates radioed to us by the ground forces' advanced spotter.

After maybe an hour, our friends told us they had a badly wounded Vietnamese boy who needed serious medical attention as soon as possible. He was nine or ten, they indicated, and had suffered horrific shrapnel wounds from the enemy shelling.

We volunteered to make a run up a canal we called Breezy Cove, just north of Song On Doc. We could get close to the support base, pick up the youngster and take him back to the cutter, where a fully outfitted medical team could treat him. This seemed pretty straightforward to us at first, but it wasn't. It was now fully dark, and the monsoon was blowing the seas into a vicious chop. And we had lots of things to do at the same time: up anchor, check the twin .50s up forward, and set blackout conditions for a canal run. In the canal we wouldn't have to worry about staying upright and dry. In the canal we had to worry about fast reactions and weapons that didn't jam.



I was in the pilothouse using the twin engines to hold the bow steady on the mooring line so we could retrieve the anchor from about twenty feet of water. As the anchor broke ground, we suddenly realized that the unpredictable and unrelenting winds had caused the boat to steadily drift down on the anchor line as it was being pulled in and the line was now fouled in the screws. We quickly shut down our engines so we could take a look underwater.

We now had an entirely different set of problems. The anchor was aweigh and we had no means of making headway to hold our position. We were an ungainly, drifting hulk at the mercy of the wind, the seas and the firepower of anyone anxious to punch our clock. We were moving inexorably toward the beach and we didn't have a lot of time. We needed to unfoul the screws, get underway and fetch the wounded kid.

Our boatswain's mate quickly stripped to his skivvies and made several dives to assess the extent of the problem and unfoul the anchor. The rest of us hung over the fantail, shining every light we had so he could see what he was doing in the dark water. Another target for Charlie.

Freeing the anchor probably didn't take all that long, but I couldn't tell you. Given the circumstances and our desperation, it seemed like forever. But then we were free. We killed all our lights and returned to general quarters. Then we began feeling our way into the canal.

It was pitch black. Navigating by radar, we inched our way through a watery gulch only thirty feet wide at best. We were lucky it was high tide. Instinct told me we would have run aground if we strayed from the midpoint of the canal. And we were sitting ducks. The banks of the waterway were dense with all sorts of tropical vegetation...a perfect hiding place. We were probably lucky again that Charlie didn't figure on a Swift Boat coming upriver, so he hadn't rigged an ambush.

And it wasn't any easier for him to see us than it was for us to see him. On the other hand, the rumble of the diesels was something we couldn't conceal. Sporadic gunfire punctuated the entire trip. A number of rounds hit the boat, and our radarman was cut by flying glass.

Finally, we reached a bend in the canal where we were supposed to make our pickup. Our mortar rounds had obviously had an effect, and the shooting had become quite random as we approached a rickety "mooring" composed of poles stabbed into the mud bottom and tied together with old, warped planks haphazardly thrown together to accommodate small fishing boats. We tied up delicately, staying only long enough for the detachment team to place our precious cargo on board. The boy was even worse off than we had been led to believe. Bandages and tourniquets covered what seemed to be an unending number of wounds. Medics had an IV in his arm. I hoped it was morphine.

We retraced our route. Nothing had changed. The water was shallow, navigation tight and the travel extremely slow and tenuous. When we got to the canal mouth we pushed the throttles all the way forward. Full bore to the cutter, waiting about four clicks away in the open ocean.

The seas grew worse with each click. The bone jarring jolts we received from flying into, up and then over the top of the swells compressed the spine and brutally pounded every joint every time the airborne hull banged back to the surface of the sea.

Our job was tough, maybe impossible. We wanted to get the boy to the cutter as soon as we could, but we didn't want to kill him in the process. We needed to go fast, but nature wouldn't allow it. I wondered as I maneuvered through the whitecaps whether the boy felt any pain. And then we were there. We passed his broken body to waiting hands and said a prayer.

The outpost at Song Ong Doc survived, and the District Senior Army Advisor there wrote us a Letter of Commendation. We felt pleased.

On the *Yainstat*, doctor and staff worked through the night. The little boy didn't make it. I suppose we did our best, but it wasn't good enough. We felt rotten. 🇸🇨

VC TAX STATION

By Larry Irwin

All Photos Courtesy of the Author

There is a well-known story that has been circulated about Lt. (jg) Mike Bernique's escapade on the Giang Thanh river that runs eastward from the Gulf of Thailand at Ha Tien, along the Cambodian border. The episode describes how the swashbuckling young naval officer disobeyed orders, went up the river, and attacked and captured a VC Tax Station.

Lt (jg) Bernique was sent to Saigon to be court-martialed, but was saved when Admiral Zumwalt heard the story and decided that this was the kind of aggressiveness the brass wanted to see. Bernique was awarded the Silver Star.

This triggered in me a memory about that Tax Station. I was the Officer-in-Charge of PCF 10 and served from October 1966 to September 1967, leaving Vietnam about a year before the Bernique incident. Because I had an interest in photography, I had managed to talk my way into the ancillary duty of "Official Division Photographer". This meant that I had custody of all of the photographs that had accumulated in the division's files. One of these was entitled "VC Tax Station" and it was described to me as being just inland of the coastal town of Ha Tien, but was strictly out of bounds because we were forbidden at that time to go into the rivers.



In the foreground, PCF 10 is moored at the Ha Tien pier. The Special Forces Camp sits on the hill in the background.

Lt (jg) Larry Irwin separated from active duty in 1969. He retired in Menlo Park, after a career with Silicon Valley companies in Northern California that lasted over forty years.

At the mouth of the Giang Thanh, there was a U.S. Special Forces Camp on the bluff to the west overlooking Ha Tien. One of the services that we, in the PCF division carried out, was to ferry Special Forces teams to and from their excursions into the Cau Mau Peninsula. This was more than appreciated by the teams of two or three men, who were typically in the field for three or four days. My crew was comprised of: BM1 Jim Taylor, EN1 Gordon Jones, RM3 Danny Hannah, GMSN Basil Harris, and BMSN Chuck White.

Without the lift from us, the Special Forces teams would have had to walk back to base. This simple act of transport was loved even more so by the teams because we were able to provide them with fresh salami and cheese sandwiches that were washed down with a cold beer (which we stored illegally aboard). Then they were able to grab some much-deserved shut-eye on the ride home.



VC Tax Station



The Special Forces team rewarded us with a tour of the Special Forces Camp at Ha Tien and walked us through their jungle live-fire trail where they were training a troop of about 200 Cambodian mercenaries.

On one of the trips back from Ca Mau to Ha Tien, I remembered the picture of the VC Tax Station. I started a conversation with one of the Special Forces Sergeants about the outpost. He hemmed and hawed a bit, which of course got my interest up, so I kept after him.

I finally posed this question: "From the picture, it would seem that you could take a couple of guys down the river with rifles and a Browning Automatic Rifle and shut the Tax Station down." "Furthermore," I said, "it was only about an hour's walk from the Special Forces compound." He finally agreed that the job could be done, so then I asked, "why not?" More wavering ensued. I was able to discern from what he said and what he didn't say that the mayor of Ha Tien was getting a large slice of the tax collection. That really got my interest going, so I pressed on: "Why do we (U.S. types) care that the mayor is getting a kickback? No answer.

I then said that I would take the issue up with my boss and the Special Forces captain who was in charge of the compound. That produced an immediate "better not do that" response from the sergeant. He then very warily implied – but never said directly – that maybe it was not just the mayor who was getting a kickback. I learned later that the Special Forces captain at Ha Tien compound was your classic mercenary soldier, a native of Poland, and not a U.S. citizen. I immediately stopped the conversation at that point, realizing that I was getting into very treacherous territory.

I never mentioned this incident to the staff at the division as I had no real evidence. It was a guess on my part, and I didn't want the sergeant to get in trouble.

When I thought back on this after burying it in my memory for forty-five years, I wondered what would have happened if I had reported the incident to the division commander and if it would have resulted in the Tax Station being taken out by the Special Forces. As it turned out, the VC Tax Station was still in place when Bernique decided to disobey orders and go after it.

It has been documented in a number of the Vietnam histories that Admiral Zumwalt, the Commander Naval Forces Vietnam at the time, had gotten at least some of his inspiration for Operation Sea Lords from Bernique's attack. Sea Lords put the thin-skinned and very vulnerable Swift Boats in the rivers and cost many Swifties their lives. If the Tax Station had been destroyed earlier, maybe Zumwalt would have had second thoughts about putting Swift Boats in the rivers and all those lives would not have been lost.

Perhaps, some memories are best left untouched....

The Little Girl From Tamassou Island

By Bernard W. Wolff

All Photos Courtesy of the Author

PCF 52 left the Swift Boat base at An Thoi in mid-afternoon and headed for the west coast of Vietnam to begin a 24-hour patrol. I was Officer-in-Charge. The whole area was cloaked in thick smoke, reducing visibility to about a mile. It was 1968, early spring, the time of year when farmers burn the straw on their harvested rice fields to provide nutrients for the coming crop and kill the insects that prey on it.

*W*e didn't see many junks, or much of anything else because of the smoke, so after a long, slow run along the shoreline with no sign of enemy activity, we headed north to Tamassou Island for dinner. We had a barbeque grill we had brought from Cam Rahn Bay, and Quartermaster Bart Barthelmeh and Gunner's Mate Jerry Thompson were good at concocting marinades that made mundane food taste interesting.

Tamassou Island, southside, An Thoi



Lt. Bernard W. Wolff was Officer-in-Charge of PCF 52 and 69. He returned from Vietnam, and remained in the Naval Reserve until 1974. He started his own chemical export business in Roswell, Georgia.



Northside Tekere Island, An Thoi

After dinner, we headed south along the shoreline for the night. Fishing junks stayed ashore because of rough seas and smoke, and then wind. The next morning was equally uneventful. The sea remained empty and the shoreline was quiet. We tried churning mud with our props as we hugged the mangroves along the shore, trying to attract enemy fire. None occurred. It was shaping up to be yet another boring patrol.

As the time approached for us to be relieved, we returned to Tamassou Island and dropped anchor off the northern side. A small sampan came out to ferry ashore our landing party, which included me. As was customary, I took along our first aid kit and some food and gifts for the local folks.

Doctors were a rare luxury. Adults and kids with cuts and sores came forward and gave thanks when we applied stinging ointment. They stood in line whispering "Bák S" (doctor) in quiet reverence, waiting for their turn.



First Aid Station on Tekere Island, An Thoi

Some kids brought a shy young girl to me, gesturing toward her crooked right forearm. She had fallen from a tree weeks before and broken it. The bones had pierced the skin, and now she had an angry red scar at the middle of her infected inner forearm. We decided the little girl needed to go to the clinic at An Thoi, and we took her and her mother to PCF 52. We were shocked when the mother returned to shore, leaving her daughter behind, alone and scared. But Bart gave her a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and she perked up. I asked her how old she was. “Mòùì lam, 15,” she said. She looked no more than twelve.

During the long transit to An Thoi, we let her have a turn at the helm, took pictures of her in the gun tub, and tried to make her feel at home. Her bright smile never faded, and she got visibly more excited as we approached the end of our journey.

About 5 P.M. we overheard a series of radio transmissions from a Swift Boat up north, telling us that a Cambodian gunboat was just over the border from Vietnam. Even though Cambodia was neutral, the gunboat would train its three-inch guns on Swifts, and we would train our .50 caliber machine guns and mortar on it, each of us running along next to the border until the gunboat anchored.

This time, however, events took a different turn. The surveillance aircraft that worked with us, a Lockheed P3 Orion with the call sign "Hurdy Gurdy 9," was in the vicinity and wanted to take a look at the gunboat. "Barbados," the Coastal Surveillance Center in An Thoi, granted permission. We listened offhandedly to the chatter, hearing the familiar voice of Hurdy Gurdy 9's radio operator, who sounded just like Smokey the Bear.

Suddenly, the tone changed: "We're pulling up! We're pulling up!" the familiar voice said. "Damage assessment unknown!" We learned later that Hurdy Gurdy 9 had accidentally entered Cambodian waters and overflowed the gunboat, which had opened fire.

"We're gonna have to ditch," a new voice said in a nervously resigned tone.

"I don't know if we're gonna make it," another Hurdy Gurdy crewman said.

I resisted the urge to come up on the radio and encourage them to ditch in the shallow waters of the area.

"We're going to try to make it to An Thoi," Hurdy Gurdy said. An Thoi had a small air field, maybe enough to land a P3, but it would be tricky. We called Barbados to tell them we would take station at the end of the runway, in case they had to ditch early. Our passenger was fascinated by the radio, and pointed excitedly at An Thoi as we reached the harbor entrance. Thank God she couldn't understand what Hurdy Gurdy was saying.

"I'm getting out of here," radioed one crewman. "I'm hitting the silk." Bart came into the pilothouse from the main cabin. The FM radio said two crewmen had parachuted. Hurdy Gurdy approached. Rather than coming directly into the airport, it went into a classic landing pattern, one of its engines blazing furiously.

The little girl was beginning to wonder why we were not going ashore. We told her something important was happening and to be patient.

And then we heard once more from the radio: "We're Ditching! We're Ditching!" with that terrible note a person gets in his voice when he is a few seconds from dying, and knows it.

"Hurdy Gurdy 9, this is Barbados, Over," the surveillance center radioed in a tearfully shocked and panicked voice.

"Hurdy Gurdy 9, this is Barbados, Over."

"Hurdy Gurdy 9, this is Barbados, Over."

We headed south at full speed, weaving our way past a series of beautiful,

peaceful, emerald islands as we charged toward the probable point of impact. Then we rounded a corner and saw the ball of smoke, cut off at the bottom, rising skyward. A villager said later a wing had separated during landing and Hurdy Gurdy 9 crashed practically nose first.

"Hurdy Gurdy 9, this is Barbados, Over."

Two landing gear assemblies were bobbing amid a wide field of surface debris.

"Hurdy Gurdy 9, this is Barbados, Over."

Feeling numb, I radioed Barbados: "Negative survivors on scene."

"Check again!"

"I'm sorry," I said. "They're all gone."

We cruised through the debris field. The little girl didn't understand why we weren't at An Thoi. I sure as hell wasn't going to tell her. I told the crew to keep her below in the main cabin. We had done this once before.

*W*e stopped at a spot where debris floated to the surface. I was steering from the after helm. Robinson, the boatswain, stood beside me with a boathook. When the human remains began to rise from the depths, Robinson retrieved them and placed them on the port engine hatch. The longer we stayed, the worse it got.

The rear hatch to the cabin opened, and the smiling face of the little girl appeared.

"Keep her below!!!" My voice was hoarse.

I looked north toward Cambodia in a cold rage, wanting to track down and attack the gunboat. I had never felt such anger before. I would never feel such anger again. I wanted revenge, and I didn't care if I died in the process. The little girl's happy face appeared at the rear window of the pilothouse. The crew politely restrained her.

Eventually more Swifts arrived, and Barbados allowed us to return to the base, drop off our grisly cargo and pick up body bags. The little girl gleefully

watched as we approached the pier, thankfully oblivious to what was on the fantail. I took her to the clinic, introduced her to one of the doctors, told him her story, and said goodbye. She held my hand briefly.

Then I went looking for body bags. I asked some volleyball players. The game stopped. One of the players led me to a small building. I took the bags and returned to PCF 52. We filled a bag, handed it over and went back to the crash scene. Later I learned that the two Hurdy Gurdy crewmen who had bailed out hit the tail of the plane and died.

Our normal routine resumed, but with one exception. Whenever our Swift Boat arrived at the An Thoi pier, I could see the little girl looking for me from the clinic window. She would rush out, hold my hand and walk with me, telling me about her progress as I went to the briefing office. Afterward she would meet me again and we would go together to the clinic and check her progress. She accompanied me when I went back to the boat and waved goodbye to all of us. Everybody in the crew brought her treats. She loved chocolate.

The bone infection was serious, but was responding to treatment, and the doctor had reset the arm so it would be normal after healing. She would need to stay several weeks before she could return to Tamassou Island.

The little girl was still convalescing when we were transferred to Da Nang. We stopped by to say goodbye. When she understood that we were leaving, her eyes filled with sadness. It was the first time we didn't see her smile while she was with us. Except for my photo, I never saw her again. I pray that she's had a happy life. 

**The Girl from
Tamassou Island**



Fire Mission

By David P. Marion

I arrived in Thanh Phu district on September 1, 1968, a brand-new Army captain (four months in grade) sent as a deputy advisor to Vietnamese militia. Thanh Phu, about forty miles south of Saigon, was a rice-growing rectangular piece of flatland between the mouths of the Ham Luong River to the north and the Co Chien River to the south. To the east, all the way to the South China Sea, were “beaucoup” Viet Cong, who threatened everything else.

The militia, known as Regional Forces/Provincial Forces, or more familiarly in U.S. Armed Forces argot as “RF-PFs” or “Ruff-Puffs,” were building a new outpost at the tiny hamlet of An Hoa, about two clicks southwest of a canal where the VC routinely set up ambushes for anyone who came close. We called this spot “B-40 Rocket Alley,” and we wanted it back. The Swift Boats, based nearby at Cat Lo, knew the district was a nasty place, and handled it with extreme care. They called it the “Thanh Phu Secret Zone.”

The Deputy Province Advisor, a U.S. lieutenant colonel, told me Thanh Phu was low priority. “Don’t expect any help to come to you in a firefight,” he warned. “We do not have the troops to send.” I should be aware of my militia’s shortcomings, he said, and “don’t get them into anything they can’t get themselves out of with what they have. Remember, your RF-PF troops are mostly for defense,” he finished. “Try not to lose any more hamlets to VC.”



Army CPT David P. Marion left active duty in 1969 and stayed in the Army Reserve until 1972. He went to work for the U. S. Department of Agriculture and retired in College Station, Texas, in 2004.

That was really reassuring. And then, when I got to Thanh Phu, I learned we had about 300 RF-PFs, many of whom were armed with World War II-vintage M-1 Garand rifles and .30 caliber carbines. The local main force VC had AK-47s and plenty of combat experience.

But the news was not all bad. I was in great physical shape and brimming with confidence, and my Vietnamese counterpart was a tough customer willing to fight deep inside VC territory. We thought alike. Our troops may have been poorly armed, and some of them were green, but we both agreed we had to push Charlie away from our villages so the mortar and rocket attacks would stop.

In late January 1969, U.S. and Vietnamese intelligence reported increased VC movement around Thanh Phu, heightening my suspicions that a major attack might be brewing near An Hoa. It was the dry season, and there was no water



Courtesy of Larry Irwin

in the rice paddies—perfect maneuvering conditions for VC foot soldiers.

On January 31, Charlie launched probing attacks at An Hoa – testing our defenses and troop strength. Intelligence said more VC were arriving, probably massing for a major engagement. Working from district headquarters at Thanh Phu, I sent two advisors on February 1 to take an M-60 machine gun and a radio to An Hoa for extra firepower and for direct communications with the other Americans at headquarters. The next afternoon one of the advisors injured his foot and needed to leave. There was nobody to replace him but me. I came in by chopper at sundown.

We had 100 men on the ground at An Hoa, all of them untested new recruits and all of them armed with outdated weapons. The outpost was half-built with

a five-foot wall around it and one circle of barbed wire to discourage bad guys. No mines, no overhead cover. From a defensive standpoint we were practically naked. The M-60 covered our right flank, pointing southeast. I found a small hole where a tree had been removed, spread my poncho and laid down for a catnap.

The VC hit us in a coordinated mass attack at 1:15 A.M. on February 3. I knew about it immediately when a mortar round exploded with a flash and a loud bang on top of the outpost wall about twenty yards from my hole. So much for the lieutenant colonel's advice now. Charlie was trying to overrun us. I hit "transmit" on my radio and called out in plain English: "Fire Mission – Uniform Sierra (U.S. forces) in contact! We need help NOW!"

A voice responded immediately: "This is Perky Bear Hotel." I knew from the call sign that I was talking to a Swift Boat somewhere, but the voice seemed strange. Was it a VC with our radio frequency? I asked the "voice" to identify, and again I heard, "Perky Bear Hotel." I asked again:

"Goddamn it, give me your name," I screamed. "Who are you – in the clear, now!"

"I'm a Swift Boat," Perky Bear answered.

"Roger, Copy," I replied, finally satisfied. "Fire mission, fire mission!" I passed along target coordinates.

But nothing happened. The VC pressed the attack, but the ARVN (Vietnamese Army) artillery at Thanh Phu was holding them off, firing on enemy mortar positions and at the infantry trying to reach the outpost. But then suddenly, in the light from an ARVN star shell, I spotted a new wave of VC coming at us on the right. I asked Thanh Phu for help, but they were too busy firing on the first set of attackers to shoot at anything else. We seemed to be out of options.

Then, like the answer to a prayer, the radio crackled and Perky Bear Hotel came back on the air. They were ready to fire. I sent them the new target. The first rounds landed in the middle of the VC flanking attack, disrupting and slowing them down. "Target correct," I radioed. "Fire for effect."

"Rounds on the way," replied Perky Bear. Right on the money. I could smell the cordite drifting over the outpost.

"Shift, LEFT FIVE ZERO" (50 yards left), I radioed, and began walking the rounds across the VC, then back to the right, then directly toward me. The VC assault faltered, resumed and dissolved into several piecemeal attacks. Perky Bear called in: he was out of HE (high explosive) rounds. "Shoot Willy Pete (white phosphorus incendiary rounds)," I said. After a few of these, I radioed "danger close" and walked his mortar rounds practically to the outpost wire.

At that point, the explosions stopped. Perky Bear came back on the radio. He had a problem, he said, and had to stop firing: "We've done all we can, and we've got to leave." But they had done enough. The effect was devastating. Scattered VC elements came closer, but the M-60 and the RF-PFs stalled and eventually broke the attack. We had held them off, losing three dead and 13 wounded. ARVN intelligence later estimated a VC battalion of between 400 and 500 troops had attacked us.



Pictured are Regional Force Troops from RF Company 246 with CPT David P. Marion, Advisor to the Vietnamese Troops, standing tall behind the soldiers. This photo was taken a few days after the battle.

Courtesy of David Marion



I never forgot that night. I served six more months in Thanh Phu, came home, became a civilian and went to work for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, but An Hoa for me was always unfinished business. I needed to know who had saved my life and those of the RF-PFs that were with me. I attended Navy meetings and reunions, polled other Navy buddies from Cat Lo and looked for an after-action report, but I could never find a trace of Perky Bear Hotel or its crew.

In June 1995, I took my 26-year-old daughter, Raye Leigh, to Washington D.C. for the dedication of PCF 1, to be put on permanent exhibit at the National Museum of the U.S. Navy. The ceremonies and reunion lasted three days, ending on Father's Day. Raye Leigh and I had breakfast that last morning with several Swift Boat sailors, including Wey Symmes and Bill "Hot Dog" Franke, who I had never met. Franke, as a young ensign, had served as Officer-in-Charge of PCF 56, and Wey was his radarman and leading petty officer.

I asked my usual question about a Thanh Phu fire mission and, as usual, got nothing but blank stares. But when I said "Perky Bear," Wey turned to Bill, "Didn't we do one patrol just before we went to An Thoi?" An Thoi was another Swift Boat base. "Remember that time a round got stuck in the mortar tube?"

Bill seemed to recall something like that. And yes, that was the night someone under attack was calling for fire support. "And the guy on the radio kept yelling at me to identify myself."

We compared notes. I went out to my car and got an old map. I showed it to them. They weren't sure where they had been, but they remembered being warned about a collapsed bridge in the narrow waterway leading into the rice paddies, and the bridge was on the map.

It was them. I knew nothing about them, except that they had saved my life, and they knew nothing about me – a disembodied voice on the radio fighting a

battle they could hear, but couldn't see. A cascade of emotions and memories came rushing back.

"What took you so long to open fire?" I asked. I had always thought they were north of us on the Ham Luong River, within easy range of our outpost.

But they weren't, they explained. They were on the Co Chien River to the south, and had to drive the boat more than six clicks up the waterway to get to a place where they could reach the VC with their mortar. And leaving the main river at night violated Standing Orders from Cat Lo. This may have been why Bill, an ensign on his first patrol, didn't file an after-action report.

And they had to tiptoe into the canal because another boat had told them about the bridge: "If you go balls to the wall, you'll hit it and kill the whole crew," Wey had told Bill. On the way in, they crashed through a log barrier, dodged fishnets, backed out after taking a wrong turn, and then, finally, found a firing position. And everything went fine until the mortar round got stuck in the tube. Nothing you could do about that. They had to get back to Co Chien before the VC found them. They did not know they had come in through the same infiltration route the VC used to get in position for their attack.

We finished breakfast and rose to leave. Raye Leigh turned to Bill and Wey, "Thanks for giving me my Daddy," she said. She was born in Texas three weeks after the battle at An Hoa. 🚢



After the accidental meeting on Father's Day, June 18, 1995, the three families gathered for a photo (from left to right): Wey and Terry Symmes, Raye Leigh – Marion's 26-year-old daughter, David Marion, Bill Franke and his two daughters. Raye Leigh finally had the opportunity to thank Bill and Wey for saving her Dad's life.

Courtesy of David Marion

Regarding Henry

By W. Henry Inabnett



First View

All Photos Courtesy of the Author

The thump of the landing gear brought Henry to the plane window where he looked out on white sand beaches and blue ocean, all of it bathed in brilliant sunshine. Henry had read about the violence in the Republic of Vietnam. He didn't know what to expect, but it wasn't the gorgeous coastline at Cam Ranh Bay.

On that summer day in 1968, Henry knew a bit about the war. But mostly he regarded Vietnam as a potential source of memorable and dangerous adventures. As a boy in northern Louisiana, he had led others in exciting expeditions and competitions along wooded streams and lakes behind his house.

Many of his experiences then – the burning thirst, swimming vast distances – were in his mind. He learned about the outside world from television. He dreamed of far-off places and, from programs like “The Silent Service” and “Victory at Sea,” he figured the Navy was his best ticket to adventure.

Henry's father was a civil servant with two years of college, which he had obtained at great personal expense, and he wanted his son to get the degree he couldn't have. But Henry meandered through high school and dabbled in college, always focused on his desire to wander the world. Naval Officer Training School wouldn't take him because he didn't have the grades, so he enlisted in the Naval Reserve. Three years later he dropped out of college and went on active duty. Soon he was a radarman aboard a Navy oiler operating off the Vietnamese coast, but the only action he saw and heard were nighttime flares and the thump of artillery echoing from distant beaches.

Radarman Third Class W. Henry Inabnett

finished college when he returned from Vietnam, and retired from the Naval Reserve as an Operations Specialist First Class. He managed credit unions for thirty-five years, before retiring near Austin, Texas.

So he volunteered for Swift Boat duty. He had only a vague idea of what the boats did, but they were 50-ft. long, traveled very fast, had twin .50 caliber machine guns in a turret above the pilot house and a third .50 mounted on top of an 81-mm mortar on the fantail. Each boat also carried an M-60 light machine gun, M-16 assault rifles, a handheld grenade launcher, a shotgun, two .38 caliber pistols, and grenades. Swift Boats worked close inshore.

Henry first met Lt. (jg) John Roland during Swift training at the U.S. Naval Amphibious Base, in Coronado, California. Roland, a U.S. Naval Academy graduate from Georgia, became Officer-in-Charge of Henry's boat. Henry was the radarman, tending the communications gear and the electronics. There was also a quartermaster, a gunner, a boatswain and an engineman. Near the end of training, Roland was given a choice of where he wanted the crew to be deployed. He picked the Mekong Delta. Later he told Henry he thought the Delta would provide more variety and more interesting missions. He was right.

Up until 1968, Swift Boats patrolled Vietnam's inshore coastline to cut off waterborne supplies to the Viet Cong. But Henry flew south with Roland and the rest of the crew on a different assignment at Coastal Division 13, in Cat Lo, at the northern edge of the Delta. Their job was to work the rivers. This was not Cam Rahn Bay. There was no white sand and no blue sea.

Roland and his crew took over PCF 35. Their primary job was to spend two or three days at a time patrolling river commerce – inspecting shorelines, water taxis and sampans, looking for contraband and checking for suspicious activities. Henry got to know the Mekong's tributaries like the back of his hand.

Henry inspects a fishing boat.



Henry grabbed an M-16, dropped extra clips in his pockets and hooked several incendiary and percussion grenades into his belt. The boat punched the canal bank and Roland, Henry and engineman Bill Clark jumped from the bow and walked to the hut. There was nothing inside and nothing in the fire pit.

They re-boarded the boat for the trip out. PCF 100 was in the lead now, with the 35-boat following. Roland spotted a cluster of huts under some trees, perhaps seventy-five yards from the canal bank. He signaled Henry and Clark to get ready. The huts were empty, but there was a dirt bunker on the edge of the compound, also apparently empty.

Henry tossed a percussion grenade into the bunker. Nothing. Then, after several failed attempts to light the thatched walls of the huts with a cigarette lighter, incendiary grenades were used to burn the roofs and walls.

They returned and both boats fired aimlessly into the underbrush on either side of the canal as they continued out of the canal. Suddenly, Henry saw a cloud of smoke and a heard a roar of machine gun fire – no longer random – coming from PCF 100. The boat turned to port toward the canal bank and then suddenly veered away. Then he saw something else.

"Hey, there are two guys in the water!" Henry shouted.

PCF 100 had been ambushed from a firing position near the huts that PCF 35's crewmen had just inspected. The first rocket had hit forward, near PCF 100's pilothouse. Two more hits came from recoilless rifles. More B-40 rockets and recoilless rifle rounds flew overhead and detonated on the opposite canal bank.

Clark on the trail.



The 100-boat engineman, stationed on the fantail, knew that damage forward had crippled the pilothouse steering, so he used the after helm to put the boat back on course for the canal mouth. He had no idea that O'Grady and forward helmsman Jim Lloyd had been blown into the water.

Rockets flew over PCF 35 as it approached O'Grady and Lloyd. Henry grabbed the ten-foot long boat hook and reached for the two men. O'Grady grabbed the hook with one hand and the collar of Lloyd's flak jacket with the other. Henry pulled them alongside, but their flak jackets were so weighted down with water that Roland

couldn't bring them aboard. O'Grady grabbed a towline dragging in the water: "Get out of here!" he yelled.

PCF 35 edged forward, but O'Grady couldn't hold the towline. Enemy small arms fire continued to flash from the riverbank, and Roland ordered the boat to maneuver between the ambush and the men in the water. "Leave us and save yourselves," O'Grady yelled at one point.

Eventually they were hauled aboard, but even then, the firefight wasn't over. A shoulder-fired rocket slammed into PCF 35's main cabin just aft of the pilothouse. All the windows were blown out, and Henry saw grey smoke spewing from the openings. The rocket splintered inside, spraying shrapnel that destroyed the radar and radio equipment.



The rocket splintered inside, spraying shrapnel that destroyed the radar and radio equipment.

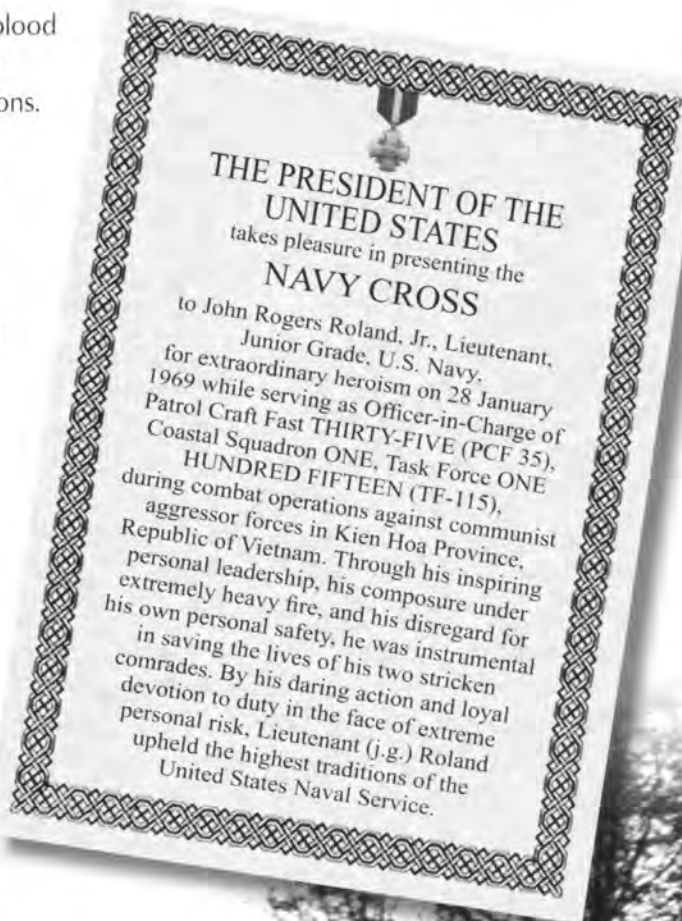
Henry sat in the bow, firing his M-60, surrounded by empty shell casings. As soon as they cleared the canal he went aft to the fantail, kneeling beside O'Grady, whose left leg was burned and pocked with bloody shrapnel wounds from foot to thigh. His left boot was in shreds, and Henry removed it, but left the sock. He bound the leg cautiously with battle dressings. The crew's first aid training was limited, and Henry didn't want to make anything worse.

Roland had tried to radio for a helicopter MEDEVAC before PCF 35 left the canal, but all the boat's communications were destroyed. Luckily, however, there were two heavy riverine craft at the canal mouth. Thirty minutes later the wounded were airborne.

The 35-boat crew hosed the blood from the fantail, swept the empty brass over the side and ate C-rations. Then they returned to Cat Lo. O'Grady and Lloyd were going to be all right.

John Roland was awarded the Navy Cross. Henry and his other PCF 35 shipmates received the Navy Commendation medal with Combat "V". Gerald O'Grady got a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart; he spent five months in the hospital and left the Navy with a "slightly shorter" big toe on his left foot.

Henry went home in July 1969 and saw the first moon landing on TV in Louisiana. He was 23, and he had found adventure. 



The Original Arnold Horshack

By Paul D. Johnson



I met up with Arnold Horshack in 1969 when I got orders to PCF 12, stationed at An Thoi. Horshack and I came aboard about the same time. We were the whole crew at that point, as the previous bunch had all gone home. Horshack (not his real name, but close) had already spent several tours in Vietnam. He was a skinny little guy, maybe five-foot seven-inches tall with black hair, a short scruffy beard and a beaded necklace with a peace medallion that attracted quite a bit of hostile attention from the higher-ups. Horshack didn't care. I soon learned that Horshack didn't care about a lot of things, most of them having to do with discipline.

He was the only guy I ever met who claimed that he never went to Swift Boat school. Instead, he told me, the Navy sent him to An Thoi from boot camp. When he arrived no one knew what to do with him (his words to me). Finally, the Executive Officer sent him to an LST off the coast of the Ca Mau peninsula, which was serving as a forward base for Swifts to refuel and resupply. He was supposed to fill in as a relief crewman for those who went on leave or R&R, or who went home.

After three months of this without a break he noticed that regular PCF crews only had to deploy for thirty days before returning to An Thoi for rest and boat maintenance. Nobody was saying anything to Horshack, so he caught the next boat back to An Thoi to find out what was up.

The next day he shows up at the ship's office and asks to see the XO, who takes one look at Horshack and lets out a gasp. *Where the HELL have you been?*

"I've been right where you sent me three months ago. I need some time off," Horshack says. "What gives?"

The XO ran to the radio room. "Have you sent out that MIA report on seaman Horshack yet?" he shouts. "Well, if you have, please stop it and change the seaman's status to present and accounted for!!!"

And now we're together on the 12-boat. Eventually, the rest of the new crew shows up and then we're underway for Ha Tien, a port town on the river that separates Cambodia and South Vietnam, near the Gulf of Thailand. Our base is a couple of barges tied up next to some disheveled buildings. Charlie has been

EN2 Paul D. Johnson left the Navy after Vietnam and served for thirty years as a Chief Engineer for the U.S. Merchant Marine. He retired in Seattle, from Washington State Ferries.

using the area forever to smuggle troops, ammo and supplies into Vietnam. We're supposed to stop him.

At dusk the first day we travel upriver for a "night ambush," a fairly simple op in which we are supposed to find a convenient tree, tie up, kill the engines, douse the lights and wait until bad guys try to cross the river from the Cambodia side to Vietnam. Then we grease them.

We set up, and I'm on watch with Horshack in the bow, trying to keep the mosquitoes from eating me alive on a dark, muggy night. Then Horshack notices something on the riverbank and calls to me to look. I don't see anything.

"There's a trail in the bushes," he says.

"Big deal," I say.

He says "I'm gonna see where it leads."

"You're crazy," I say.

He lowers himself to the riverbank, swinging hand-over-hand down the mooring line. Then he disappears into the jungle. I tell the boat officer. He says, "Why didn't you stop him?" Sure, you bet.

Then I'm back in the bow all alone, hot, sweaty and swatting the mosquitoes. I wait for what seems like most of the night before I hear a voice from the darkness:

"Hey, Johnson, can you give me a hand?"

"Where have you been?" I ask.

"Here take this, and be careful. It's live."

Whereupon he hands me a nasty, looking pancake shaped thing with spikes sticking out of it. It's a land mine.

"Set it down and help me with the rest," Horshack says.

"I've got five more."

"What the hell have you been doing?" I ask.

"Exploring the jungle," Horshack says.

I remind him that we aren't supposed to go off on our own.

"Don't worry so much," he said. "Nothing happened, and everything is okay."



Then the sun comes up and it's time to get back to Ha Tien. We're going full speed because it's harder for Charlie to hit us when we're traveling fast. Horshack is the bow gunner, but pretty soon he's back on the fantail with a land mine. There isn't enough room up forward for him, his mines and his machine gun. "I have to do something with them." He sets the mine down on the fantail and walks back to his battle station to get the rest.

Before he returns with the second one, the first one is sliding around the deck every time we careen around a river bend. I am beyond upset. I tell Horshack he's got to secure his trophies. He piles them in the center of a mooring hawser laid on deck in a circle. Now any incoming can obliterate us with one lucky shot – and me first!

Eventually we slow down and I call Ha Tien and tell them I've got a buddy with Explosive Ordnance Disposal. Can he meet us?

He's standing on the fuel pier when we come alongside: "What's the big deal?" he asks.

I point to the land mines. The EOD is a warrant officer and a pretty crusty guy, but his eyes almost shoot out of their sockets. "Where in the hell did you get those?"

Horshack is summoned to explain. He retells his tale, with new details. After he jumped off the boat, he quickly found the trail he had spotted and followed it for a quarter-mile until it dead-ended in a main road of some kind. That was far enough, he decided, and turned around.

On His Way Back, along the same road, he noticed some spikes sticking out of the ground in the middle of the trail. He had seen a lot of war movies and decided this must be a land mine.

He took out his trusty K-bar knife and started probing the mine to locate the edges. Once he accomplished this (like in the movies), he dug the mine out and lifted it from the ground. Then he spotted another one. And another. Eventually he reached the boat with an armload of six. The fact that he had walked the whole minefield outward bound without triggering anything does not seem to concern him.

The EOD guy listens to all this and scratches his head. He doesn't know what to make of Horshack.

"Somebody get me an empty pallet board," he says, finally. "Has anyone got some parachute cord?" One sailor brings him a shot line. The EOD guy ties one end of the line to the pallet and lowers it over the stern of the boat into the river. He lies flat on the deck while we hold his legs.

"Carefully hand me one of those land mines," he says. He puts the first one in the center of pallet and adds the rest, one-by-one, carefully arranging them so the pallet doesn't tip over. Then he slowly lets the line out until the river floats the pallet and its cargo downriver about 300 yards. He calls for a marksman to take an M-14 rifle, find a high spot, "and, when I call out, shoot the pallet."

At this point there's a big audience. The sailor with the M-14 shoots and misses. Then he misses again. But the third time: BOOM!!!!!! Great theater. It was like Charlton Heston parting the Red Sea in *The Ten Commandments*.

Then the EOD guy turns to me. Time to cut me a new you-know-what, for bringing six live land mines out of the woods, driving them down the river and having them on the fantail when we tie up to the fuel barge.

I remind him that Seaman Horshack is the one who did it. He doesn't care.

"Don't do it again," he tells me.

"Yessir." What else can I say? I hand him the bottle of Jack Daniel's I've got stashed in my seabag.

Horshack, of course, skates, beaded necklace and all. 



THE 12-BOAT

By Paul D. Johnson

During my year in Vietnam from May 1969 to May 1970, I spent about eight months based at An Thoi, a small island in the Gulf of Thailand. It was not unusual to serve on several boats during the tour. Some were swapped out at overhaul. Others just required different crews due to end of tour, R&R, sickness, wounds, or, in some cases, death. Some boats remain etched in my memory. This is about the 12-boat. Let me tell you, it was no prize.

I was all alone and unassigned at the time, as was PCF 12. I have always felt this was not a chance meeting. Another guy who was in similar circumstances was Gunner's Mate Horshack, a stranger to me at that moment, but soon to be a valued colleague in misfortune.

I'm in the engine room and Horshack is on deck, so we divide up the jobs to get the old girl in shape. I change the oil and filters, strip the fuel tanks and check for spare parts and tools – details that always seem to haunt me later if I let them wait. My credo is to trust no one. When you have the time, the parts and the repair shops, you do the work.

Horshack is doing the same thing topside – checking mooring lines and supplies of toilet paper and food, and making lists of what is and isn't on board. Then we turn to the practical: Does the stove work? Do we have a gun tub cover? Radios? Check. Then we look at the guns, ammo, spare barrels, grenades and mortar rounds. Best to inventory the ammo locker for quality and toss anything that looks dicey. Just like mom used to do in the refrigerator back home.

The rest of the crew shows up. We decide to take this baby for a test drive. It doesn't go well. At full throttle, the rudder wants to be between four to six degrees to starboard or the boat won't go straight. I speculate that someone had the rudders off and didn't realign the linkage. I also discover that the port engine is misaligned and the packing gland that encases the port shaft is all messed up. It's worn on one side and the shaft is running in an uneven orbit, doing a kind of horizontal hula. This, I now notice, is because the port engine mount is uneven. *Good Lord.*

EN2 Paul D. Johnson left the Navy after Vietnam and served for thirty years as a Chief Engineer for the U.S. Merchant Marine. He retired in Seattle, from Washington State Ferries.



Courtesy of Larry Irwin

We decide to have the tender pick her up so we can get a look at the outside of the hull. But as soon as we maneuver the boat beneath the crane, I hear groaning from the tender's crewmen: "Oh, no, not that pile of junk again," he says. Then another: "Call the welders and tell 'em to bring their MIG (arc) welder. They're going to have a long day."

"So, okay guys," I ask. "What's the big deal?"

I learn that our pride and joy during its last patrol was traveling on one of the rivers at full speed when some VC on the riverbank detonated a water mine close by. It was about the size of a 50-gallon oil drum. So the boat, weighing twenty-seven tons and moving at 23 knots, suddenly leapt between six and nine feet into the air. I'm getting the picture.

I seek out some sailors who know something about this. One seaman tells me he was riding on the bow of the boat, directly behind PCF 12. One moment he was looking at her stern, he said, the next moment he was staring at the hull six feet in the air with both screws still going full speed. The force of re-entry ripped the port engine from its foundation and tipped it over on its side. Soon the starboard engine stopped. In the end, the rearranged mess of 12-Boat had to be towed out of the river by other Swifts. Thank God no one was killed, but several crewmen went to the hospital and were subsequently reassigned.



Courtesy of Larry Irwin

The engineman working at the base at An Thoi was one of the crew. He tells me he can no longer ride the boats as he has broken several vertebrae. When the mine went off, he says, he soared into the air along with everyone and everything else. He landed on the fantail on some ammo cans, and all kinds of ammo and other stuff landed on top of him. As he lay there, he felt something warm and wet on his face. He reached up and discovered his entire upper body was covered with liquid. His thick glasses had shattered and he couldn't see. He started hollering that he was shot and dying, but when rescuers arrived they didn't seem particularly concerned. He was covered with motor oil from a busted jerrycan.

Everyone on the boat was injured, he continues, but some fared worse than others. The gunner, manning the twin .50 caliber machine guns in the forward gun tub, went up in the air along with his weapons, his gun ring, his counterweight and the cans of ammo that surrounded him. He did a front flip and landed upside

down in the tub, his feet sticking up in the air, his arms were pinned by belts of ammo wrapped around him like a fouled fishing line. Rescuers had to de-link the ammo by hand to get him free. During the firefight, defenseless and unable to move, his legs were kicking in the air like a trapped squirrel, as bullets whizzed through the gun tub without hitting him. This sort of horrid experience can provide years of nightmares.

We finally get to look at the boat out of the water. It's not a pretty sight. All of the hull plates are punched inward like upside down soup bowls. From the lazarette to the forward end of the main cabin, all of the hull plates have this concave appearance. There are cracks everywhere. The rudders are in their correct positions as near as we can tell. We speculate that the keel is bent, even though we don't have the equipment to measure it.

We now turn our attention to the port engine. It's in a sad state. I ask if anything can be done to fix the alignment. Not much hope, I am told, unless we take out the engine and build a new foundation. This would require a trip to the yard at Cam Ranh Bay...ain't gonna happen. The machinists do what they can, but it's not much.

So we went on patrol and tried to take it easy. We could run full speed, but the port shaft was never properly aligned, so we had to apply right rudder constantly. It was one sad ride. After a couple of months of this, our whole crew got pulled off, and a bunch of fresh-faced rookies took over. And they were the ones who got to take the 12-Boat to Cam Ranh. I guess they wanted to make sure the old salts stayed in the combat zone.

I have come to the conclusion that the 12-Boat's sad story is one of command hubris. The powers that be did not want to scrap the boat and credit the opposition. Whatever happens, don't put one in the enemy's win column. And if mechanical failure aboard this crippled lady causes heartache or loss of life, one merely has to fill out a casualty report to explain it all away: "Lost at sea with all hands aboard." But never: "Lost to enemy action."

So welcome to the fray, young men. Line up like the cannon fodder you are, and accept your fate. Those on high can take comfort knowing that they will neither suffer from our mistakes nor will they be required to learn from them. *C'est la guerre.* 

What the Hell am I Doing Here?

by Ted Kenny

I have asked myself this question several times during my life. I remember asking it on more than one occasion in the surface Navy, and probably daily in Vietnam while on a floating beer can called a Swift Boat.

I have always loved the water. The year was 1967 and most everyone was serving whether they wanted to or not. The Navy was a natural for me and it became even more imperative when I reported to my induction physical at Fort Hamilton, in Brooklyn. The standard "turn your head and cough" and "bend over and spread your cheeks" routine suggested to me that the Army was not the way to go.



Lt. (jg) Ted Kenny, USNR, 1967-1970, served on a Swift Boat in 1970. After separating from the service, Kenny pursued several careers, among them: V.P. of an investment firm, custom home construction, V.P. of Sales at IDEX Microsystems, after which he returned to the brokerage business and ventured into commercial real estate. In 2012, Kenny retired with his wife in Colorado.

But real fear reared its ugly head when a fellow inductee had an eye exam. The medic shouted over to the sergeant that this guy couldn't see out of his left eye. The non-com barked, "Can he see out of his right eye?" "Affirmative," came the reply. He passed the physical. *Oh my God. They are taking any warm body.*

Meanwhile, however, I was waiting for orders to Navy Officers' Candidate School in Newport, Rhode Island, and it was a race to the finish. I won. I raised my right hand and joined the Navy at the very moment my Army induction notice was being delivered to my parent's house. Thank heavens for small favors.

My first two years as a line officer were uneventful and even offered spare time in one of the country's best cities, Boston. My ship was in the yards and I decided to put off reading Tolstoy's *War and Peace* in favor of cavorting from one end of town to the other. The XO actually told me once that he was grateful I had duty every four days so my liver could have a rest.

There in Boston I met the cutest gal, who would eventually become my wife. She was living with four girls I went to Georgetown with. It was love at first sight, but I couldn't go quietly. Sure enough, we had not just a lover's quarrel, but a full-blown breakup before I left.

The plot thickened. Enter Stage Right, my Detailer – the guy in Washington who allegedly looks after you when you need new orders. "Where would you like to go?"

"Just get my ass out of here," I said.

"East Coast? West Coast?"

"Just get me out as fast as possible."

Long deliberation and thoughtful reasoning were not always my MO.

Six weeks later I had made up with my girlfriend – wife to be – and the phone rang in the ship's office. "It's for you Mr. Kenny." Uh oh, the Detailer! He told me I was going to Coastal Squadron One. Hmm, I thought, staff duty. How nice. I asked about the location of this outpost.

"In-country, Vietnam."

"Oh."

"Just what am I going to be doing?"

"You will be the Officer-in-Charge of a PCF."

"What's that?"

"Look it up in *Jane's Fighting Ships*," he said, and hung up.

So, as you see, I didn't quite volunteer. On the other hand, I truly felt that if a guy with a wife and kids was over there, it wasn't my time to bail.

Fast-forward to a Flying Tiger 707 coming into Cam Ranh Bay, 1970. We had left Seattle in late afternoon and followed the sunset across the wide Pacific. The plane's running lights were darkened, and I was now farther from home than I had ever been.

As we taxied to a halt, I could feel the oppressive heat even in the middle of the night. Inside the terminal we were briefed and I noticed a chap of Asian descent darting to and fro with an Army issue nine-volt battery strapped to something. *Holy Sh-!* He's got a bomb, and I'm not even here thirty minutes. Of course, it was a transistor radio tuned to Armed Forces Radio.

So I started my tour. I had 365 days and a wake-up to go. Start counting. But first I had to make many startling discoveries that weren't particularly combat-oriented. The beaches were vast and unspoiled. Saigon still had most of the trappings of a slightly seedy, delightfully wicked French colonial port city. Vung Tau, on the sea at the northeast corner of the Mekong Delta, was in many ways a resort. Do fifty or sixty days in the jungles and canals and then have a wonderful dinner with a vodka and tonic.

Yet SeaFloat – our Swift base on floating barges moored in the middle of an estuary deep in the Ca Mau Peninsula, offered a totally different reality. Agent Orange rendered lifeless anything from the shoreline inland for 100 yards. No hustle and bustle. We owned 500 yards of water and wasteland in the middle of nowhere. The other side owned the rest.

The Brown Water Navy was an apt description for where we were and what we did. Prolific tide changes reminded me of a toilet being flushed. The banks oozed mud and you shook your head as you watched one villager brushing his teeth, another washing clothes and a third taking a dump within shouting distance of each other. I sure hope they switched sides when the tide turned.

I was twenty-four years old, "Captain," "skipper," "boss" or "Ted" depending on who was talking. I was responsible for five crewmen and a 50-foot boat. There were no watches. I was on all the time. The guys were great, but I was the man. If I caught a catnap I was inevitably jolted awake when the engine speeds changed a mere 50 rpms. Guns. Positions. Radios. Code books...keeping everybody up and alert...Ain't nobody but me holding this thing together.

Train all you want, the most amazing and challenging part was making split-second decisions. You tried to skew the odds, but you realized if you screwed up there wasn't much latitude. You had a bit of a swagger. You were a Swiftie. But you tried to keep your emotions and arrogance in check. We were playing for keeps.

There were, of course, hijinks. Some planned. Some embarrassing. One colleague and his crew had fallen asleep when their boat plowed through some guy's hut from the bedroom to the living room. Although funny at first, the reality of invading these people's world was sobering. Sometimes you just couldn't make it right. And their lives were changed forever. I felt for the villagers who had probably traveled to a city maybe once in their lives, even though it may have been only ten miles away. You got the feeling they didn't care if we were VC or American. *Just leave us alone.*



SeaFloat

Courtesy of John W. Yeoman

There was a camaraderie among fellow officers and crewmen that can't be duplicated. We lived on boats, barges and barracks, ate crappy food and laughed and kept each other safe. Arguments were rare. That was the one thing that was probably not healthy for anyone.

Another was that we actually liked a fast pace. We did several patrols in a 24-hour period; time passed quickly. And the scariest part was that it did become our home. You fell into a rhythm. A routine. You haven't lived until you've showered with ice cold water provided by a cistern. There were so many mosquitoes it sounded like JFK airport at night.

Every so often you had "Merry Go Round watch," where one boat circled the base and a nest of moored Swifts and other gunboats. We continually dropped concussion grenades on our loop to ward off sappers, all the while gunners from the base were firing 50-caliber rounds into the woods to keep them low. We dealt with it. *Life's a bitch. Then you die.* Hope not.

So many years have passed. Memories foggy. We always err on the plus side and embellishment seems to be the order of the day. But my thoughts aren't on this rice paddy or that one. I can't remember the names of the rivers and checkpoints. To this day, I have no affinity for guns or high capacity magazines.

I think I have earned the right to speak of war as a horrendous waste of money and men's and women's lives. Not as a Vietnam veteran against the war. Not as a pacifist. Just as a thinking person who looks at the facts and draws an obvious conclusion about the futility of such folly, as the few pursue power and domination. And then, once again, I have to ask, "What the hell are we doing here?" 

ENDGAME

By Robert O. Lincoln



The five Mark III Swift Boats in the foreground and final eleven USN Mark I Swift Boats in the background are assembled for turnover to the VNN at Cat Lo on December 1, 1970.

All Photos Courtesy of John W. Yeoman

Supposedly, the shipmates you bond with during Swift Boat training are the same men you spend the year with in Vietnam. Your crew, the instructors told us, was for keeps.

Maybe at the beginning, but by the time we got to Cat Lo in mid-1970, things had changed. The Navy was turning over all the American Swift Boats to the Vietnamese, a process that was supposed to finish December 1. Guys were going on R&R, finishing their tours, or getting early outs and going home. New crews were not crews, it turned out. I went upriver to a place called Sa Dec, and the rest of my training mates filled in other blanks wherever – placeholders until turnover.

Soon I found myself twenty miles deep inside Cambodia aboard PCF 54, with a bunch of strangers. I had replaced a veteran who was probably going home. I had 360-some days and a wake-up to go. Man, would I ever get out of here?

Turnover began with a trip 200 miles up the coast to Cam Ranh Bay for overhaul. PCF 54 was dented, beat-up and leaking from countless encounters with everything from stone piers to B-40s. We were supposed to swap it for a reconditioned, turnover-ready rehab.

RD3 Robert O. Lincoln left the Navy in 1972. After a career working in the furniture industry and, eventually owning his own business, Lincoln retired in northern Michigan.

This event was a welcome interlude. We washed away the river mud with the gorgeous swells of the South China Sea. The harbor at Cam Ranh was like something out of a movie – surrounded by mountains with water so clear you could follow the fall of a dropped quarter for thirty feet.

PCF 54 looked like an abandoned orphan next to our spanking new PCF 87, and we were happy to have it. I still didn't know much about the rest of our crew. Our Vietnamese crewman would disappear for weeks whenever he wanted to go home, then get arrested and reappear without explanation. Then there was "Ski," a loud-mouthed New Yorker who threw a tantrum when they tried to make him an advisor to the Vietnamese Navy. He stayed with us while they set up his court martial in Saigon.

Back at Cat Lo there wasn't much left for us to do. Vietnamese boats handled all the coastal patrols and most of the routine river work. That left "make-work" for us. Really nasty make-work.

PCF 87's last American-crewed mission began November 10, 1970. Together, with PCF's 45, 97 and 692, our assignment was to raid Dung Island, on Rach Eo Lon, a VC stronghold southwest of Vung Tau, and find a large arms cache there and destroy it. To do the job, we were using "Kit Carson Scouts" – former VC who had come over to our side.

As we approached the island I noticed a ten-foot square billboard with an English inscription that read: "Americans who enter will be killed."

...Can't say they didn't warn us.

I was the bow gunner on the lead boat, but without a gun mount. I had to shoot my M-60 from the hip. This was called "John Wayneing" it. When you weren't shooting you cradled the M-60 like a baby. When you were on full automatic, you hung on for dear life to keep the gun from jumping out of your hands.

We turned into a canal so narrow that tree branches on either side made me sit down. I couldn't see anything. We stopped, and the Scouts got off the boat. They found the ammo dump, but instead of blowing it up, they returned to the boats carrying armloads of rockets.

What the hell? I thought. *Talk about stupid. Why in God's name are we doing this?*

We made it back to the relative safety of the big river just before dark. Sometime around then, listening to the boat officer in the pilothouse behind me, I learned that the big shots back at the base wanted to show off the size of Charlie's ammo cache. We couldn't blow the stuff up. We had to bring it home. Even during the last days of American Swift Boats, by God, we could prove we weren't doing make-work.

So instead of an "attaboy," the big shots told us to go back the next day and pick up more ammo. *Are you kidding?*

We did it again, this time with a feeling that our luck could run out at any moment. The Scouts made trip after trip to the cache, and stacked the ammo high on the boats, so the big shots could eyeball it and take pictures.

Still no “attaboy.” We needed to go back one more time, they told us, and, finally, blow up what was left of the cache. I wondered: *wouldn’t it be easier – and safer – to use Black Ponies, Cobras or mortars? We have the exact coordinates. Did the big shots really think Charlie would let us humiliate him three days in a row?*

It was November 12, 1970. We got in again without trouble. The Scouts went ashore, blew the ammo dump and came back to the boats. Now, I thought, all we have to do is get out of here and make it to the big river. But in the meantime, if Charlie wanted to find us, all he had to do was hold out his hand. We were that close to the riverbank.

As we turned into a fork in the canal I heard a blast behind me. Charlie had finally fired a rocket, but it had detonated between two boats. No damage. Even better, someone saw the smoke trail as the rocket left the jungle. We drove straight at the spot. Seconds later I was fifteen feet deep in the forest, carpeting the ground with bursts from my M-60.

The firefight ended. Scouts jumped from the boat to do a quick body count. The big shots have to have their body count. I never learned whether there were any bodies to count. It was still a long way to the big river, and we needed to focus on getting there alive.

PCF 87 was second in line now. Just ahead to starboard was a barren mud field denuded by Agent Orange. To port was dense jungle. Then I heard another explosion. The boat jumped ahead, throttles to the floor. Standard procedure. Get the hell outta here – clear the kill zone.

Except the helmsman suddenly turned sharply to starboard and beached the boat in the empty mud field at full speed. I had a split second to drop the M-60 and grab a support bar to keep from being thrown overboard.

And then silence. I looked around at the helmsman sitting in the pilothouse behind me and started screaming at him for almost killing me. He interrupted. We’ve been hit, he said. The throttle was jammed.

I jumped up and ran the six or seven steps down the port side to the fantail. Then I froze, for five seconds, or maybe it was five minutes...I don’t know.

“Linc!” the boat officer hollered at me as he climbed out the door of the main cabin. “Get blankets over these men!”

I started to move, except there was no place to put my foot. I couldn’t see the metal surface of the boat. A rocket had hit a Scout in the chest and detonated, spraying blood and innards everywhere.



Black Ponies arrived then, and miniguns poured fire into the jungle all around us. Other boats came alongside to take some of the wounded. I knelt beside a young Scout whose dark eyes looked into mine. His body was ripped open from throat to crotch by a gash that looked like it was eight inches deep. I couldn't believe he was still breathing, and I was terrified that I would drop him as I helped transfer his stretcher to another boat. But I didn't.

As we were being towed back to a support base, the Scouts' American advisor screamed at us, challenging our manhood because we weren't cleaning the body parts off the deck with our bare hands. Sorry big shot, I thought. I'm using individual body armor plates from blown-apart flak jackets to push remains off the boat, but the advisor had a point. The sun was baking the gore onto the deck and we had to go faster. I used my hands.

Back at the base our boat officer joined the other officers for cocktails and to sleep in a clean bed. My two unharmed crewmates and I scrubbed the boat for most of the night and tried to sleep in the filthy main cabin.

They told us only two people died in that firefight. Nobody asked me, but part of my soul died as well. I'll never forget the sight and the stench of the dead and dying on the fantail of PCF 87.

I couldn't figure out why we were sent to Dung Island three days in a row for a job that could have been done another way in a couple of hours. Was it stupidity or arrogance? This type of leadership, I figured, could cost you a war.

As for the men I served with, I couldn't tell you. There was the tall skinny guy and the guy with the spider-web tattoo covering his back. Never saw them again. I think the guy in the gun tub was named Brown. The quartermaster was blond and the boat officer was Irish. I'm the guy who threw the hearts, lungs and shinbones into the river.

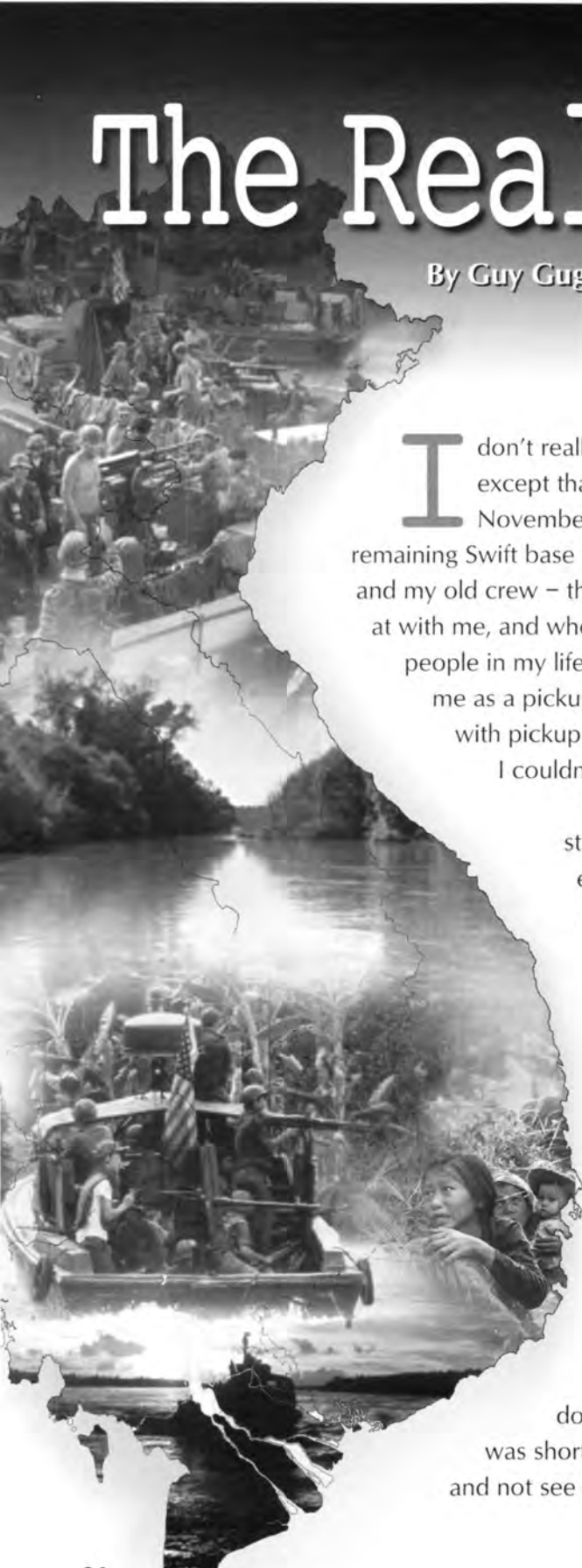
PCF 87 was the last U.S.-crewed Swift Boat to be hit and take casualties. Three weeks later we handed it over to the Vietnamese. 

Pictured is Lt. (jg) John McGuinnis' PCF 87.



The Real World

By Guy Gugliotta



I don't really remember leaving Vietnam, except that it happened sometime in early November 1970. I was at Cat Lo, the last remaining Swift base that hadn't been Vietnamized, and my old crew – the five guys who had been shot at with me, and who had been the most important people in my life – were already gone. That left me as a pickup Officer-in-Charge working with pickup crews. They were nice folks, but I couldn't tell you their names.

That's probably because I had started to check out. Like everybody else, I had spent a lot of time thinking and talking about *the Real World*, as in, *when I get back to the Real World, I can get ice cream anytime I want, or, when I get back to the Real World, I won't ever drink warm beer again, or sleep on a plastic mat with mosquito netting wrapped around my face; or wear clean clothes that feel like they've been treated with fire retardant; or smell charcoal cooking fires everywhere I go.* I had counted down my year day-by-day, and I was short – “so short I can sit upside a dime and not see over the edge.”

Lt. (jg) Guy Gugliotta worked in New York, Latin America and Washington D.C. for thirty-five years for *United Press International*, *The Miami Herald* and *The Washington Post*, before leaving *The Post* to become a freelancer. Gugliotta is the author of *Freedom's Cap*, about the building of the U.S. Capitol, and co-author of *Kings of Cocaine*, a history of Colombian drug trafficking.



And then it finally happened. I'd like to tell you that going back to the Real World was ecstasy – deliverance from evil, dawn of a sunny day, a heavy sigh of relief. Or even that it was a horror – night sweats, problems coping with everyday tasks, inability to carry on a coherent conversation. But reality for me was difficult to describe. Still is, truth be told.

It still surprises me that my departure remains a mystery to me. I know I went to Saigon, because it was the only place you could get out, but even though I had hardly ever seen the place, I couldn't tell you what I did there or even if I spent the night. I know I flew home on a charter jet filled with servicemen, but apparently I didn't have profound thoughts before takeoff, or I would be able to tell you what they were.

I remember only two things. The first was the one-hour stop-over in Anchorage, Alaska, and the walk down the long, wide, bleak, badly lit corridor leading to our U.S.-bound flight. Halfway along, we passed the passengers coming in the other direction on their way to Vietnam. I had made that walk nearly a year earlier, depressed, scared and wondering why the returning guys weren't joking and laughing, teasing us and giving us the finger.

Now I was a returning guy, and I wasn't joking and laughing, either. Instead, I felt separated from myself, an unpleasant feeling that I would come to know well in the coming months. This wasn't me walking down the polished corridor, I thought. I didn't belong here. I belonged...No, not there... Anywhere, ...but not there.

The second thing I remember was landing at McGuire Air Force Base in central New Jersey. I don't know what I expected as a Real World introduction, but zero is what I got. It was four in the morning and there was nothing at all except an empty parking lot and a van to take some of us to Kennedy Airport. The driver lived in Trenton, and one of my fellow passengers grew up there. They talked non-stop the whole trip, treating this like it was an early morning commute. I felt like we were on Mars.

When your tour ended, the Navy would fly you anywhere you wanted to go in the United States. I picked Boston, where I had spent a lot of time as a Navy ensign raising hell at local saloons. Where better to acclimatize myself to the Real World? I had no history in Boston, I knew almost no one, and if I screwed up, no one would see me. Much later, I realized that I must have suspected that the Real World might not be the hoped-for cakewalk.

I got to JFK at dawn, bought a standby ticket and went to the gate. The stewardess (we called them stewardesses then) saw my uniform and put me in first class. Working people always cut us a break. In those days everybody had either served or had family who had served.

I reached Boston around 8 A.M. I had an old Navy friend who put me up for a few days. My plan was to get out of the Navy and spend some time and money (I was loaded after spending most of the year on Uncle Sam's nickel), while I figured out how to be a civilian. Only then would I fly home to San Francisco, see my folks and try to resume my romance with the girlfriend I suspected had abandoned me during my long absence.

I checked into the airport hotel at Boston intending to take a nap, and slept for nine hours. My buddy picked me up, took me to his fiancée's apartment and left me there. He was in business school, which made him somewhat frantic almost all the time. The fiancée was nice. I drank scotch with her and watched Monday night football for the first time ever.

My buddy said I was taciturn and reserved. I shrugged. He had to study; I wanted to party, but when we tried that out, I was bored. I called my girlfriend. I tried to make a joke. It felt wrong. I was nervous. She was nervous. This isn't me, I thought...the Anchorage feeling again.

I didn't, however, entirely take leave of my senses. I visited the First Naval District office the morning of November 9, 1970, and was separated from active duty after enduring a pep talk from a lieutenant commander about why I should stay in, go to destroyer school and become CO of a tin can when I was thirty-seven. I was barely twenty-four. Destroyer school? *Are you sh-ing me?*

My Boston stay did not improve. I felt like a foreigner, and my buddy and I no longer seemed to speak the same language. Maybe it would be better if I went home, I thought, so I left early and flew to San Francisco. My girlfriend apparently hadn't found anyone else, or maybe she just hid it well, but, indeed, we were finished. I didn't accept this right away, and I was devastated.

I realized much later that this experience, dreadful though it was, offered a useful insight that I had missed completely. Vietnam was supposed to be dangerous, terrifying and traumatic, and it was. But war is also very simple. They feed you, clothe you, sell you cheap drinks, plan your schedule, define your goals and show you a movie every night at 1930 hours. There was nothing you could do about your girlfriend, so give it a rest. You'd think about it later.



Well, later was now. In the Real World you had a love life – or not. You had to talk to children, women and old people. You had to buy presents for people, call people on the telephone, pick up orange juice on your way home, make an appointment for your little brother at the orthodontist. The Real World was complicated and emotional. You could hurt someone's feelings. Someone could hurt your feelings. The Real World was dangerous, terrifying and traumatic.

So, okay, I opened a bank account, got a driver's license, did my own laundry (with detergent), read western novels by Louis L'Amour and began to think about what to do next. Maybe it wasn't anybody's fault that my girlfriend and I couldn't get back together. Maybe I had changed, and my relationship with the Real World needed to change. *Figure it out.*

How different was I? Once a notorious big mouth, I now had little to say, and everybody noticed that. But there were other things. I no longer cared what people thought about me. And, except for my parents, who, bless their hearts, didn't bother me or ask me any questions, I didn't trust anyone.

This was bad because I could be a very cold bastard. But it was good, because it was hard to hurt me, and I no longer paid attention to minutiae. I took the Graduate Record Exams and scored 250 points higher than I had scored on the College Boards. I was a great interview – able to communicate with potential employers with utter clarity. Being in Swift Boats – a discipline that taught no obvious marketable skills – had apparently given me a boundless capacity to focus. I had needed that in the Delta. Apparently, it was also useful in the Real World.

I decided that I wanted a career where I would go to exotic places, and that Latin America would be best. I don't know why I got this idea, but it, too, probably came from Vietnam, an atavistic urge to seek out uncertainty and adventure. And I had a little Spanish.

I spent some time in Monterey, California, at a small school that accepted graduate students in Latin American Studies, and then went to New York to study international affairs at Columbia University. I would join a non-profit or become a diplomat.

I had no closure with my old girlfriend, no interaction with my old friend in Boston, and no correspondence with my crew in Vietnam. But now, although I still had the Anchorage feeling, I also understood that I was separating from my old life. The new me, not a person I really knew or liked yet, was now my Real World. *Get used to it.*

One thing that hadn't changed was my attitude toward school. I had no patience for it. Novelty got me through Monterey, but my resolve was now fraying badly. I signed up for a heavy course load so I could finish a semester early. I took the Foreign Service exam and passed it. I needed to hang on for six more months.

The course book offered three graduate credits for an internship at the New York desk of the news service *United Press International*. No final, no paper, just spend Wednesdays doing "rewrite," whatever that was. I showed up at UPI and was put to work at one of a dozen huge Smith Corona manual typewriters. "Take in City Hall on line four..." the editor said, by way of introduction, and walked away.

I picked up the receiver: "Gugliotta," I said.

"Yeah?" said a voice, and began dictating a story. I looked around. My woman colleagues could all type, but the guys used only two fingers or four, they looked at the keys, hit them way too hard, jammed the carriage and made a lot of mistakes, which they fixed with a pencil. *I can do this*, I thought.

The next week was more of the same, except I came in later and was supposed to stay later. By 6 P.M. I was the only person left in rewrite. Around then the cops called. A teenage mugger had killed a Columbia professor on Amsterdam Ave. as he walked to the Harlem train station.

"You're at Columbia, right?" said the deputy night editor, a woman my own age with an extremely loud voice. "Find out about this guy..."

A reference librarian at Columbia filled me in on the man's entire life with effortless dispatch. I shouted some of the details to the deputy editor.

"Gimme three graphs," she said, and turned back to the phone. I pounded out three paragraphs and handed them to her.

"That's good," she said. "Gimme the rest." I kept typing.

She wrote the story again and I gave her three more paragraphs. Then she did a "writethru" with feeds from our on-scene reporter, from the cops and about 250 words of background from me.

"That's great," beamed the night editor. He turned the dial on the radio, running the drive time stations. "Everybody's using our stuff."

Teletype machines were clanging "Bulletins" and "Urgents" that I had helped write. Telephones rang off the hook. People were shouting across the room to make sure the story got on the national wire. I stood up.

Maybe I was still feeling my way into the rest of my life, but for the first time in a while I had the answer to something: *They pay you to do this in the Real World?* Wow, I thought, *sign me up.* 

Legacy

By Suzanne Edwards

All Photos Courtesy of the Author

My father, James C. Edwards, to hear him tell it, was something of a rabble-rouser as a teenager in Wheeling, West Virginia, so it came as no surprise to anyone when he hit former President Herbert Hoover with an egg during a spring parade in 1956. It was all in fun, but the cops were not amused, and they hauled him off to the judge. His predicament was described to him this way:

"Young man, it is your choice," the judge said. "Go directly to juvenile detention, or march yourself down to the recruiting center and sign up for the Army." My father – again no surprise – enlisted a few weeks later, on June 17, 1956. He was sixteen. I don't know whether he had to lie about his age.

Funny story? It was practically the only thing my siblings and I, and even my mother, knew about my dad's thirteen-year service career in both the Army and the Navy. He retired as an E-5 gunner's mate after his last assignment aboard a Swift Boat in Qui Nhon. He never talked about that, nor did he talk about why he would not talk about it. He would become evasive and withdrawn if you pushed him. He never hurt us, but we learned not to ask. But I always wanted to know, and sometime around 2003, I decided to find out. This is his story – and, in many ways, my own.

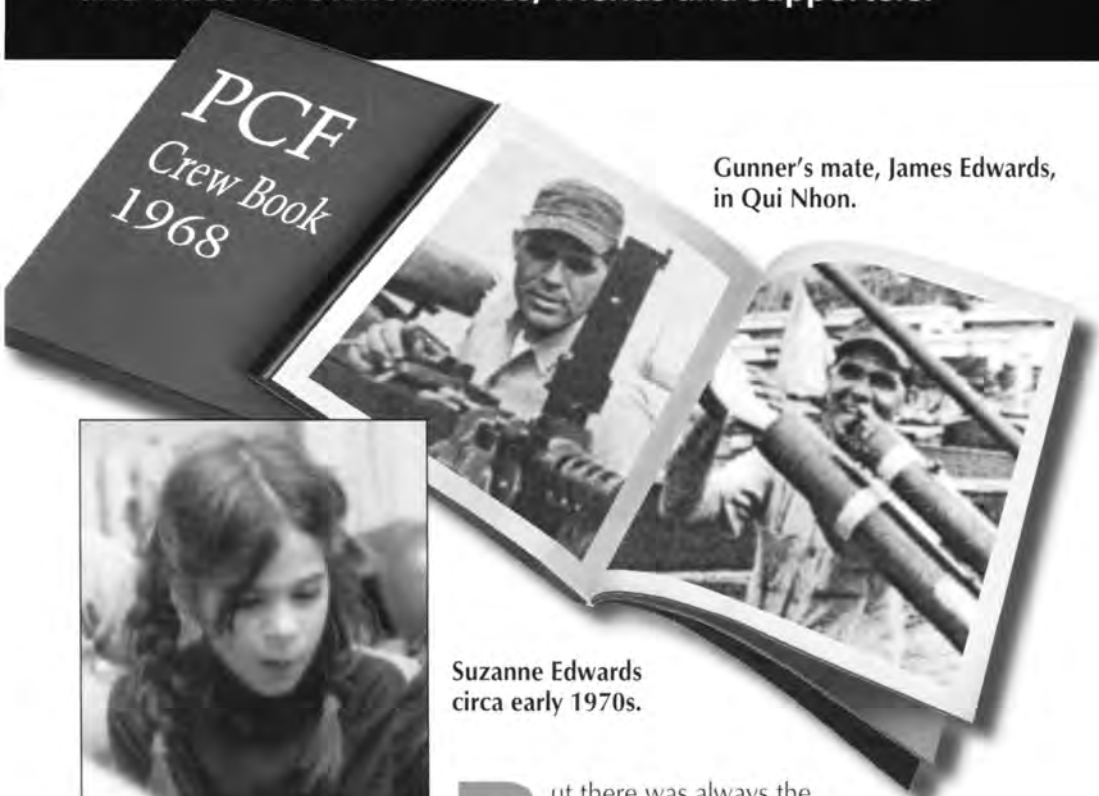
My dad served in the Army First Division, the "Big Red One," for four years, then re-upped in the Navy as a gunner's mate. He became a tin can sailor, serving on three different destroyers and then made his way to Qui Nhon and the Swifts in 1968.

"Things happened there," he said once, but only once.

I guess I always knew this. I remember being around four years old, sneaking into my parent's bedroom one morning to "surprise" my father. Before I jumped on him, my mom stopped me. "Never try that again," she said. Long afterward, I found out that dad always slept on the floor during those first years home from Vietnam, so he wouldn't hurt my mom after having night terrors.

Don't get me wrong. I loved my father desperately, and as a young girl I felt loved and protected by him, even if he was not wholly accessible. He could laugh heartily, debate politics, sing " 'A' You're Adorable" to my mom at large family parties and call me Maran when he lifted me up and shook me into my tights for Sunday school. (My middle name is Katherine, which became catamaran, which became Maran ... you get the picture....)

Suzanne Edwards, of Thornton, Pennsylvania, founded a website in 2013, "Legacies of Swift Boat Sailors," to preserve and promote the history of Swift Boat sailors and to serve as a repository for documents, photos, film and video for Swift families, friends and supporters.



Gunner's mate, James Edwards, in Qui Nhon.

Suzanne Edwards circa early 1970s.

But there was always the line I could not cross.

Once I thought it might be funny if I let the family dog wake him up. I let Bear jump on his bed to kiss him, anticipating that he would gently chastise me and then hug me and laugh at my devious plan. Instead, he sprang to his feet, knocking the dog to the floor. He was enraged – the kind of anger that you can feel. I ran. He never yelled at me. He never said anything at all. But I got the message – *Don't do it again.*

We lived in Drexel Hill and Aston, Pennsylvania. Dad worked hard in security and as a warehouseman, drank his beer, watched war movies and hummed country music songs. As a teenager I began to understand that he struggled with overt closeness, even with those dearest to him, and I began to wonder why. He never offered a real reply, but that was okay because deep down I knew I would always be daddy's girl.

I grew up, got married and had a son. Two peas in a pod they were. This little man was this grown man's best friend; he protected him as though he was his own, and palled around with him like he had never done with his own kids. Maybe he trusted him more, because he was innocent and didn't know granddad's issues.

One afternoon in 2003, when Nick was about six, we were all together, when I heard my dad call for me. He was watching yet another documentary on the Vietnam War. He wanted me to come in, because his boat was on television. I remember thinking how odd this was after so many years. The Swift Boat was smaller than I had pictured it. Actually, I guess I never really pictured it at all. At first he was excited, but then the all-too-familiar look washed over his face. It's hard to explain, but it was like the five stages of grief in one sweep, transforming a smile into a distant gaze.

Still, maybe this was an opportunity, so I took a risk. Father's Day was approaching, and I decided to see if I could find the perfect picture of the Swift Boat I saw on TV and give it to him. I worked as a paralegal, and knew how to find things. It wasn't hard. I searched "Swift Boats" on the Internet, and, of course, there it was. Not only pictures, but names – his name and the names of his shipmates. Was this Pandora's Box? If I showed him what I had found, would I lose him altogether? I loved him deeply. My intentions were good, and he would understand that. *Go for it.*

I handed over the package like a peace offering – a means, I hoped, to soothe the conflicts within. He opened the package and said nothing. He looked at all the pages and said nothing. He put it all back in the envelope and said nothing. He turned back to the television and said nothing. Fair enough. No verdict. So I said nothing.

The next day I visited again, just to sit beside him. It was our way of being close. I was shocked when he pulled out the package. It sat on a table in the middle of the room. I waited. Finally he spoke, asking if I had talked to anyone mentioned in the pages? "No," I said, but I had found more information. For a moment his eyes gleamed. He wanted to know what else I had. "Not much," I said. I wanted to get his service record. "Permission Granted," he said with a slight smile.

Eventually it came. He began to feel safe telling me some things, and then more. He wanted me to contact his shipmates, make sure they were alive. He was letting me in, not all the way, but eventually enough so I could learn about the event that had most troubled him for so many years.

It happened on November 8, 1968. The previous day my dad had done maintenance on PCF 89 before it went on patrol. On November, 8, PCF 89 went to sea and was called upon to provide 81-mm mortar support for an Army unit under attack. The boat started to drift and the crew ceased firing, until the boat could be anchored more securely. Orders came once again to commence firing. There was a sudden loud explosion, a flash and then an awful stillness. Two men were dead and three severely injured.

My dad was distraught when he heard about it. He had just worked on PCF 89's mortar. Had it jammed?

Five days later word came down: the explosion was caused by the accidental double-loading of the mortar when firing resumed. My dad hadn't caused it, but this, I had long ago learned, was cold comfort. Intellectually he might have known he was not to blame, but he carried the guilt with him for the rest of his life.

On May 8, 2010, I went to sit with my dad again, but this time at the hospital. Dad had long suffered from COPD and was battling cancer. I brought him a strawberry milkshake. He asked me to sit down, and told me he had made a decision. It was his time, he said. He didn't want to struggle to stay alive anymore. I was heartbroken and said so. "Don't be afraid for me, I am not afraid," he said. "Don't feel pity for me. I have chosen my own destiny. Don't try to fight me on this. I have lived with integrity and should be allowed to die with dignity. What you can do for me is to sit here and hold my hand, talk to me even when I don't respond and live with no regrets." He died the next day. It was Mother's Day.

You would think the story would end there, but it doesn't. One day in 2008 I was online looking at Facebook when a page entitled "Swift Boat is a Noun... (not a verb)" was offered as a suggested group. At the time, I was deep into my search for people who may have known my dad, so I joined up. I soon met "Kat," whose father, like mine, served on Swift Boats in Qui Nhon. But my father had come home, while hers had died on patrol.

Nearly three years passed. We talked often about our fathers, our kids, our life experiences. We leaned on each other during bad moments, and shared secrets. Kat got divorced and took her maiden name – Katherine Wallace – again. The surname seemed oddly familiar. I brushed it off, of course it was familiar, she was my friend.

Then suddenly I knew. Her father, Lt. (jg) Richard Wallace, was one of the men who died in the mortar explosion on the fantail of PCF 89. Kat and I had been friends for three years. My dad had died. It was time to ask for the forgiveness he had sought for all those years. I let Kat know what I had figured out, and told her that my dad always believed he was partially responsible for her father's death, even if he was not the direct cause.

Kat brought closure. She and her family had learned long ago what had happened on that day, she said. They knew it was an accident. My father had nothing to do with it. He could finally rest in peace. Two daughters, both of us burdened with what I call "Second Generation Legacies," had found each other by chance at the right time, in the right place, for the right reasons, and we had been able to finish the story. Perhaps this is now our legacy of the Vietnam War. 

A Noble Quest

By Virgil Erwin



Maltese artist Edwin Galea generously donated one of his latest watercolor paintings to the Maritime Museum of San Diego. The painting shows the Museum's Swift Boat as she appeared while in service under the flag of the Maltese Navy. Galea depicts P23 and P24 (now PCF 816 in the Museum's collection of historic vessels), under way in Sliema Harbor, Malta.

In 1971, the U.S. Navy donated two Swift Boats to the newly formed Republic of Malta and their Maritime Squadron. The relationship between the Swift Boat Sailors Association and the Armed Forces of Malta's Maritime Squadron began in 2003 when Major Ivan Consigilo, Public Information Officer, and Bob Shirley, a Swift Boat skipper and historian, set up a ham radio connection during a Swift Boat reunion in both countries, enabling sailors to exchange stories about daring feats at sea.

In 2008, Major Consigilo contacted Virgil Erwin, another former Swift Boat skipper living in San Diego, and told him that Malta's two boats were retiring from service. He proposed donating one of them, for restoration and preservation, to the Swift Boat Sailors Association. This, he said, would create a lasting bond between the Swift veterans of both seafaring nations.

Lt. Virgil Erwin left the Navy after Vietnam, and retired in San Diego after a career in sales and marketing. He authored *Cat Lo – A Memoir of Invisible Youth*, which portrays his experiences as the skipper of PCF 67 and the years following his service as he struggled to integrate back into civilian life.

Dr. Ray Ashley, President and CEO of the Maritime Museum of San Diego, had promoted the history of Swift Boats for many years, having visited the Vietnam Unit Memorial Monument on the Naval Amphibious Base in Coronado, where Swift crews had trained. Dr. Ashley, cognizant of the significance of the Swift Boat's maritime heritage, offered to support the SBSA in its wish to restore one of the Maltese boats to faithful period appearance and operational capacity, to certify it as a U.S. Coast Guard documented vessel, and to exhibit and operate it both as an artifact and as a living history experience.

Dr. Ashley's vision was to educate visitors by memorializing the history of Swift Boats, both in Vietnam and in service to the Republic of Malta, and, by operating the boat, to provide the kind of experience that no static display could match. The exhibit would also amplify the Museum's mission to show the public how U.S. small combatant naval vessels had contributed to the nation's war power from the first days of the republic to the present.

The Swift Boat, once restored, would be used to carry passengers on narrated tours of the naval facilities in San Diego, and would be crewed and commanded by Swift sailors as long as possible, or by small combatant vessel captains holding U.S. Coast Guard licenses.

At the request of Dave Wallace, then-Chairman of the SBSA, Dr. Ashley met with the Maltese ambassador to the United States in Washington, D.C., and talked with Maltese Defense Minister Vanessa Frazier, to convey the SBSA's and the Museum's historical commitment and desire to create a symbol of international friendship. Dr. Ashley also met with all five U.S. congressmen from San Diego, who signed a joint letter of support and sent it to Malta.

Members of the SBSA traveled to Malta in 2010 to present the plan to the Maritime Squadron, to Minister Frazier and to LCDR Phil Webb, the U.S. Naval Attaché at the U.S. Embassy. As a result of these efforts, the Republic of Malta awarded one of their boats (P24) to the SBSA and the Maritime Museum of San Diego.



In November 2011, the SBSA sent three Swift Boat sailors to Malta to conduct a thorough survey of the donated Swift Boat in preparation for restoration and to arrange for fabrication of a custom-made cradle strong enough to withstand a trans-oceanic voyage. The delegates also formally asked the U.S. Navy for a "Lift of Convenience," in which the Navy would honor Swift

Boat history with a ceremony

and bring the boat home aboard a Navy ship.

The delegation met with General Martin G. Xuereb, Commander Armed Forces Malta, Colonel David Mifsud, Colonel Procurement and Logistics, and Colonel Wallace Camilleri, Commanding Officer Maritime Squadron, the senior officers who had reviewed and endorsed the SBSA/Maritime Museum proposal. The delegates presented a dramatic painting of a Swift Boat in Vietnam to the Maltese Armed Forces, and it was displayed at the Maritime Squadron headquarters.

And in a meeting with Minister Frazier, the delegates thanked her for her support. She described their plan as an "exceptional" proposal. The delegates then presented her with the SBSA Challenge Coin: "I understand I'll need this in my pocket the next time I'm in a bar with a bunch of Swift Boat sailors," she said jokingly. "Otherwise, I'll need to buy a round."

Minister Frazier said that both Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Senator John McCain were aware of the project and interested in supporting it. Retired Vice Admiral Ed Martin, who was a POW with Senator McCain, asked McCain, as a personal favor, to do all he could to assist with the Lift of Convenience.

During their visit, the SBSA/Maritime Museum delegates were escorted by Lt. Marco Cauchi, who had served as the last Officer-in-Charge of Maltese P 24. The delegates were impressed with this selfless gesture, knowing very well what it is like to give up a cherished boat, as happened when the United States donated all its American Swift Boats to South Vietnam.

Lt. Cauchi recounted stories about thousands of refugees he and his crew had rescued from leaky boats that had foundered on the voyage across the Mediterranean Sea, from North Africa to Europe. One mother had given birth in the main cabin, he said. Lt. Cauchi also escorted the visitors to see a memorial honoring seven sailors lost in a violent explosion aboard Malta's other Swift Boat.

The delegates found a skilled maritime craftsman, Stephen Ellul, in Malta, and he quickly fabricated a steel cradle to secure the Swift Boat for the trip home. His energy and enthusiasm were emblematic of the unflagging hospitality and support that the SBSA/Maritime Museum team encountered in Malta during what eventually became four separate visits.

In January 2012, the U.S. Navy announced that the USS *Whidbey Island*, (LSD 41) would visit Valletta, Malta, to take the Swift Boat aboard and deliver her to Norfolk, Virginia. A group of Swift Boat sailors hurriedly flew to Malta to help bring the boat to the wharf where the *Whidbey Island* would moor.

But on the day before the *Whidbey Island* arrived, the delegation received a phone call from the senior legal staff officer for Admiral Harvey, who commands all U.S. Navy ships in the Atlantic. "We have a problem," the officer said. "There is a federal law that says any country who has received military equipment from the United States may not sell or donate it to another country without first receiving permission from the Department of State."

The delegates told the officer that Secretary Clinton knew about the plan and approved it. Also, the Swift Boat was coming back to the United States. *Wasn't that good enough?*

"No, Malta needs to make a formal request in writing and get a formal response from the State Department," the officer continued. "And there're a few more things. The Department of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms needs to approve importing this boat back into the U.S. as it is considered an Implement of War."

But all the guns had been removed, the delegates told him. There were no weapons aboard.

"They still need to approve this," the officer said. "And two more things – you need the Department of Agriculture to inspect the boat for any possible marine contamination. If we put your Swift Boat on our ship and pull into Norfolk, and USDA says it's contaminated, we can't get rid of it until that problem is fixed. What if we need to respond to some military situation; we can't be stuck with your boat on our flight deck. Do you understand? Oh, and you need to check with both Malta and U.S. Customs before you move that boat. U.S. Customs and the EPA will want to know about the engines you have in that boat, and if they meet current pollution restrictions...."

The USS *Whidbey Island* enjoyed its Malta visit and departed boatless for Norfolk.

It took an additional six months for all of the requirements to be fulfilled and properly documented. But when it was done, the SBSA/Maritime Museum team called Admiral Harvey's legal officer to tell him the good news.

"Something else has come up," he said. "There's another law...since you are not a federal agency, we are not allowed to help you if commercial transportation is available."

Over to Plan B

That was when Mark Gallant, the Operations Manager for the Maritime Museum of San Diego, stepped in. A man of incredible energy and focus, he soon found space on a Maersk cargo ship departing Malta in July 2012, and arriving in Norfolk two weeks later.

Col. Mifsud immediately ordered an official military dedication and turnover ceremony. Dignitaries from the Republic of Malta and U.S. Ambassador Gina Abercrombie-Winstanley attended. Bagpipes played and Swift Boat sailors from both nations saluted as the Swift Boat was escorted out of the harbor en route to her cargo transport. Those saying good-by were not dry-eyed.

The ship was met in Norfolk by Kit Copeland, a six-foot-eleven giant accompanied by an eighteen-wheel truck and trailer – transportation for the Swift Boat to San Diego. Kit had a disarming dimpled smile and a southern accent, but he was all business, and...he had some problems to deal with. After the crew had removed the radar mast and gun tub, the boat was still three feet over the sixteen-foot height limit (from the ground to the topmost section), with little road clearance.

And the boat was fourteen feet wide – eight feet is standard. And...it was 43,000 pounds, 3,000 pounds over standard regulations. Even if it had not been too tall and overweight, Kit still needed to apply for permits for every state he would travel through from Virginia to California. And each state designated what roads he could use. And he could not travel at night, or on weekends, or during commute hours when near big cities.

It took two weeks of back roads and limping under low hanging power lines and tree branches. Kit said, at regular stops at truck scales, “When I entered the scale, I’d pop the brakes. That would make the scales go deep into the ‘red,’ but then as the rig rebounded up, the scale would go into the ‘green’ and I’d accelerate to move on fast before the scale came back down to red. I broke more rules and laws getting this boat to San Diego than in my entire thirty-five year career.”

All along this remarkable trip, Swift Boat Sailors found Kit, following him, meeting him at overnight stops and buying him his favorite drink, Dr. Pepper. Even highway patrolmen wanted to see the boat and meet the driver, and ask about where the boat was coming from and where it was going.

Finally Kit, wearing a big, well-earned smile, arrived at Shelter Island in San Diego at the end of August, 2012. A dozen Swift Boat sailors followed him into the parking lot with two quarts of chilled Dr. Pepper.

Within days the restoration process had begun, with thirty-five Swift Boat sailors coming from all points of the compass to bring her back to the condition she was in when she had first raced through San Diego Bay in 1968.

When they started to peel off forty-four years of old paint, the restoration team was thinking the job would only take a few months.
No such luck. 



Courtesy of Brad Holderman, MMSD

The Gallant Effort

By John W. Yeoman



Courtesy of Brad Holdeman, MMSP

Left to right: Neil Geis, Virg Erwin, Bob Bolger, Don (the escort driver from Arizona to California), Kit Copeland (Truck Driver), Mark Gallant, Dave Hansen and Terry Boone.

PCF 816 arrived in the parking lot of the Koehler Kraft Boat Yard, on Shelter Island, in San Diego, on August 29, 2012, to the cheers and applause of a dozen Swift Boat sailors. It had been just over three years since Major Ivan Consigilo, Public Information Officer for Armed Forces of Malta, had contacted Virg Erwin about returning PCF 816 to San Diego, where it had begun service training Swift Boat sailors in 1968. PCF 816 (formerly the Maltese vessel P 24) had made a two-week voyage from Malta to Norfolk, Virginia, as cargo aboard the M/V *Bavaria*, a Maersk containership. In Norfolk, the boat was loaded onto a lowboy flatbed tractor-trailer that had six inches of road clearance because of the size and weight of the boat. Truck driver, Kit Copeland supervised the loading of the 1968 vintage Swift Boat. At six-foot-eleven and well over 300 pounds, Kit was a friendly and formidable character. He was an independent trucker with thirty-five years of experience, specializing in hauling marine vessels. His skills were soon put to the ultimate test.

The fourteen-day trip from Norfolk to San Diego covered 3,270 miles across ten states. When compared to the distance, as the crow flies, of 2,322 miles, or the suggested AAA driving route of 2,688 miles in five days, it became clear what effort and skills were needed to get an oversize, heavyweight load safely from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

Lt. (jg) John W. Yeoman skippered PCF 37 and PCF 692 in Vietnam. He also served as tactical commander of combined PCF, SEAL and helicopter attacks in the canals of the Mekong Delta. After leaving the Navy, he earned an MBA from the University of Chicago. He then worked as an investment banker in New York, as a skipper of megayachts and tugboats in San Francisco, and then moved to Maui, and into a position as a Financial Advisor for Morgan Stanley Wealth Management. In 2012, John created a booklet about PCF 816 to solicit donations for its restoration.

Along the route Kit had to use back roads to avoid highway overpasses and curfewed driving hours, plus making detours around major cities. Over forty-five Swift Boat sailors joined the convoy periodically as escorts. During these stopovers, they learned that Kit strongly favored drinking liter bottles of Dr. Pepper during a long day's drive. One day, Kit's supply of Dr. Pepper dried up. Dave Hansen, a Swift Boat sailor from Arizona, who was escorting the truck in his 2006 Monterey Red Corvette, peeled off from the convoy and found a 7-Eleven convenience store that had a sufficient supply. Dave rejoined the convoy several hours later by relying on his Monterey Red Corvette's ability to maintain a 100+ speed without attracting any unwanted attention.

After one of the trips to Malta, with a contingent from the Swift Boat Sailor's Association and the Maritime Museum of San Diego, Mark Gallant, the Maritime Museum's Director of Operations volunteered to be the full-time project manager to acquire, transport and restore PCF 816. Those from the Swift Boat Sailors Association thought this was a great idea. Mark had spent over four years at the Maritime Museum as Director of Operations, overseeing all the Museum's programs and special events that take place aboard all the ships. Ray Ashley, President and CEO of



Courtesy of Neva Sullaway, MMSD



Courtesy of Neva Sullaway, MMSD

the Maritime Museum, also thought that making Mark project manager was a great idea, provided that Mark continue doing all that he was currently doing at the Museum. Mark realized the implications, but took up the challenge with his usual “Can Do” attitude. Thus began The Gallant Effort to acquire, transport and restore PCF 816.

From August 29 to September 18, 2012, PCF 816 floated in a slip at the Koehler Kraft Boatyard. On September 18, with fifty Swift Boat sailors aboard, formally dressed in Navy blue Swift Boat shirts and starched, pressed khaki pants and blue ball caps, the boat was towed to the Maritime Museum’s dock for a welcome home ceremony complete with U.S. Navy officers, San Diego City officials, the Navy band and over 150 Swift Boat sailors and friends.



Courtesy of Maggie Walton, MMSD

The next day, restoration and The Gallant Effort got underway. What was initially thought to be a relatively modest restoration project of tuning up the engines and freshening the paint quickly became a complete overhaul and partial rebuild. A few of the projects included:

- Sanding the hull down to bare metal from the waterline to the keel and applying a ceramic primer coat and finish coat.
- Cleaning the fuel tanks.
- Replacing all the fuel lines.
- Removing and replacing all of the electrical wiring, distribution panels, controls, lights and switches.
- Chipping and painting the hull from the waterline up, as well as the decks and superstructure.
- Restoring the pilot house, main cabin and forward berthing.
- Cleaning and painting all the bilges
- Removing and restoring the main engines.
- Re-installing the main engines and aligning the transmissions and propeller shafts.
- Restoring the battery bank.



Courtesy of Maggie Walton, MMISD

All these projects and quite a few more were to be accomplished in time for the boat to be operational at the Swift Boat Sailors' Reunion on May 10, 2013. At first, seven months seemed to be sufficient. By the end, it was a close call, but The Gallant Effort prevailed.

On September 18, PCF 816 was towed to The Marine Group Shipyard in Chula Vista where most of the work would take place. Swift Boat sailors started arriving as volunteers to help with the work. A total of thirty-five volunteers contributed to the effort and a core group of nineteen quickly became known as "The Dirty Boat Guys". Using needle guns, grinders and sanders was dusty, dirty, and gritty work. Wearing filter masks (which wasn't done in the 1960s), added to the difficulty. There was an advantage to working on the hull from the waterline down to the keel. Shade! The deck and superstructure baked in the sun. The work on the lower part of the hull progressed well, until the group realized that as they worked lower, the vertical space between the ground and the

hull declined. The boat sat on 24-inch wood blocks. Grinding the paint off the hull for the last few feet to the keel in a 24-inch vertical space would have been a lot easier for a spry twenty-year-old sailor, but for a sixty-six-year-old Swiftie retiree, it took some doing. In the words of former Swift Boat Skipper Don Farrell, "When you have a tough job, you should do the hardest part first, then, it gets easier as you go. We'd forgotten that!"

Gary Liedorf, a retired electrician from Northern California, volunteered to help do some electrical work. "Help" and "some" were Gary's initial words. Virg Erwin told Gary he could stay at Virg's house, while Gary

"helped" with "some". Gary spent the first four days ripping out old wiring. Then, the U.S. Coast Guard announced that the entire boat would have to be rewired. Distribution panels, controls, lights, and bilge pumps would have to be removed and replaced. That would be a monumental job for an electrician living in the San Diego area, but Gary lived much farther away. The price tag would easily be \$75,000, if contracted out. Gary drove 600 miles to his home in Northern California and thought things over. He was not in a financial position to move to San Diego and stay for the duration.

Then, for a number of reasons, work on the boat was delayed. Gary and his wife moved to their winter home in Arizona, about a three hour drive to San

Diego. In the first part of February, Gary started commuting to San Diego on Monday; he stayed in a motel and worked full-time on the restoration project, and then on Friday he'd drive back to Arizona. By April 10, Gary realized that the electrical work would not be completed by May 10 for the reunion. The work had turned out to be a bit more than "help with some". So Gary's wife packed their car with what they thought they'd need to live in a motel, and they drove to San Diego where Gary worked full-time, seven days a week, for twenty-eight days straight.

The nineteen members of The Dirty Boat Guys logged more than 2,440 hours of work restoring PCF 816. It's estimated that those hours represent about one half of the man-hours required to complete the restoration project. They saved the Maritime Museum well over \$50,000 in labor costs.

Gary's wife packed their car with what they thought they'd need to live in a motel and they drove to San Diego where Gary worked full-time, seven days a week, for twenty-eight days straight, to get the job done.

The Dirty Boat Guys were comprised of:

Bob Bolger	11 hours
R. A. Bond	60
Terry Boone	34
David Bradley	89
Robert Brown	350
Virgil Erwin	120
Don Farrell	225
David Hansen	19
Rich Hollman	18
Duncan Hunter	4
Fred Kaufhold	37
Gary Liedorff	367
Tom Matyn	678
McPugh	8
Richard O'Mara	23
Tony Snesco	152
James Steffes	14
Stanley Williams	125
Dewey Williams	75



Courtesy of Maggie Walton, MMSD

Two of the Dirtiest of the Dirty Boat Guys –
Tom Matyn (left) and Bob Brown.

Of note is that Tom Matyn put in the most hours, 678, and he didn't even serve on a Swift Boat; he served in the Mobile Riverine Forces on CCBs and PBRs. Tom saw the Swift Boat restoration project as an endeavor to honor all the Brown Water sailors who served in Vietnam. After Gary Liedorff (367 hrs.), the next highest contributor of hours was Bob Brown with 350 hours, described by the DBG's as a workaholic. Jim Deal kept his DBG shirt somewhat clean, but provided an array of power tools from a friend who operated a rock quarry, thus enabling the Dirty Boat Guys to get even dirtier.

In March 2013, Mark Gallant realized that the May 10 deadline, to get the boat operational for the Swift Boat Sailors' Reunion, would be very difficult to meet. He asked The Dirty Boat Guys to work seven days a week for three weeks, which they did with moans, groans, glee and pride. After re-installing the main engines and aligning the shafts and transmissions, PCF 816 was picked up by a crane and lowered into the water on April 22. Cheers were followed by a hushed silence as the bilges were checked. They were dry. Smiles beamed all around. Mooring lines were put out. Next, one main engine was started.

More cheering. Unexpectedly, the engine shut down by itself. It was quickly restarted and idled properly at 800 RPM. Smiles, again, all around. Then the boat started to move in reverse. Mooring line cleats were ripped out of the dock. Line handlers were towed backward down the dock. The engine controls were not lined up correctly. PCF 816 was proceeding astern with strength and vigor toward a gleaming, white-hulled 200-foot megayacht worth over fifty million dollars. Panic and scrambling ensued. Several feet before impact, the main engines were successfully shut down and disaster was averted.

On April 24, further repairs and adjustments were made and additional mooring lines were put out. Both engines were started and ran smoothly. The Harley Davidson rumble of a 12V71 Detroit Diesel brought smiles to all. PCF 816 moved under its own power to the fuel dock and for the transit to its berth at the Maritime Museum.

PCF 816 was ready for temporary duty taking Swift Boat sailors on tours of San Diego Bay for the four days of the Swift Boat Sailors' bi-annual Reunion. Over 500 Swift Boat sailors, family and friends attended, including Kit Copeland, the truck driver who had transported PCF 816 the 3,270 miles from Norfolk to San Diego. By unanimous vote, Kit was made an honorary Swift Boat Sailor.

Having obtained a U.S. Coast Guard Ships' Masters license for his retirement hobby of driving commercial excursion boats, Captain Don Farrell manned the helm. The Morse Controls for the main engines had not yet been replaced. After forty-five years of service, the "click" for the neutral position was no longer there. Don spent eight hours a day for three days trying to find neutral, as he drove the PCF 816 on twenty-four, memory-filled cruises of the Bay for over 400 Swift Boat sailors, their families and friends.

In 1967, it cost approximately \$175,000 to build and equip a new Swift Boat. Over the past four and one half years, almost \$300,000 has been spent to acquire, transport and restore PCF 816. In the winter of 2012 and spring of 2013 over \$110,000 was raised from donations by the Swift Boat Sailors Association, former Swift Boat sailors and their friends to contribute to the effort (not including their volunteer hours).

After the Swift Boat Sailors reunion was over, there was more work to be done. Replicas of the .50 caliber machine guns were to be found. To meet U.S. Coast Guard safety requirements, a fire suppression system was installed. Safety rails around the perimeter of the boat were installed. A stability test was performed. Seating on the aft deck was put in place. By the end of 2013, PCF 816 was ready for full-time duty as the Maritime Museum's ninth historic vessel afloat. The Gallant Effort prevailed.



Courtesy of Maggie Walton, MMSD

Aside from the historical significance of this Swift Boat, it is perhaps worthy to observe that our nation has for many years attempted to cope with the knowledge that veterans returning home from the Vietnam War were poorly treated, and then we, as a nation, have had to cope with the collective remorse that ensued. While it is impossible to undo actions of the past, quirks of fate are sometimes kind in providing second chances. This small vessel, so symbolic of an entire conflict and of an age, may well be the last Swift Boat Veteran ever to come home and the last chance to help heal what is still a painful wound. Because it is not a grand, complex, or triumphant object, this Swift Boat has the capacity to evoke the personal nature of war and the homecoming as experienced by individuals. Of artifacts with a story to tell, in that role, this Swift Boat may be the most effective conveyance we can offer in perpetuity. 

— Ray Ashley

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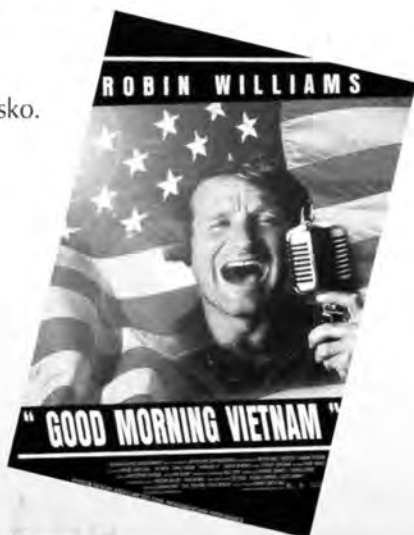
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COASTAL SQUADRON ONE – Swift Boat
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Editors' Note:

**This is a partial listing of the
many resources available
for further reading and research.**



Acknowledgements



It goes without saying that if not for the initial conversations between Major Consigilo, of Malta, and Swift Boat Skipper, Virg Erwin, of San Diego, in 2008, and the subsequent donation of P 24 to the Maritime Museum of San Diego, this book would not exist. Since that time an untold number of man-hours, an increasing amount of money and thousands of miles of ocean and concrete have passed under P 24's keel to restore her back to PCF 816, the original Swift Boat training vessel of the 1960s.

It has been a long haul. While "Thanks" will never be enough, on behalf of the Maritime Museum of San Diego, I would like to acknowledge the original prime movers, including all those mentioned in "A Noble Quest" and "The Gallant Effort," and especially the Maltese and U.S. counterparts who supported the mammoth endeavor to bring the Swift Boat home.

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To all those who contributed their blood, sweat and tears to the *Restoration of a Legacy*, may PCF 816 remain an enduring repository for the Swift Boat history, while thundering down San Diego Bay.

— **With Gratitude, Neva Sullaway, Editor**



Maritime Museum of San Diego

**In Honor of Those Who Served
In Remembrance of the Shared
Swift Boat History**



**Welcome Home
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While presenting the condensed history of the Vietnam-era Swift Boats, *Restoration of a Legacy* is about the personal stories – some tragic, some heroic and some peering over the edge into darkness – of the men who fought in them, and the twists and turns of one Swift Boat's journey home. *Legacy* assures us that the Swift Boats and their sailors will not be forgotten.

Legacy is about men who fought in the closest confines imaginable, along the coast and upriver in Vietnam. The river narrows to thirty feet; it's flanked by dense foliage; life narrows to the sound of the metal flaps tapping against the exhaust pipes and the soundless communication between skipper and crew. The enemy is on both banks of the river. This is a story of men who survived in the most gruesome face-to-face combat since the Civil War, on a small and vulnerable boat.

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