THREE TASTES OF
Nước Mắm

THE BROWN WATER NAVY & VISITS TO VIETNAM

DOUGLAS M. BRANSON

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To the memory of those with whom I served, Vietnam, 1966-67

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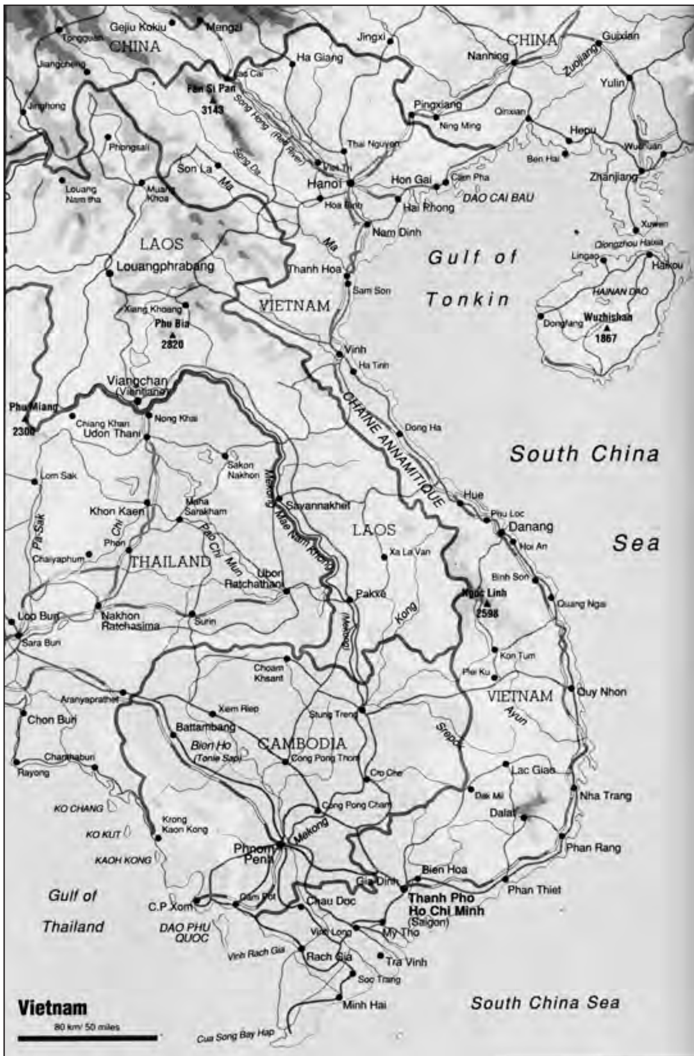

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DAO PHU QUOC
Vinh Long
My Tho
Vinh Rach Gia
Rach Gia
Tra Vinh
Soc Trang
Vietnam
Minh Hai
South China Sea
80 km/ 50 miles
Cua Song Bay Hap

Preface

Nuoc mam is the salty, "fermented" fish sauce Vietnamese put on their food. I was stationed in Phan Thiet, 200 kilometers east and slightly north of Saigon, a fishing town where workers manufacture great quantities of the stuff. Phan Thiet is known as Vietnam's "Nuoc Mam Capital."

I spent a year there from 1966-67. Twice more (1995 and 2011) I returned to see how the small city had evolved, leading to the title of this book, *Three Tastes of* Nuoc Mam. In it, I describe my role as an officer in the "Brown Water Navy" as well as my subsequent visits.

The Brown Water Navy consisted of a hodgepodge of wooden junks, coast guard vessels, inshore minesweepers and, later, swift boats and riverine craft. The U.S. Navy and the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) assembled this hodgepodge to patrol Vietnam's extraordinarily long coast and its many rivers and canals.

Forty-four years intervened between the time I came home from my tour in Vietnam (April 1967) and the time I began this book (early 2011). The reason I delayed writing for so long was not revulsion at recalling the horrors of war, as many U.S. military experienced and of which James Lee Burke so eloquently wrote in his book, *Swan Peak*:

> Sometimes in his dreams Clete saw a straw hooch with a mamasan in the doorway engulfed in an arc of liquid flame … He

> saw a seventeen-year-old door gunner go apeshit on a wedding party…the brass cartridges jacking from an M60 suspended from a bungee cord. He saw a Navy corpsman with rubber spiders on his steel pot try to stuff the entrails of a Marine back inside his abdomen…He saw himself inside a battalion aid station, his neck beaded with dirt rings, dehydrated…his flak jacket glued to the wound in his chest.

I didn't see anything like that, or only a bit or two of it. Most of us who were in Vietnam didn't.

The delay in writing about my Vietnam experience also was not due to the overwhelming anti-war sentiment I encountered when I came home. I did encounter that and it did play a part in the reversal of my views about the War. I was never a John Kerry, a future U.S. Senator who in 1971 dressed in his Navy fatigues, leading "Vets for Peace" (some, perhaps many of whom were not vets at all). In turn, those "vets" led a 100,000 war protesters' march upon the U.S. Capitol. By contrast, with little fanfare at all, I slowly and quietly turned against the War.

The real reason I delayed in writing about my combat experiences was that I thought for the longest time that I had very little, or nothing, to say. I was not a war hero. I was seldom in nose-to-nose combat. I got shot at three or four times but I am not absolutely certain of one of those incidents.

Our country, though, has a long tradition of seeing the human and the funnier side of things military. Sometimes the tradition manifests itself in black humor about war and the Army or Navy. World War II had G.I. Joe, the cartoon figure drawn by Bill Mauldin, and *Mr. Roberts*, a 1946 novel by Thomas Heggen made into a movie in 1955 starring Henry Fonda, James Cagney, and Jack Lemmon. Not much of that lighter side came out of the Vietnam War, the "American War" as the Vietnamese call it. All the history books, biographies and

chronicles were grim, recalling the terror and the horror of the War, the high costs in civilian and military lives, and the geopolitical implications. In no particular order, we had historical works such as *Platoon* (Dale Dye), *Bright Shining Lie* (Neil Sheehan), *Fire in the Lake* (Frances Fitzgerald), and *The Things They Carried* (Tim O'Brien). More in the hard combat genre are *The Killing Zone* (Frederick Downs), *Blood Trails: The Diary of a Combat Foot Soldier* (Christopher Ronnau), *Hamburger Hill* (Samuel Zaffiri), *The Bloodbath at Hamburger Hill* (John DiConsiglio), *Days of Valor* (Robert Tonsetic), and *A Rumor of War* (Philip Caputo). One fiction novel, Nelson Demille's *Up Country* (2002), devotes itself to Vietnam after the War, examining the humorous side of things as well.

Overall, however, it was as though the vociferous, near universal and loud anti-war movement, which went on for years, heard all around the world, silenced even the prospect of laughter. The Vietnam War "movement" drowned out, masking from view, any report of the humorous events that happened or the lighter side to things that occurred.

Well, time has passed. The Mercedes emblem has replaced the peace symbol as the icon of the times. Although some individuals still harbor strong anti-war views, they are fewer and fewer, and perhaps now someone like me, who actually was there, may attempt a snapshot of the lighter side of things, a Mr. Roberts of the Vietnam War.

So, presentation of the lighter side (not necessarily hold-your-sides humor) is a first goal for this book.

A second goal, or byproduct, is to show how loose and unrestricted (or with very few restrictions) things were. This was particularly true in the War's early years. Many U.S. military wore pearl-gripped six shooter revolvers, handle bar mustaches, and an "out there" Wild West mien. It seemed as though every U.S. serviceman left the past and, to some extent, the present, behind, going off

in search of fortune or adventure. Army Special Forces troops were notorious for wearing necklaces of Viet Cong ears or of dried human tongues.

The average citizen does not realize how often in a military establishment, known for its regimentation, there may be room for a large amount of "play in the joints," even extreme outlandish behaviors, some of which may lead to barbaric acts while others result in extreme incongruity.

At times, soldiers, Marines, and others needed the flexibility and room for creativity a certain amount of looseness permitted. Chapter 5 recounts some of the red tape and regulation military had to go through to obtain air support. A twelve-to-fifteen-minute delay in procuring an air strike could mean life or death in certain situations but such a delay there had to be in order to obtain approvals from rung after rung of higher-ups. The contrast between Korean troops, several battalions of whom operated in the northern reaches of our area, virtually without restriction, and U.S. troops, who had numerous restrictions and complex rules of engagement, are striking. Excessive political correctness sometimes entered into the equation, probably as a byproduct of the growing anti-war sentiment back home.

As troops in the field, we were fighting a war with one arm tied behind our backs. At times, though, U.S. troops were able to be flexible and creative. They would get the job done, eventually, in nonconventional ways.

This volume also recounts the differences and similarities between then and now, with a lengthy visit in 1995 sandwiched in-between (then, then, and now—hence *Tastes of Nuoc Mam*). I returned to Vietnam in 1995, just after the country had emerged from nineteen years literally in the Dark Ages, with no foreign contact; prison and re-education camps for Vietnamese with the remotest connection to the South Vietnamese government; sky high unemployment; an out-

of control birth rate; and an absence of any foreign currency or foreign goods that could be purchased with "hard" foreign exchange (francs, marks or dollars).

In 1995, excruciating poverty was everywhere. I traveled from Saigon to Hanoi, seeing no Americans and very few foreigners at all, from anywhere. The country was then in worse shape, far worse shape, economically and otherwise, than it had been in the War years of 1966-67.

More than what I saw in 1966-67, what I saw on later trips proves how unwinnable the Vietnam War was, how unwise or even foolish was the U.S. presence there. Vietnam was engaged in a civil war in which we had no business intervening. The U.S.'s prolonged support for a worthless South Vietnamese regime did nothing more than harden resolve and embolden hardcore Marxists, who took control and plunged the country into a near twenty-year nightmare. Even if a political justification existed for American involvement, geography militated against any lasting success.

Vietnam is a string bean (wet noodle) of a country, more than 1,700 kilometers (1,100 miles) long, and very narrow. It has only one principal thoroughfare, Highway One, which runs from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon). The U.S. built state-of-the-art airbases every seventy five to eighty kilometers the length of the country, the best and most comprehensive aviation infrastructure in the world. The U.S. had the best technology, weaponry, and equipment in existence.

Yet we (U.S. and South Vietnamese forces) were never able to keep Highway One open, even for a few weeks. In my patrol area, 200 kilometers from Saigon, the Viet Cong (VC) blockaded the road at least once a month, sometimes more often. Seemingly, they (the VC) could disrupt Highway One at will.

It was said that the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces owned the cities and towns while the Viet Cong owned the countryside. That was only partially true. The Viet Cong owned many of the towns as

well, as the early 1968 Tet offensive vividly demonstrated. Even in so-called secure towns, as U.S. forces we did not wander about or go down side streets. The Viet Cong were everywhere and also nowhere. They raided or ambushed, melting back into their civilian occupations, or into the countryside, or into neighboring Cambodia or Laos.

The Vietnam War was one then that could not, and probably should not, have been won.

Earlier I said that I never wrote of my Vietnam experiences because I believed that I had little or nothing to say. Actually that was not always true. From time to time I did write about them.

As a professor, I may be the only, or one of two legal academics who fought in Vietnam (law dean Rudy Hasl is the other). Later in my career I became a finalist for the position of dean at several law schools. The script for the decanal selection process requires candidates to list their most significant achievements. I always listed my year in Vietnam when, at age twenty-two, I led sixteen enlisted men through a year of combat.

Almost invariably, when it came time for my campus visit as a dean candidate, I found that my biography had been sanitized. Someone had removed any reference to Vietnam. So not only was it that I thought that no one cared, in certain quarters, twenty-five to thirty years after the War, it remained taboo as a subject. For many years after they came home, Vietnam veterans were vilified as killers, or derided as losers, or both. For a veteran, the better course of action was to call no attention to Vietnam service at all.

Mark Twain termed fiction as a "superior form of lying." This book is not fiction but it is what some term "creative non-fiction." Not all of the events recounted in this book happened to me, or happened precisely in the way I describe. Rather the portrayals in this book many times represent amalgams, or capture the spirit more than the exact letter of what went on.

I was not a war hero and I hope that nothing in this book makes

me out to have been, in the slightest way. If it does, I now expressly disclaim that I was in any way a hero. It was not my intent to portray myself as heroic.

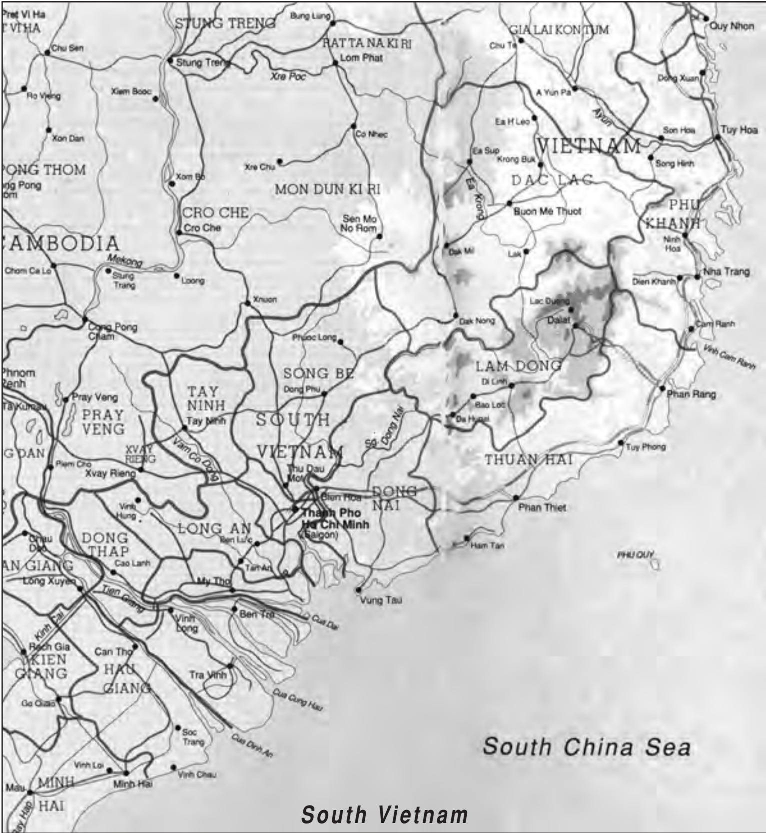
Some of the names have been changed so that no one may be held up to scorn or ridicule. If I misreported some matter, or put anyone in a false light, I apologize. I researched this book as best as I was able.

That said and done, everything recounted in this book did happen, in one form or the other.

The spelling of Vietnamese place names follows the conventions adopted by the U.S. and international press corps. In newspapers, on road signs, and elsewhere, the Vietnamese themselves write all place names and other terms as discrete syllables (Viet Nam, Ha Noi, Sai Gon). The War era press corps compounded any of the names they used frequently (Vietnam, Hanoi, Danang) but not those which appeared less often in their reports (Nha Trang, Bien Hoa, Nha Be, An Loc). I have utilized the press corps usage, although my 2011 trip revealed that nearly all the old two word (non-compounded) spellings have re-emerged, seemingly used exclusively.

TASTE ONE

THE BROWN WATER NAVY IN VIETNAM—1966-1967



South Vietnam

1

III Corps in the Morning

With God's help, we will lift [Vietnam] up and up,
ever up, until it is just like Kansas City.

—Senator Kenneth Wherry, Nebraska, 1940 (speaking of Singapore)

The only thing that I am afraid of is fear.

—Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, 1831

Vietnam is a mostly cloudy place. The ragged mountains suck
the clouds down, and most people remember the fogs and
the mists, like the ground itself is always steaming.

—Lee Child, *Tripwire* (1999)

FEAR MANIFESTS ITSELF IN DIFFERENT WAYS IN different individuals. For some, their knees knock, their hands shake. Others stutter or speak more quickly. A few actually do pee their pants (usually just a bit). With me, when first I arrived in my patrol area in Viet Nam, where I would spend the next twelve months, my mouth went all dry. I'm a cotton mouth kind of guy, I discovered.

I was cotton mouthed but not by the sight of some barren land, devastated by war. Viet Nam is absolutely beautiful. Binh Thuan Province, toward the southern end of III Corp (the U.S. had sliced South Vietnam north to south, into I, II, III and IV Corps), resembled Italy or Greece, semi arid, filled with cacti and Poinciana trees.

So why was I cotton mouthed? I had hitched a ride on a U.S. Coast Guard cutter (an eighty-two foot WPB) from *Nha Trang*, 200 kilometers north of Binh Thuan, where III Corps coastal patrol forces were headquartered and where I received my indoctrination training. We motored along at thirteen to fourteen knots, half a kilometer off the coast, through patches of early morning fog.

Gradually the morning mists lifted, giving way to a stainless steel gray sky, as we motored on down toward Phan Thiet. It was early May 1966.

In this enchanted setting, with wreaths of fog still encircling the hilltops, the Coast Guard Officer in Charge (OIC) was trying to scare the bejesus out of me. He was succeeding. I was this twenty-two-year-old Lieutenant Junior Grade—Lt.(jg)—eleven months out of college, sent to Viet Nam at a time supposedly when the Department of Defense still sent only volunteers. I never volunteered for anything.

The "coastie" told me about Duckett, the Navy guy whose place I was taking. I don't remember Duckett's first name, if I ever did know it. Duckett had been shot up, badly, by the Viet Cong (*viet* = people, *cong* = man) as he, his Vietnamese crew, and his fellow U.S. advisers were on patrol in the small inlet just north of Phan Thiet Bay, a grand sweeping bay with thirty or more kilometers of sand beach, at the south end of Binh Thuan Province. Phan Thiet Bay was centered on the outfall of the Phan Thiet River into the sea, where Phan Thiet, the provincial capital, was located and where I would be stationed.

Patrolling close in, Duckett's two Yabudda junks (wooden, ten meters, or thirty-nine feet, long, with a General Motors diesel engine in each, painted haze gray with eyes and a fierce red mouth painted on the bow) had been hit by shore fire. Although it was difficult to get straight information, Duckett had been hit in the lower back and shoulder. He was seriously wounded, airlifted out by helicopter to Cam Ranh Bay, the huge U.S. installation and natural harbor 130 kilometers to the north. I never did hear whether Duckett survived, but

I am pretty sure he did. I never heard anything to the contrary.

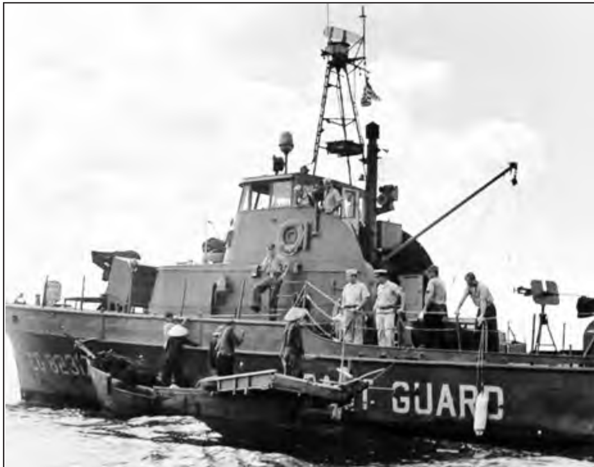
But "Jesus Christ," as they say, and as I thought to myself. I was an economics major who got into Navy ROTC because he liked the uniforms. The Navy was supposed to be safe, erudite, certainly gentlemanly: steaks and bone china in the ward room every night; waited on by stewards; tailored blue officers' uniforms in winter, crisp whites in summer; and high-minded conversation with fellow officers following dinner. See the world: Barcelona, Naples, Antibes, Cape Town, Sydney, Honolulu, Tokyo, Hong Kong, and Singapore.

The small Coast Guard coastal patrol boat (WPB) upon which I rode, was commissioned, as I recall, the *Point Comfort*. So far it and its skipper were offering the opposite—extreme discomfort.

I wound up in Phan Thiet, a sad-sack collection of two-table restaurants and used electronics stores, all with corrugated tin roofs, and movie tents, spread out along Vietnam's Highway One, on both sides of the Phan Thiet River. The most noteworthy landmark was a water tower painted to resemble a pagoda. To boot, Phan Thiet stunk, worse than raw sewage.

The Coast Guard WPB navigated around the sand bar protecting Phan Thiet harbor's entrance, letting me off at the small public dock midst the 1000 or more fishing vessels filling the harbor. Another adviser, Jim Ewers, from Cincinnati, met me (at that time all U.S. personnel were still labeled "advisers"; the fiction persisted for another six to eight months, even though by mid- 1966 more than 150,000 U.S. troops were engaged in actual combat).Ewers walked me past the much smaller inner harbor boat basin where our patrol craft were moored.

Many of the Vietnamese walking and bicycling the dirt streets wore black cotton loose-fitting tops and bottoms, resembling pajamas, with homemade sandals. All the women and many of the men wore straw conical hats to protect them from the sun. A few men wore pith helmets. Westerners were still new to them. They stopped in the street, staring at Ewers and myself as though we were circus animals.



The U.S. Coast Guard *Point Comfort.*

Our billet, to be my home for the next year, was located two to three city blocks inland from the harbor, and a few dozen meters north of the Phan Thiet River. A ten foot stone wall, plastered and white washed, topped with barbed wire, surrounded a compound half the size of a city block. In that area lived forty-five or so U.S. military, roughly half U.S. Army personnel who acted as advisers to the Vietnamese ranger battalion which garrisoned the town and bivouacked out near the airport. The other half consisted of Navy guys, assigned to coastal patrol duty.

Within the wall was a two-story building, once a convent I think, maybe a hospital, useful for our purposes as it contained numerous small bedrooms which we shared, two to a room. In the courtyard stood several recently constructed plywood huts which served as lounge areas and a mess. The armory, where weapons and ammunition were stored, was in a more secure stone and concrete building off to one side.

I was busy meeting my new mates, junior officers like myself and enlisted guys with whom I would spend many hours on patrol. The trepidation and fear I had felt hearing about Duckett and other battles or skirmishes fought with the VC was fast dissipating, swirling away like bathwater down a drain. Then I heard a "whoosh" and a "thump," followed by an explosion in the street outside or, possibly, in the vacant area next to the river. My body tensed up once again. I dived for cover. No one needed to tell me what was happening: we were under mortar attack.

The guys with whom I had been standing jogged toward several vacant doorways facing onto the courtyard. They didn't sprint, didn't fling themselves under a jeep—just more of a hurried but orderly exit from the open area. Along came another "whoosh," "thump," and explosion, again outside. I can't remember if there was a third.

My fear was back. I didn't care whether I had exhibited the requisite amount of courage. I knew right then that I did not want to be here for a whole year, especially if the year would be like that. I wanted to be in the real Navy, on board a cruiser or a destroyer ("greyhounds of the fleet"), maybe even an aircraft carrier.

"Happens once a while," Ewers apologized.

"What happens?" I had thought that Phan Thiet was "secure," that is, free of VC presence.

"Charlies bicycle into town, or ride up the back streets on a motorbike. They set up a mortar tube in the back streets, fire two to three rounds at us and run like hell. They're probably gone before the last round hits the ground."

"How many of our guys have been killed?" I asked what I thought to be a logical follow up question.

Ewers and the others laughed. "They haven't hit the compound yet. They never even come close. They're lousy shots."

Big consolation, I thought. The odds are stacking up in favor of them hitting something one of these days. And I now had two slivers

under my skin—Duckett's unfortunate incident and a mortar attack on my new residence—which caused me great consternation.

The next day, early in the morning, two Yabudda junks, one with me aboard, sailed out on my first patrol. A breeze blew, making a light chop on Phan Thiet Bay. White sand beaches, and above them, brown hills surrounded all sides of the huge bay. Nearer us we could see the fish traps of bamboo and nets set by local fisherman. Closer still we could see down into depths of the clear ocean water. Outward from the sides of our bow wake we saw schools of small fish swimming away, appearing as though someone had scattered fistfuls of silver dollars into the water, suspended less than a meter from the surface and glinting in the sunlight.

From Phan Thiet, our (my) patrol area reached northward from Point Ke Ga to the south, across Phan Thiet Bay and then northward for sixty-five to seventy kilometers to Con Na Beach and Point Mui Dinh (*Mui* means cape or point). If you look at a map of Vietnam, at Phan Rang (where a large U.S. airbase used to be), just below Cam Ranh Bay, the coast turns southwesterly. That first seventy kilometers or so of the long southwesterly chord is Binh Thuan Province, its rocky coast and inland waters, our patrol area.

I was in the "Brown Water Navy," to be distinguished from the decidedly more upscale "Blue Water Navy" my parents had told me about and about which I had dreamt in college days. Instead of spotless white uniforms or Navy dress blues, *Officer and a Gentleman* uniforms, it was to be baseball hats, t-shirts, shorts, and body armor, riding tiny wooden patrol craft.

We were issued part leather, part khaki colored canvas combat boots but we never wore them. For traction, jumping from vessel to vessel, we wore tennis shoes. We were also issued olive drab fatigues with spacious cargo pockets on the pant legs. We soon abandoned those in favor of Bermuda shorts and T-shirts, sometimes olive drab ones. That's the closest we got to military garb. We had nothing close

Brown Water Navy patrol (Vietnamese Junk Forces).

to the camouflaged battle dress uniforms (BDUs) or tan combat desert uniforms (CDUs) the modern military favors.

I had heard of Southeast Asia or, indeed, all of Asia, as teeming with people. Long stretches of Viet Nam bore little evidence of human habitation. There were no roads into many areas, especially in Binh Thuan. Brown and green hills rose up 800 or 900 feet right beyond the water's edge. The beaches were circles of white sand ringed with stands of tall palm trees. Big rolling sand dunes. No people, at least that could be seen.

The Binh Thuan coast was a variegated one, with bay after bay interspersed with hour glass shaped coves and inlets. The whole province lay in the rain shadow of the Truong Son mountains, visible and brooding ten to twelve miles inland, where we were told Charlies (Viet Cong or National Liberation Front [NLF]) were based. U.S. forces called this "Indian Country" (all land from the foothills up to and including the mountains and anything above the coastal plain). Both the latitude (11° N) and the protection of the mountains moderated what weather extremes did exist.

Earlier, in 1954, the Geneva Convention on Viet Nam had laid

out the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) (in black humor referred to as the "Dead Marine Zone"), a ten-kilometer wide area bracketing seventeenth latitude north. The Ben Hia River bisects the zone. The DMZ cut the country in two, separating North Viet Nam from the Republic of South Viet Nam.

We were in III Corps, the third "fourth" of South Vietnam, about 200 kilometers (klicks) east and a bit north of Saigon. Below us was Vung Tau (Cape St. Jacques on French charts, still in use in the War's early years) at the mouth of the Long Tau ship channel to Saigon.

Below the ship channel, stretching to the tip of the country was the Delta (meaning the delta of the Mekong River), which cuts west across Viet Nam and turns northwards at Phnom Penh, the Cambodian capital. The great river, a mile wide, 4200 kilometers long, known as the "Amazon of Asia," stretches north to Vientiane in Laos and from there to northern Thailand, Myanmar (Burma), and China. On U.S. forces' maps, the Delta was IV Corps but everyone called it the Delta, a 200 kilometer long, flat, densely populated area of several thousand square miles, with a countless number of estuaries, lakes, and swamps, as the Mekong splits into nine channels and approaches the South China Sea.

The Delta was the "rice bowl" of Vietnam, a seemingly idyllic landscape carpeted in a dizzying variety of greens. The Delta also was a water world, where boats, houses, and markets float upon the endless number of streams, canals, and rivers that flow through the area. Bucolic though the Delta may have seemed in the shimmering light of day, it was a hot bed of Viet Cong activity, unsafe day or night for any American not heavily armed and traveling in numbers. I was pleased not to be there.

Binh Thuan and Phan Thiet, where I wound up, have several distinguishing features, aside from beautiful beaches and enchanting landscapes.

First, Phan Thiet was the fifth largest city in South Viet Nam, after

(I guess) Saigon, Danang, Nha Trang, and Hue, although nobody ever heard of Phan Thiet, including U.S. military who had served in-country. That Phan Thiet was the fifth largest was not saying a whole heck of a lot because Phan Thiet had only 80,000 residents, out of thirty-five to forty million in total population (North and South) back then (said to be ninety-two million today). But 80,000 was more, much more, than just a village. On the other hand, that Phan Thiet was the fifth largest city signaled what a rural country Vietnam was.

Second, Phan Thiet was the fishing capital of Viet Nam. As you crossed the river on the Highway One bridge through town (practically everything in Viet Nam abuts Highway One), and looked out to seaward, where the Phan Thiet river approached the bay, there was a basin filled, as I said, with hundreds (a thousand or more) of fishing vessels. Sea life in the waters off Phan Thiet was so abundant that during several times each year eighty and one hundred foot, steel hulled fishing trawlers, big ones, sailed down from Taiwan and Korea, a thousand or more kilometers to the north, to fish a few klicks off the Binh Thuan coast.

Third, Phan Thiet was (is) the *nuoc mam* capital. In *nuoc mam* factories, workers line wooden vats, much like large wine vats (ten to twelve feet across) with fish. On the fish, the workers layer salt. On top of the salt they load on another tier of fish, and so on and so on, until the whole shebang is three meters high. Then the *nuoc mam* producers let the whole thing rot. Workers mix the juice that comes off with peppers and spices. *Nuoc mam* is on every home and restaurant table in Viet Nam, as well as on many Vietnamese tables in America. Many refer to *nuoc mam* as the "Vietnamese ketchup." Vietnamese put it on everything. Phan Thiet is chock-a-block with *nuoc mam* and *nuoc moi* (made with shrimp) factories—down every street and every lane.

Now Phan Thiet is in Asia. Then, in 1966-67 especially, the city was undeveloped. Sanitation was not the best. There were open sew-

ers. Here, there, and practically everywhere, you got a strong smell of human waste, overpowering at times. Now combine that smell with the pervasive smell of rotting fish. In other cities and towns of Vietnam, the odor of burning charcoal wafted in on the breezes, as Vietnamese used charcoal fires both for cooking and for heat. But Phan Thiet had an odor like no place any of us had ever been, ten times stronger than the foulest barnyard. But they say the human olfactory sense is the quickest to adapt. That proved true, although when we came back off patrol we always had a period in which we had to re-adapt. We joked about it—"fish and shit," a rhyme of sorts with "fish and chips."

Fourth, Vietnamese's forebears came from Mongolia via central China. They began a descent into the upper reaches of the Indochina Peninsula in the Twelfth or Thirteenth Centuries. The early Vietnamese's predecessors were the Chams, a warlike Hindu people. Phan Thiet approximates the southernmost point this Cham civilization reached and was one of its principal centers. The Vietnamese destroyed the Champa capital city of Indrapura in 1471; thereafter, except for a few outliers such as Cham Island, after the sixteenth century the Chams ceased to exist as a distinct people.

Just north of Phan Thiet, and a mile or so out to the east, in or slightly inland from the sand dunes, are Cham towers. Built of red brick, these towers are three to four stories and thirty to thirty-five feet (nine to ten meters) high. Their limestone decorations resemble the Khmer decorations on the temples of Angkor Wat in Cambodia. Undoubtedly the towers (sanctuaries) had religious significance. They are 1,000 or more years old (the historical marker says built in the ninth century), well preserved, their beauty enhanced by the sand dunes, seashore, and landscape that surround them. We saw them nestled up above the sand dunes as we motored out from Phan Thiet to begin our patrols.

There are Cham towers elsewhere in Viet Nam (Phan Rang and

above Nha Trang, to the north, for instance) but Phan Thiet is a good place to see them.

Fifth, Phan Thiet was, as I said, a city of 80,000 or so, termed "secure" (but not necessarily safe). But the remainder of Binh Thuan Province was sparsely populated with few roads, hilly and mountainous terrain, bays, inlets, and other places to hide, allegedly filled with Viet Cong (lots of them). The VC, however, did not populate the outer reaches of the province to bring power to the people. Binh Thuan was supposedly a Viet Cong R & R (rest and relaxation) center to which VC soldiers repaired after a hard month of fighting. The Charlies (Chuck, Sir Charles) undoubtedly appreciated beautiful beaches and warm ocean waters as much as the next guy. Binh Thuan was the VC's Hawaii.

Charlie's presence while on R & R had two consequences. Whenever anyone shot at U.S. or South Vietnamese forces, the shooters were usually (not always) backing up. Few on either side, save for the men and women who shot at Duckett (in what came to be known as Duckett' Cove), wanted a fire fight. That's not what they (the VC) were there for.

The other consequence, however, cut in precisely the opposite direction. While Phan Thiet proper was deemed "secure," the entire remainder of the province was not, most decidedly so. North of Duckett's Cove a range of large sand dunes began. This area, and another farther to the north, were deemed beyond merely "unsecure." They were "free fire zones." These areas had been the scene of hostile VC activities in the past. The mapmakers marked them out, including several hundred meters to seaward, with bold red borders. Ordinary rules of engagement (when armed and deadly force may be used, which is much more circumscribed than many non-military believe) did not apply. Within a free fire zone, U.S. or Vietnamese troops could shoot at anything that moved, or did not move, for that matter. They could shoot automatic weapons, machine guns, mortars, what-have-

you, with no provocation necessary and no questions asked.

I was ordered to go to a war, I did my job, took care of my guys, and my guys took care of me. After a year, we all came home. In retrospect, boarding and searching junks and sampans (a junk large enough to hold a standing water buffalo, according to one popular test) put us at an extremely high level of risk, but we saw little gunfire, death and destruction. I got shot at maybe three, perhaps four times.

One of the few destructive things I did see was in the free fire zone I just described. Again, Viet Nam is a long string bean of a country, especially the former South Vietnam (below the DMZ), fifty kilometers across at its narrowest and not more than 130-140 kilometers at the widest, at least north of the Mekong Delta. The most expeditious way in which to move people, supplies, foodstuffs, animals, or what have you (guerilla fighters, war materiel, etc.) is by sea. Up and down the Vietnamese coast, then, besides the thousands of fishing vessels, moved thousands of passenger and cargo junks and sampans. Many of them had steel rather than wooden hulls. They could be up to seventy-five feet in length. Like bugs, they crept up and down the coast, night and day, in an endless parade.

Most sampan skippers knew where the free fire zones were. They navigated their sampans out to sea a bit and around the free fire zone. A few kilometers onward, after passing well clear of the free fire zone, the skipper turned his vessel back close to shore and to calmer waters.

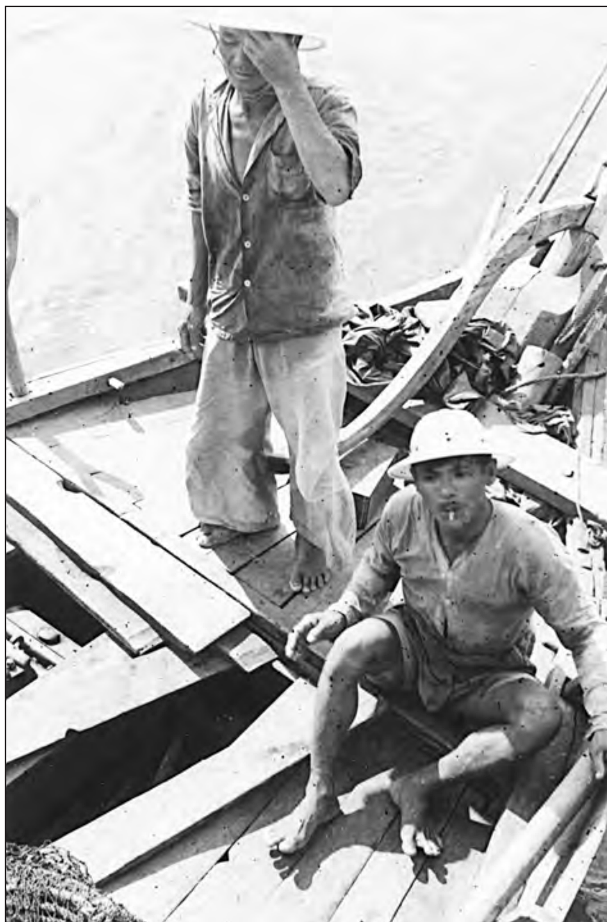
One night at dusk, I was aboard a Yabudda junk tied to another junk, just on the boundary of a free fire zone. We saw a faint movement in the darkness several hundred meters away. The other Yabudda untied and headed toward the movement. The ARVN (Army of the Republic of Viet Nam) lieutenant aboard suddenly picked up an armed M-79 grenade launcher. Without having spoken with or conferred with anyone, he took aim quickly and fired. He vaporized the junk. God knows how many were aboard. Most surely they were not Viet Cong. They may have been smugglers or black marketeers but not Viet Cong.

They could have been a wholly innocent family. In any case, they did not deserve the fate which befell them.

There was nothing left but flaming debris. The Yabudda junk and the ARVN lieutenant moved off into the night. I never saw them again.

One of the lasting impressions of that era comes from the incidents or episodes of violence I saw in my year in Viet Nam. I saw several incidents similar to the indiscriminate destruction of that junk and intervened to prevent several others from occurring. What struck me was how little regard Vietnamese seemed to have for each other and for human life.

Based upon those experiences, I tended to spread my opinion, or judgment, across all Asian peoples and particularly all Vietnamese. But I know now that is not true. We all cry at funerals and find great joy in marriage ceremonies and births of children. People are people. I think that the cruelty and low regard for fellow human beings that I saw comes from poverty, certainly as a byproduct of war, and from subservience. The subservience of colonialism, which Vietnam endured for 1000 years under China, and for nearly 100 years under France, accentuates or emboldens men and women to demonstrate their superiority and control over others of their kind. Often they do so through evident and extreme disregard of others, morphing into violence and extreme brutality. Witnessing those episodes of violence and brutality slipped a third sliver of discomfort and consternation under my skin.



Vietnamese fisherman aboard their junk.

2

The Mission

We have a problem making our power felt. Vietnam is the place.

—President John F. Kennedy, 1961

Let no one doubt that we have the resources and the will to follow this cause as long as it may take. No one should think for a moment that we will be worn down, nor will we be driven out, and we will not be provoked into rashness.

—President Lyndon B. Johnson, 1966

We are swatting flies and we should be going after the manure pile.

—General Curtis LeMay, U.S. Air Force, 1965

But you would have thought we were there for a wild west show.

In May, 1966 there were 150,000 or so men in-country. Regimentation was wanting (it came thereafter, as the number of U.S. in country soared to above 460,000, peaking at 505,000). Many military did their own thing while off duty. In the early years, many also did their own thing, or some of their own things, while on duty. Being a cowboy was one of them.

I saw several Army and Navy senior enlisted men and officers wear chrome plated, pearl handled six shooters. Some wore matched pistols, backwards (butts facing out). Large engraved western belt buckles (a buffalo, an antelope, the American flag) were popular. Handlebar mustaches were in. I never did see a cowboy hat, at least

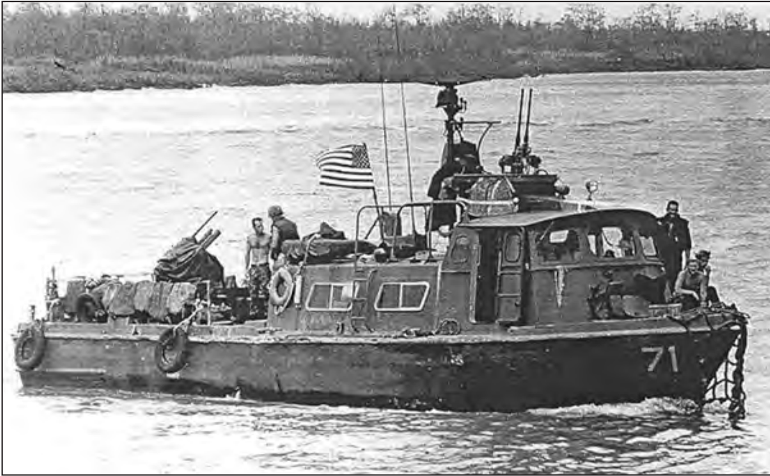
worn while on duty, but nearly everyone wore a baseball cap of some kind rather than official military headgear, at least while not on patrol. In *A Rumor of War*, Philip Caputo describes how he saw helicopter pilots who, in 1965, wore "Terry and the Pirates costumes," with bush hats and low slung holsters containing pearl handled revolvers. It wasn't only helicopter pilots.

New vocabulary took over. Instead of "carry," or "place," or "set down," or "hike," or "patrol," "hump" became the universal solvent. Instead of walking from point A to point B, or patrolling, ground forces "humped." Were I to direct another to pick up a box, carry it across the room, and place it on the window sill, I might simply say, "Hump it to the window."

"Saddle up" first undoubtedly meant for grunts, or ground pounders, to put on their packs, pick up their weapons, and move out. We saddled up as well. We put on our body armor (eight-pound vests), our ammunition, and side arms, picked up our other weapons, radios, first aid supplies, and combat rations (Cee-rats), and "humped" the two city blocks from our compound to our patrol craft. After stowing what needed to be stowed, we backed out into the stream and "humped" off on coastal patrol.

The swift boats, which found new notoriety in the 2004 presidential campaign, as Democratic nominee John Kerry's alleged heroism as a swift boat Officer in Charge (OIC) came under scrutiny, were put in service about halfway through my year in Vietnam. Swift boats and their crews were especially known for cowboy antics.

Swift boats (PCFs—Patrol Craft Fast) could reach speeds of thirty-six to thirty-seven knots, with a crew of six (fewer witnesses to their antics) and a lot of firepower (twin 50-caliber machine gun turrets over the pilot house, over-and-under machine gun, 81-millimeter mortar on the main deck). A swift boat had a junior officer, lieutenant junior grade, as OIC. The scuttlebutt was that swift boat crews, instead of going to their patrol areas, after leaving their home base



U.S. Navy Swift Boat on coastal patrol, 1967.

would pull the boat into a secluded cove to enjoy a day of water sports, water skiing behind the craft.

My favorite Wild West show story: Two swift boats had a firefight with one another. The prosecutor questioning one of the OICs asked, "Joe, you knew it was a friendly. Why did you open fire?" Joe didn't blink an eye: "Ya, but he shot at me first."

Such were the early days of the Vietnam War—a lot of cowboy stuff. We did it, too. Early on in our year there, the OIC of our little detachment was off on an errand somewhere. So, during a slow Sunday afternoon, a couple of officers, including me, and a handful of enlisted men put on Australian slouch hats and body armor. We took the most menacing automatic weapons we could find. Off we went, in a couple of small boats, venturing a hundred meters out on Phan Thiet Bay. There, while our boss was away, we struck various manly Wild West poses, taking pictures for the folks and our friends back

The author playing cowboy.

home. We were "starring in our own war movie," as Philip Caputo notes troops did everywhere, at least in those early years.

But we had a more serious purpose in being there.

Highway One, which reaches from Hanoi in the north to Saigon, was really the only long distance highway in the country. It was much

watched and heavily travelled, at least for Vietnam back then. Local farmers, men and women, often blocked long stretches of the highway to dry their rice or their manioc root. To attempt to keep the highway open, the military (ARVN) had checkpoints all along the highway. American Special Forces camps overlooked chokepoints and junctions that the VC would be likely to attack or disrupt. Movement by either motorized vehicle or ox cart (just as likely) was slow going.

As I described, Vietnam has a long, variegated coast. The quickest method then for the VC to move men, ammunition, weapons, or foodstuffs was by water, sometimes only at night and often more brazenly, in full light of day. So Commander Military Assistance Command Vietnam (COMMACV) ordered Commander Naval Forces Vietnam (COMNAVFORV) (the military is fond of jaw breaking acronyms) to blockade the entire South China Sea coast (called the "East Sea Coast" by Vietnamese). Navy and Vietnamese patrols were to board and search vessels they encountered, apprehending suspected VC, and turning suspected VC, draft dodgers, and smugglers over to the Vietnamese National Police.

A secondary purpose was blocking. As Army or Marine detachments conducted "search and destroy" missions ("offensive sweeps" in official jargon) in coastal areas they would sweep toward the coast. Inshore waterborne forces (Brown Water Navy forces) had to patrol off the coast to prevent ex-filtration by sea. I remember doing this duty as the First Air Calvary (the Big Red One) conducted operations in our province. We constantly had difficulty obtaining the Army radio frequencies so that we could communicate and hopefully coordinate our efforts. By and large, coastal patrol forces retained the same radio frequencies while the ground based Army forces changed frequencies monthly.

First a formation of Cobra or Huey helicopter gunships, six or eight of them, would sweep in low over the jungle in a nose down at-

titude. They would begin firing Gatling guns and rockets into the area where the VC were suspected of being ("thump, thump, thump," the noise of rockets being fired was a distinctive sound). Two minutes later another fleet, this one of Huey helicopters, eight or ten of them, would sweep in low, landing sixty to seventy troops. Each Huey carried seven infantry and four crew members. These ground forces would do a sweep, wheeling toward the coast. Offshore we would hear gunfire. Forty minutes later the helicopters would return, taking the Army ground forces away. To this day, when I hear helicopter sounds close overhead, I get chills; the hair on the back of my neck stands up.

We did blocking operations a score or more times, as Big Red One troops did sweeps toward the beach, in a variant on the classic "hammer and anvil" tactic. We saw Vietnamese emerge running from the bush, and then running along the sand. We fired at them but we never were never able to capture anyone or effectively seal off the coast. We were too slow. Our Yabudda junks could barely go as fast as a man could run.

The difficulty in all of these coastal patrol operations was that the U.S. Navy did not have the equipment with which to do the job. To be sure, the Navy had handsome, haze gray destroyers, long frigates, even longer cruisers ("the big guns"), and gargantuan aircraft carriers—but it had nothing small or capable of inshore patrol. So the Navy pulled together a motley collection of water craft, including the aforementioned Yabudda junks, Coast Guard WPBs (twenty-five plus meters, or eighty-two feet, in length with eleven crew and names such as *Point White, Point Welcome, Point Comfort, Point Gresham, Point Hudson, Point Partridge, Point Lomas, Point Kennedy*), and inshore minesweepers (wooden, named after birds such as the *Bluebird* and the *Oriole*). Old World War II destroyer escorts, which had outlived their useful lives as radar picket ships, ready for the scrap yard, were pressed into service for offshore patrols. We were a garage band

navy, not the U.S. Navy seen in the movies and on recruiting posters.

Meanwhile, the Navy instituted a crash program to develop proper vessels. They designed two: the swift boat and the smaller riverine craft known as PBRs (Rover Patrol Craft) for the Delta. The swift boat's fast track design and construction were evident. At fifty feet (fifteen meters), the craft were too small to stay on station very long. If the transit time from their base to their patrol area was lengthy, a swift boat might only be on station for twelve hours. In fact, many swift boat crews would pull in the first secluded cove or bay, anchor, and sleep off crew members' hangovers. When it finally reached their station, a swift boat might only stay there for four to five hours.

The windshields on swift boats popped out all the time as well. Early on, until the Navy got the problem fixed, swift boats had to return to base right away if they had encountered rough seas. The vessels could not take weather at all.

There was a swift boat base at Cam Ranh Bay to the north of us. I visited there several times. I had served with a guy, Jim Columbo, from Detroit, in my first month in Vietnam. Jim had come back for a second tour in Vietnam, the second time as OIC of a swift boat. He was stationed at Cam Ranh.

At the Cam Ranh Navy base, you couldn't walk ten meters before someone stuck a can of beer in your hand (San Miguel, from the Philippines, was the favorite but the saying was that there was "a headache in every bottle"). There were volleyball and basketball courts. Elsewhere on the base they had a golf course, with sand putting greens, coated with motor oil, then rolled firm. Much of the aura and reports of heroics surrounding the swift boats in Vietnam were myths. Swift boat crews cultivated the Wild West appearance and mentality even after it had died out everywhere else. Swift boats were more famous for not doing the jobs assigned to them than they were for any heroics by their crews.

Navy riverine craft in Mekong Delta, 1967.

How John Kerry, the presidential candidate in 2004, did his much ballyhooed heroics, and got his medals, on a river I haven't figured out, as the Navy assigned swift boats exclusively to coastal patrol. Duty on the rivers was left to the smaller riverine craft, shorter hydrojets with four-person crews and open cockpits, which drew only eighteen inches of water. Nonetheless, as with many other Vietnam vets I know, we are reluctant to mention our Vietnam service around political conservatives or Tea Party advocates lest we get "swiftboated" (vilified for any claim we make), a word now in many dictionaries.

When we came home forty years ago we had to keep our mouths shut because the War was so unpopular, as many times were those of us who had fought in it. Forty years later, things haven't changed much: once again you feel as though you can't mention what you did, this time because there might be a swiftboater in your midst.

One more swift boat story: In Vietnam, we all purchased or had relatives back home send us Radio Shack or similar walkie-talkies, which you could stick in your back pocket. A principal reason was that to use Navy or Army frequencies we were required to encode everything. We then often had to relay messages through the Coastal Patrol Centers (Nha Trang for us) to communicate with someone we could see several hundred meters away, who would then have to take valuable time to de-code the message. Navy portable radios were PRC 10s, big and cumbersome. Encoding and decoding took time, a pain in the ass, so we got the little "illegal" handsets, communicated in plain English and broke the rules. We even made up funny call signs for our store bought walkie-talkies: "Snoopy," "Lucy," and Peanuts" for the goody two shoes; "Fuck You One," "Fuck You Two," and "Fuck You Three" for the more rough hewn.

Another swift boat captain I knew, who we called Horrible, and his crew had walkie talkies. When they left their base at Cam Ranh, they went straight to the bay next to the U.S. Air Force base at Phan Rang, about twenty klicks south of Cam Ranh. Horrible and his senior petty officer would man the swift boat while the other troops went into the enlisted men's club to have a few (more than a few) drinks. Then they would reverse it. Horrible and his friend would go ashore while the troops manned the patrol craft.

Now the officers' club at Phan Rang sat up in the sand dunes overlooking the bay. Horrible would take a seat at the bar. Inevitably, some Air Force guys (many were pilots) would come over and by way of introduction say, "Hey, we don't get many Navy guys in here. Whatcha doing?"

Horrible would put them on. "See that boat out there. It's remote controlled."

The pilots didn't believe him. "You're putting us on."

"No, I'm not. Watch this." Picking up his walkie talkie, Horrible would say, "Right full rudder" and the swift boat in the distance

would move smartly to starboard, heading for the coast. He would speak into the handset again, "Left full rudder." The boat would turn to port, moving back to seaward.

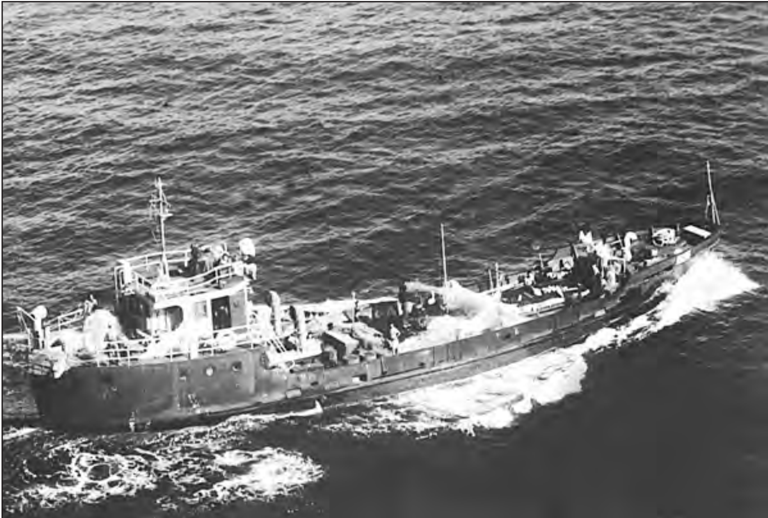
The Air Force guys would clamor for the walkie talkie. "Gimme that. Gimme that. I want to try it." Horrible said he never had to buy a drink. After four or five pops, paid for with Air Force dollars (script actually, because U.S. personnel were not allowed greenbacks), Horrible would return to his swift boat. He and his crew would proceed to their patrol area, or at least to the first cove, where Horrible and his crew could sleep it off.

The massive effort to patrol an 1100 kilometer coast, and to interdict VC, black marketeers, and smugglers, boarding and searching a hundred thousand or more vessels, was known as Operation Market Time. In 1966, just after I arrived off the coast, Market Time took on a further sense of urgency. The higher ups' biggest fear was that a steel hulled trawler, eighty or ninety feet long, and capable of carrying great quantities of weapons and ammunition, rather than a little dinky wooden one, would sneak down from the north, offloading its cargo in a secluded cove, under cover of darkness.

Well, sure enough it happened, near Ba Dong, in the Delta, at the mouth of the Co Chien River, 200 kilometers to the south of us. Patrol aircraft uncovered a 100-foot trawler as she was approaching the coast. The Coast Guard WPB *Point Comfort* shouldered the trawler aground.

With rockets and strafing machine gun fire, after a fire fight, assisted by other Coast Guard WPBs, the *Point Comfort* caused the now burning North Vietnamese Army (NVA), VC, and trawler crew to run the vessel aground toward the beach and abandon her. The 250 tons of weapons and supplies did not reach the enemy forces. The trawler was largely destroyed.

But the whole incident changed a lot for us, substantially increasing our risk. From on high, we were ordered to board and search



Offshore fishing trawler.

every steel hulled, offshore trawler we saw. As I said before, we saw quite a few, as periodically, foreign fishing vessels came from Taiwan and other countries to fish off the Vietnam coast. Whenever a larger fishing trawler was sighted, we had to drop whatever we were doing at the time. We would leave the shelter of bays and inlets, going out three to four klicks to sea where the weather was always much rougher, substantially so, with stronger winds and five to seven foot waves. With our little wooden patrol craft tossed by the waves, we would climb a rope Jacob's ladder up and over the side of a fishing boat that was itself bobbing up and down, many times five to six feet. We worried constantly about an ankle getting caught, or a leg crushed between the two vessels, especially if you slipped, as they bobbed up and down and banged violently together.

Now factor in that as we tried to board and search these offshore fishing vessels we were all armed. We wore bullet proof vests (body

armor) but they provided incomplete protection at best, and probably none at close range. The weaponry the Navy provided us was outdated, but heavy duty, World War II weaponry. We had .45 caliber pistols and Thompson submachine guns, also .45 caliber, which we needed because if anything arose we would be a in a relatively confined space. Thompson's are short, snubbed nose weapons. We needed them because we needed a broad field of fire.

We had shotguns, too, maybe illegal ones because the barrels had been sawn off, or just cut down really. After World War II, the Geneva Convention outlawed true sawed off shotguns, or so we were told. The term "sawed off shotgun" conjures up the pistol-like weapon liquor store owners keep under the counter, or gangsters hide under their coats. The guns we had were still long guns, with shoulder stocks rather than pistol grips, but with four to five inches taken off the barrel to ease handling in confined spaces. They were Winchesters, I believe: single barrel, 12-gauge, pump action, holding six rounds. The only safety was a half cock on the hammer.

By accident, those things went off all the time. Accidental misfiring seemed to occur every time we boarded offshore trawlers, at least in high seas. As the boarding officer, I usually went first. I can't count the times a shotgun behind me misfired, buckshot whizzing by my ear. One of my best enlisted guys, Sam Houston of San Angelo, Texas, usually handled a shotgun, going up the ladder right behind me. Under his handlebar mustache, he would lick his lips nervously, apologizing to me for his weapon's accidental discharge, but there was nothing he could do. Sam Houston was one of our best weapons guys. The fault was the way in which Winchester designed the shotgun, not Sam's.

These operations put tens of thousands of men at risk for years, year after year, but not the obvious ones of being killed by VC bombs or bullets. The risks were less serious and less obvious: the risk of getting a foot crushed, of being shot by an accidental misfire, or of

killing or wounding a crew member on a friendly vessel who would have been completely bewildered by all these big, heavily armed, seemingly bellicose Americans disturbing their space and rocking their world.*

And, turns out, the really big one got away. There was a serious risk offshore but quite a bit offshore, one which U.S. intelligence sources never picked up upon until the War was over. By 1968, as the United States bombed and otherwise interdicted traffic on the Ho Cho Minh Trail, the North Vietnamese searched for other means whereby they could supply NLF and NVA troops in South Vietnam. They expanded the trail so that in certain parts of Laos there were ten trails or even twelve, not one.

Tom Bissell in *The Father of All Things: A Marine, His Son and the Legacy of Vietnam* recounts that by July 1968 as many as 1100 trucks a day began the 600-800 mile journey down the trail. When U.S. bombing commenced the number was cut in half in a week, and cut in half again in another week.

The North Vietnamese then began transporting supplies by ship, not only offshore but far offshore. Ocean going freighters of 12-15,000 tons and 300-400 foot long (not seventy to seventy-five foot) coastal freighters or disguised fishing trawlers, laden with supplies, would make the 1600 kilometers plus journey from Haiphong in the North, rounding the horn in the south (the southern tip of Vietnam), sailing into the Gulf of Thailand. They would sail northward, offloading their cargos at Shinoukville, Cambodia, only 200 kilometers southwest of the Parrot's Beak and the Cambodian-Vietnamese border. That the U.S. forces crimped down (they never shut it altogether) the Ho Chi Minh Trail then resulted not in a reduction but in a redi-

* Stanley Karnow, in *Vietnam: A History* (Penguin, New York, 1983), the definitive account which won the Pulitzer Prize, recounts that from 1959 onward the North Vietnamese had a study committee, denominated "Group 759," which existed solely to devise means whereby men and supplies could be shipped into South Vietnam by sea.

rection of supplies. Bissell reports that by 1970 eighty percent of the NLF's and NVA's supplies and equipment came by sea, through the backdoor at Shinoukville in the west.

Market Time, the massive U.S. coastal patrol effort in which I and the Brown Water Navy engaged, involved scores of ships, patrol craft, airplanes, and thousands of men. The Navy and Coast Guard patrolled inshore, close-in off shore, and offshore. But never very far or far enough offshore. Neither the U.S. nor the South Vietnamese had any regularized means which could have discovered let alone intercepted traffic forty, fifty, sixty miles or farther offshore.

We had a job to do, a mission to undertake, to patrol and protect inshore, close to the coast. We undertook the mission and did the job, but not without misgivings, even at the time, and serious lapses, which have become evident but only after the War ended.