

MACV Army "A" Photo Team Films Harbor Pilots

The Harbor Pilots are a unique, select group of officers, I don't remember if they were warrant or commissioned officers, assigned to the Army's Transportation Corp. The Harbor Pilot story was the culmination of many nautical, marine and port operation type stories filmed by Army "A" Photo Team assigned to MACV HQS. The story took place at our home base of Saigon.

The photo team met up with the harbor pilot along the water front at the lower end of the Saigon Docks. While waiting for the "J" Boat to transport us to the ship, the harbor pilot told us once we were aboard the ship, he wouldn't have time to talk with us. So any questions we have, ask them before we get to the ship. He informed the team that he and his colleagues took selective courses on the sunken obstacles, river currents, tides, sand bars that disrupt shipping channels. Further he emphasised that it's highly frowned upon to collide with Vietnamese water taxis, sampans or larger Chinese type junks that criss-cross the heavily used water way in the city limits. Adding to the congestion, there are no bridges in Saigon/Cholon crossing the Saigon River. My roommate, a Navy Seabee used a water taxi twice a day to get to the East side of the Saigon River, where his unit was based. I long forgot what that section of Saigon on the East Side of the river was called.

I didn't think we'd tie up at the Saigon Docks, that was for civilian cargo, not military and there wasn't room for a full sized ship, with two Ex U.S. Navy LSTs locking most of the dock space for years, see photo. The harbor pilot stated things, I hope the 35 years since this happened hasn't warped my mind of the facts. He stated once we were aboard the ship, he'd be in command, by international law or agreement, even tho the ship's captain was responsible for what takes place on his ship. It sounded very tricky. The harbor pilot assured me it was very technical and detailed on how the authority was doled out.

Continuing he explained, that few ships come to Saigon on a regular basis. Many ship's captains have never been here. Or the captain may have been here decades ago as a junior officer or crew member of a ship. Therefore the ship's captain isn't in any position to navigate his ship into strange waters.

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The harbor pilot said stay close to him, everything would center around him and the ship's captain. He mentioned that some captains don't like to share power and he had a few nasty experiences. He hoped this one would go well. The "J" Boat arrived and it was about a two mile ride down the Saigon River into the Cholon sector of the city when we came aside a ship awaiting docking instructions.

The ship's crew dropped a jacob's ladder for everyone to climb. They also lowered a line to tie the camera equipment onto, for lifting aboard. Following the Harbor Pilot to the bridge; the ship's captain and harbor pilot announced themselves to each other. There was considerable discussion as to the ship's speed, turning radius, displacement, draft keel length etc. Other conversation centered on radio equipment, radar, visibility from the flying bridge on both sides, location of engine gauges on the bridge and boiler room pressure. With that all accomplished and the harbor pilot somewhat familiar with running this ship's equipment, the order to weigh anchor was given.

With the anchor out of the water, the order for ahead slow was given. Both men in charge running from port to the starboard flying bridges checking traffic in both directions. Soon an order for 10 degrees port rudder was given, to maneuver the ship into the center shipping lane between buoys markers. Whistle blowing to clear small boat traffic on the river. So it went as the ship crawled up the Saigon River toward central Saigon from the Southern part of the city. Several times the call was issued to reverse engines, enabling the ship to slow down, avoiding hitting sampans. Instead of them looking out for us, we had to watch out for them. Slowly the ship passed the Saigon Docks, then the Saigon Zoo, all the time without the aid of any tug boats, just the harbor pilot giving commands.

Somewhere between the zoo and New Port Docks, the ship veered right off onto a feeder stream of the Saigon River. The stream was much smaller in size. The Saigon River had been close to 3/4 of a mile wide, this stream was less than a 100 yards wide, with nothing but brush covering both banks. Not a Vietnamese hut, no cultivated land on either side, just over growth of brush. My instincts was what a great place for an ambush. Those feelings still exist today. At a snails pace the ship eased its way up the narrow passage.

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From the "J" Boat, I saw the ship's bow was sitting in 31 feet of water, yet my gut feeling was this stream couldn't be deeper than 20 feet, why hadn't we run aground? On the bridge orders were being barked constantly for left rudder, right rudder, ahead slow, stop, reverse as the ship meandered up stream, probably four or five more miles. Somewhere along the way orders were given to open the hatches, still were were out in the boondocks totally away from civilization.

Finally in the distance, I saw a small wooden dock, no buildings anywhere. The ship came to a halt in mid-channel. The dock was small by any standard, many lake side cabins had fishing and boat docks larger than what I was looking at. On the dock was a crane. The ship sat about 100 feet away from the dock. Several 2½ ton truck appeared. As we left the bridge, I saw the ship's booms lifting pallets of 155mm artillery projectiles from the ship's forward hole. The term Cat Lai was heard for the first time.

My mind goes blank. I have no memory of a landing craft either LCVP or LCM in the area. I assume a barge was constructed from empty fuel drums with sheet metal welded on top, and was rigged from ship to shore. When the barge was filled the barge was pulled ashore, where the crane loaded the pallets onto the trucks, destined for the 3rd Ord Bn Storage.

By the time we got ashore three trucks had departed, others took their place in line. No wonder we hadn't docked at New Port, the entire ship was laden with explosives. A driver arrived for the harbor pilot, the photo team also got a ride. In the vehicle, the harbor pilot said he was glad we were there. The camera documenting everything intimidated the ship's captain. He felt without the camera's presence, the ship's captain wouldn't have cooperated at all. Travelling a dirt road about a mile, the vehicle intersected the Saigon/Bien Hoa Highway about five miles North of the New Port Bridge.

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