

CDR Nicholas Carbone, USN (Ret.), NILO LAM SON, May 1969 to May 1970

En Route Training and Orientation.

I received survival, evasion, escape, resistance training (SEER) and Vietnamese language training. We also received weapons training.

I had three months of South Vietnamese language training at DLI Monterey, CA, but was not very proficient. Most Vietnamese that I worked with spoke English, and I have never been good at languages.

The incoming NILOs would spend the first night in Saigon in an old hotel near the Saigon racetrack that was overrun during Tet. The rooms had bunks only, and there was a common shower. Lighting was very dim. It was a grim introduction. The next night we were moved to another hotel that had a room reserved for visiting NILOs with much nicer conditions. We moved around Saigon freely, and there was little indication of a war except for occasional explosions. I spent the day checking in and getting the usual indoctrination. I was first assigned to the Rung Sat as part of the Phoenix Program, which kept track of the senior VC and the local VC organization. After about a month, I was moved to Lam Son, where I remained for the rest of my year.

Vietnam Assignments.

I was in Vietnam from May 1969 to May 1970. My first assignment in country was to the Phoenix Program, and I was initially stationed in the Rung Sat Special Zone. I was sent to the Phoenix training at Vung Tau, but, before starting with the local Phoenix office, was reassigned to Naval Intelligence Liaison Officer (NILO) at Lam Son on the Saigon River. I arrived on the Saigon River sometime in July-August, and remained there for my tour. I was not an advisor, but I did work with a Vietnamese Naval officer. We shared information and briefed our respective forces.

Riverine Operations.

The deployment of Riverine forces on the major rivers in Third Riverine worked exceptionally well initially. The VC used the Saigon River as a major supply route until the PBRs arrived. The Saigon River was the dividing line between the 1st and 25th IDs, and neither generally operated too close to the river to avoid friendly engagements. The PBRs were very successful in stopping the movement of rice into the Iron Triangle, a major VC headquarters.

The PBRs patrolled the Saigon River from Lam Son to the rubber plantation on the northern edge of Iron Triangle, where it became too shallow and narrow. The PBRs were in nightly ambush and periodically spent days working with 1st ID north of the river and 25th ID south of the river searching for VC bunkers and base camps. The Iron Triangle, bordered by the Saigon and Thi Tinh Rivers, Binh Duong province, was one of the largest underground tunnel complexes. There were daily movements of rice and other

supplies across the rivers into the Iron Triangle, so the PBRs in night ambush were in frequent engagements. I was not a PBR crewmember, but did make 10-12 patrols with the PBRs. I was not personally in any engagements.

The PBRs had a twin .50 Cal forward, at least one M-60 machine gun, a crank operated rapid fire M-79 launcher, occasionally a 90mm recoilless rifle and small arms, M-16, M-79, pistols. They were adequate. The boats were a little thin on protection. The VC along the Saigon River lived mostly in tunnels. When they fired on the transiting boats they would pop out of a tunnel, fire and then duck back in. Flat fire weapons, like the .50 cal, M-60 and M-16, were generally firing over the tops of the tunnels. The more effective weapon was the M-79 grenade launcher, for those situations. For night ambushes, with VC in the water or on the banks, all the weapons the boats carried were reasonably effective. The PBRs had a limited number of 90 mm recoilless rifles with flechette rounds. Those were most effective against VC during river crossing.

Because of the effectiveness of the Riverine operations on the Saigon, the 1st ID put several Boston Whalers (BW) boats in ambush. Each boat had 3-4 crew. They were small, no armor and possibly one M-60 machine gun, plus the soldiers' small arms and M-79s.

Before I moved up to the Saigon River, I was in the Rung Sat Special Zone, at Nha Be. The Navy flew Seawolf Huey Helicopters and Black Pony OV-10 to support Riverine forces. On the Saigon River, the PBRs occasionally got CAS from 1st or 25th ID Helicopters. There was also an occasional Black Pony. However, they did not generally have CAS for night ambush. The engagements were generally not large scale and were usually over quickly. After an engagement, with the ambush exposed, the boats returned to base. When the boats supported Army daytime operations, the ID had its helicopter support. The 5th ARVN near Lam Son, where I stayed, had U.S. advisors and USAF and USA FACS. Those FACS did watch out for the PBRs while they were supporting ARVN and US units. The CAS was focused on the 1st, 25th and ARVN ground forces, and it did seem to be effective.

I generally briefed the PBRs around 3-4 pm for their night ambushes. If we had recent recon or reports of crossing points, they would use those locations for the ambush. The boats generally went out in a group of three or four. They would leave the base at dusk, run at high speed along the banks until they reached the Thi Tinh River, then they would slow and proceed as quietly as possible. As they approached the ambush site one boat after another would cut engines and drift into the trees on the banks. That way, if the VC were listening, which they began doing after a few months, they wouldn't know exactly where the first boats stopped. The crew then went on a rotating watch, with half sleeping and the other on watch. One person would use the starlight scope to look for sampans coming down the river with people in the water attempting to cross. If one crew spotted activity, they called the other boats to coordinate the engagement. The base camp monitored the radios in case they needed to send additional boats or coordinate with Army units. The boats popped flairs to illuminate the area, and engaged the VC. There was generally an exchange of fire. If the response was heavy, they could call in CAS and exit the ambush. If they suppressed the fire and the engagement stopped, they would look for survivors or materials to take back. If the survivors were injured, they would call for DUSTOFF.

When the PBRs first arrived on the Saigon River, about July - August 1969, they transited in a column in the middle of the river from the base camp until the river narrowed. The river was about 200 meters wide at the base camp, east of Cu Chi. It was reduced to about 100 meters at the Thi Tinh fork. After one boat was hit with a 155 mm rocket fired from the bank, they began transiting at high speed close to the banks. That gave the VC less time to see the boats and shoot.

Intelligence Duties at Lam Son.

My intelligence duties included the full spectrum of intelligence support to Riverine forces. The PBRs were on the Saigon River to interdict the movement of supplies and personnel. They needed to know where the VC were crossing the river. I conducted liaison with area Army intelligence personnel and CIA, read prisoner debriefs and document exploitation reports, debriefed prisoners and Hoi Chons, and flew reconnaissance along the river to identify crossing points. Then I briefed the boat crews before they went out on night ambush. I debriefed the boat crews upon return, and then reported all the information to NAVFORV.

I was housed at the 5th ARVN base on the USA advisory team compound. The compound had rows of barracks, a chow hall and two clubs, officers and enlisted. There were offices for the advisory team, and a small air strip for the USAF and USA Bird dogs & L-19 light aircraft. The barracks had small individual areas for a bunk and personnel space. The PBR Squadron had a small compound on the east side of a bridge in Phu Cuong that connected Cu Chi, Phu Cuong and Bien Hoa. I believe they had barracks for sleeping and a small chow hall. There was a command bunker for operations, briefings and radios. There was a long pier where the boats tied up. I lived in barracks with the advisory team. The barracks had small individual areas for a bunk and personal space. I don't recall the food - it was probably standard army chow. We occasionally ate at Vietnamese restaurants with my Vietnamese Navy counterpart. The Vietnamese food was good.

During the day, my enlisted assistant and I would periodically visit USA intelligence personnel at 1st and 25th IDs, and occasionally the CIA compound. I would generally meet with my Vietnamese counterpart, and he and I would visit POWs or Hoi Chons (came over to South Vietnam) to interrogate or interview people who had been on the river. If there were captured document reports, we would review those for information on movement of supplies in the area. We would read other intelligence reports. If we had new information, we would generate reports back to 3rd Riv. If a FAC or helo was available, we would fly the Saigon and Thi Tinh Rivers to look for trails to the river or other indications of river activity, look for bunkers near or on the river. Each evening, we would visit the PBR base and brief the boat crews on locations for river crossings and make recommendations for night ambush. If there was going to be a daytime operation with the 1st or 25th, we would work with their intel personnel to determine what information was used to develop the operation. At night, we would spend a few hours in the advisory team bunker listening to the activity in case it might affect the PBR night ambushes. Monthly, we would drive to Saigon for the 3rd Riv meeting.

I routinely flew Huey helicopter reconnaissance of the rivers looking for trails and indications of crossing points. I also had a few Birdog, L-19 reconnaissance flights over the area. It was the best way for me to know what the river crossing situation was.

I went on several night ambushes with the PBRs to learn how the operations were conducted and what routinely happened, so that I could ask the right questions of prisoners and the Army intelligence personnel. Most of the night ambushes were where the Saigon River formed the southwestern edge of the Iron Triangle. The river was about 100 meters wide and heavily treed. The boats would approach the ambush sites at dusk, at slow speed, making the least amount of noise and hugging the banks. When the trail boat spotted a place with good tree cover, they would cut engines and drift into the trees. The next boat would do the same until all 3-4 boats had found a spot. The radios were in the forward cabin, so they could talk in a whisper and generally not be heard on the bank. They spent the night in ambush listening for movement on the banks, which generally indicated preparation to cross the river, or for sampans transiting the river. They also had Starlite scopes so that they could see what was happening. The boat that heard movement alerted the other boats and the base camp. That boat would wait for the VC to enter the water, then pop a flare and open up on the VC. The other boats would maneuver to support the closest boat. I did not encounter any crossings during the times that I was with the boats. After several months of taking heavy losses from the PBR operations, the VC began stationing lookouts at crossing points earlier in the day. If the boats stopped in the area, the lookout would attempt to sneak up on a boat and toss a grenade in the boat. That happened several times, but the crew managed to get the grenade out of the boat. I don't recall any casualties from those attacks. On one of my patrols, we heard branches breaking near the boat and pulled out, assuming it was a grenade attempt. There was also at least one attempt to swim up to a boat and climb aboard. That VC was killed with a pistol.

My commander was the Third Riverine Intelligence Officer, based in Saigon. I was based at Lam Son, and lived with an Army advisory team at 5th ARVN headquarters. I had one Navy enlisted man working for me. We were essentially on our own, supporting the PBR Squadron Commander. The squadrons rotated periodically. Therefore, I did not have a lot of contact with the general military leadership or my commander. From what I saw, they were good. The USA advisory personnel were good. I led one enlisted man, and he was a joy to work with. We got along well, and were very successful supporting the PBRs.

I did not meet Adm Zumwalt or any senior commanders. I did have contact with the Third Riverine Intelligence Officer on a monthly basis. All the NILOs for 3rd Riv met in Saigon for monthly meetings.

The VC and NVA.

The VC were outgunned, but determined fighters. The NVA were better equipped. However, neither were popular with the South Vietnamese civilians. The VC and NVA generally had to resort to terror to get civilians to work for them. They also had more defections than you might expect. The Hoi Chon program was fairly successful.

The VC were resourceful and well indoctrinated. They used/reused a lot of unexploded ordnance and other U.S. equipment. Their biggest weakness was no air support. They

used 122 mm rockets, water mines, small arms and grenades against the boats. There was at least one PBR on the Saigon River that was hit by a 122 mm rocket fired from a crude launcher on the river bank. Water mines were also used. The mines were generally on a wire that the VC could pull back and forth across the river to get them close to an approaching boat. One PBR crewmember went ashore on the riverbank and tripped a Bouncing Betty mine that killed him.

Body count was a means to measure success. We had a general idea of the VC command structure and manning. The Tet '68 offensive left the VC decimated and ineffective. They didn't have tanks and heavy equipment or an air force. The VC were individuals, so the only way to tell how well you were succeeding was to count bodies. If they had had airplanes and tanks, we could have counted those.

We had one crewmember from a PBR who went ashore and tripped a Bouncing Betty mine and was killed. The VC attempted to float mines down river to blow up the bridge at Lam Son. The bridge connected Cu Chi with Lam Son. They also tried swimmer sappers with mines. The barriers around the bridge supports protected the bridge. The patrols periodically dropped concussion grenades in the water to discourage swimmers.

Heroic Actions.

On one 1st ID night ambush a group of 10-12 VC passed by the ambush position. Because they were out-manned, the GIs did not engage. They were apparently told that next time, they were to engage. The next night, or a few nights later, the same thing happened and the 1st ID ambush engaged. They were overwhelmed, with several wounded, and nearly overrun. They called for help. The PBRs were not far away and responded. One PBR crewman jumped into chest deep water to get ashore. With supporting fire from the PBRs, and possible helicopter cover, the PBR crewmember pulled the wounded BW personnel to safety. I think that's how it ended. I was not there and did not debrief the crew, but that's what I heard. There should be a file copy of all the medals or accommodations from the war, as well as after action reports, which would give more details.

Agent Orange.

The Saigon River bordered the Iron Triangle, which was defoliated and Rome plowed. Rome plows were large construction equipment that were used to remove the tree cover in the Iron Triangle. Unfortunately, it didn't affect the massive underground tunnel complex. I never got sprayed, and I don't think the boats were. However, the defoliation may have ceased by the time the boats arrived, around July - August 1969.

South Vietnamese Navy.

I can only speak to the South Vietnamese Navy personnel I worked with. I had a Naval Officer counterpart, Dai Uy Choung. We each provided intelligence to our respective operating forces. We could go to our respective Army and other organization forces and collect information, then meet to share the information. We also went together to POW

camps to interrogate prisoners together. As the PBRs transitioned from U.S. units to Vietnamese with U.S. advisors his role and forces increased. From what I saw, the Vietnamese Navy was good, but not as aggressive as the U.S. units. My counterpart was an exceptional officer.

Personal Experience and Observations.

I was never in an engagement, even though I went on several night ambushes, daytime operations and reconnaissance missions, so I don't consider myself as having been in combat. What I remember most about the tour in a combat zone was the resiliency of the Vietnamese people and their desire to be free from communism.

I had been in the Philippines and Hong Kong, so I had been around Asian people. I thought the Vietnamese kept themselves very neat and clean, considering the dirt streets and general conditions of the small villages. I had daily contact with a Vietnamese Naval Officer, and was very impressed with his determination and capability. He and his family lived in Lam Son, where the VC occasionally came through at night to collect taxes or harass the people. I had a high respect for people living under those conditions and still do.

The US was in Vietnam to help the South Vietnamese people keep the communists from taking over. There were also strategic reasons, but the US has always fought to protect the rights of others, and help the oppressed, as the Bible admonishes us to do. If the US military in Vietnam had taken the time to talk to and work with the South Vietnamese people, they would have found that they did not want to live under communism. The Tet offensive proved to the NVA and should have proven to the US that there was not popular support for North Vietnam or for communism. As the communists normally do when they conquer a country, they kill off all the opposition, an estimated 2 million plus South Vietnamese died after the South fell.

I think J.F. Kennedy had the big picture of the potential spread of communism throughout Asia, and the importance of delaying the spread by taking a stand in Vietnam. L.B. Johnson and his cabinet lost the big picture, had no strategy, and let politics interfere with the military's execution of the war. We were winning when we left, and we did succeed in stopping the spread of communism. Here's a great quote about the U.S. success:

General Vo Nguyen Giap.

Giap's memoirs...

(Gen. Giap was top General in the North Vietnamese Army.)

The following quote is from his memoirs currently found in the Vietnam war memorial in Hanoi:

'What we still don't understand is why you Americans stopped the bombing of Hanoi. You had us on the ropes. If you had pressed us a little harder, just for another day or two, we were ready to surrender! It was the same at the battles of TET. You defeated us! We knew it, and we thought you knew it. But we were elated

to notice your media was definitely helping us. They were causing more disruption in America than we could in the battlefields. We were ready to surrender. You had won!"

I don't have any particular memories of the advisory team compound, but I did attend the Bob Hope Christmas show at Cu Chi, and it was enjoyable. The 25th ID had caught several VC setting up rockets the day before the show, preventing a potential disaster.

My one week R&R was to Australia. It was during their winter, so there wasn't much activity on the Gold Coast. I spent most of the time in Sydney, Australia. The USO had a good program for tours and information.

I felt great admiration for the Vietnamese people, and, at the time, felt fortunate to have been able to support their attempt to remain free from the VC and NVA communists. I was embarrassed that our politicians interfered with the war, eventually letting the Vietnamese people down, with the slaughter of over 2 million civilians after the communist takeover. When the country fell I was aboard USS HANCOCK as part of the evacuation. We had over 2,000 refugees on HANCOCK. When we returned to the Philippines to transfer the refugees to Guam, I saw thousands on Granby Island, carrying all they had left of their lives. It was sad to see so many people being forced to leave their homeland because we betrayed them.

I don't recall how I missed the rude receptions that many GIs encountered, but I did. I went directly to Navy Field Operational Intelligence Office (NFOIO) at Ft Meade, MD, and got lost in the mass of military.

I saw the "The Wall" in D.C. when I was there on business and vacation, and a traveling wall in Jefferson City, MO. None of the NILOs that I knew were lost. I did not know many advisory team personnel. The PBRs lost one Ensign, but I did not know him. So, I did not have a personal attachment to The Wall. It was no different than visiting the other war memorials.

I feel fortunate that I was able to do my job in a live combat situation and, to a small degree, help the Vietnamese people who I knew fight communism.

I think the US should have been in Vietnam - we were the only country who helped. I'm disappointed that we didn't provide the support needed to stop the communist aggression. The Vietnam war provided a good example of why we need a volunteer military, one with personnel who understand their roles in helping to provide security to those countries who cannot withstand aggression on their own. The military's role is no different than our local law enforcement and firefighters. We all pledge to risk our lives to save others.

The US and Vietnamese forces were winning when we left. We did not provide the promised logistics and other support to allow the South Vietnamese defend themselves. Unfortunately, the South Vietnamese politicians and some incompetent military leaders were as much to blame, but the communist did not have popular support, as they found out during the Tet offensive, and we could have stopped the NVA if given the chance.

If you use the "intervention" definition of "action taken to improve the situation", then absolutely. I think law enforcement personnel should intervene when someone is victimizing other people, that's why we hire them. I also think the military should

intervene when dictators are victimizing their people, or terrorists are victimizing others. You should be able to get help from your neighbor when you need it. We live in a global neighborhood. Our security depends on stopping criminals and terrorists anywhere in the world. There are many people in this world who need help, and we are one of the few countries that can provide that help. We are blessed as a nation because we are willing to help others.

I saw the communist approach to winning the hearts and minds of people in Vietnam. It was much the same as the Mafia, Pol Pot, Saddam Hussein, Hitler, the Japanese in WWII, Osama Bin Laden and others. Execute or suppress the people that might oppose you and terrorize the rest of the population so they follow orders. In small villages, the VC might order the husband to work for them. They would threaten the rest of the family if he didn't. Sometimes they would kill a wife or child in the village to prove they were serious. The US lost 58,000 during the war. The South Vietnamese lost hundreds of thousands, some estimates are in the millions. Many died after the war at the hands of the communists. Perhaps, if we had not gotten involved, the communists would have invaded earlier, but not have killed so many. It's too bad you can't interview those South Vietnamese political prisoners who were executed because they didn't want to be communists.