

DATELINE VIETNAM

Swift Boat Crew Survives Horror

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CAT LO, Vietnam—"A long day, an old story," he thought. "Seems like it's like this every day."

Lt. Alex Balian was in command of the small grey dart that the Navy men call "Swift boat" when it left Cat Lo at the start of that rainy May day, so many hours ago.

Balian, an olive-skinned, black-haired Californian, had just finished a quick dinner in the boat cabin at dusk on the Dong Tranh River, 25 miles south of Saigon and 10 miles from nowhere.

He glanced out the window, noted the rain had ceased its tattoo on the cabin roof. He could see Ralph Powers, a crewman, manning the aft machine gun, soggy in a helmet and flak jacket.

As he stepped on the bottom rung of the ladder to the wheelhouse, it happened.

Whoom!

His mind spinning, he jumped up and grabbed the radio. The set was dead.

Racing into the wreckage, he saw a gaping hole in the starboard side of the house.

Another thunder crack. Water sprayed everywhere.

The body of the pilot, soft-spoken Lee Godley, a 16-year Navy veteran with a wife and four youngsters back in Missouri, slumped in the chair.

Then Balian noticed the boat was racing out of control at full speed straight into the enemy fire.

Charley Barham, manning the forward gun turret, could see it coming all too clearly. "There was at least three heavy machine guns. In between them there was about 15 or 20 yards of beach that was nothin' but muzzle flash—small arms."

He looked down just long enough to see the bullets still smashing the wheelhouse before he opened with his twin .50 calibers.

They roared back at the beach with a vengeance—for a moment. Barham fired off 100 rounds through each—then both guns jammed at the same instant.

Barham saw the boat was plunging to its death straight into the VC guns. He jumped out the turret and ran to the rear controls.

He and Balian reached them at the same time, and pulled the boat into wide arc up river.

Powers kept the aft machine gun blazing. Coast Guard WO George Fenlin, a volunteer crewman "along for a little excitement," fired a grenade launcher. Radioman Bob Keim, with three shrapnel wounds, alternately tightened a tourniquet around his torn leg and tried to pump the radio back to life.

against it, then settled to the bottom. Her back was broken. She sat 200 yards upstream from the VC, tucked against the bank.

The crew put out a massive outpour of firepower, but Charley was nowhere to be seen. Silence crashed down around them.

It got dark, finally.

BALIAN TRIED to signal passing airplanes with a cabin light. None saw him. Leaving it on, he ordered his men to strip to their skivvies and hit the water.

Towing a small raft full of guns, they struck out.

Barham, who had a landing craft shot out from under him in Korea, thought of the jellyfish and sea snakes and huge crocodiles he had seen in the river. He thought of Keim's leg, still bleeding.