

# Crew of Vietnam veterans vows it won't allow people to forget efforts of River Patrol Force

By *HATTIE BROWN GARROW*,

*The Virginian-Pilot*

© June 25, 2006

VIRGINIA BEACH - Bob Fred and his crew could have been killed just about every day they spent in Vietnam. But the risk rarely entered his mind. "You had too many other things to worry about," Fred said. During the war, he was the commanding officer of the Hunterdon County , a support ship for patrol boats. Very few days passed without getting shot at - Fred remembers it sounded like acorns falling from a tree or popcorn popping .

These days, Fred, 71, is a Norfolk resident and a member of the Mid-Atlantic Chapter of the Gamewardens of Vietnam , a fraternal organization for former members of the Navy's Task Force 116 . The group is intent on not letting people forget the River Patrol Force's work during the Vietnam War.

The chapter recently received word that a former patrol boat housed at Little Creek Naval Amphibious Base was being taken out of storage. The boat, along with a granite monument honoring Task Force 116 members lost in combat, once again was ready for display. On Saturday, Fred and a handful of other members gathered at the base to clean the boat. They power-washed the 31-foot, fiberglass-hulled vessel and scrubbed its interior.

They plan to paint it . A few members of Naval Special Warfare Group 4 and Special Boat Unit 20 also stopped by to help . Seeing the boat and getting aboard rekindled memories for some of the men. During the Vietnam War, four people would man the boats and patrol the water . The so-called "river rats" had to keep watch for the Viet Cong at all times. The Mekong Delta's lush greenery was a good hiding place . Even a tree stump or dead animal could signal something sinister, such as a booby trap.

"They would literally lay in the brush or behind trees or in the mango groves," said A.E. "Wes" Weseleskey , 71, a helicopter pilot who assisted the patrol boats from overhead. "You couldn't see them." Built in 1966, the boat obtained by the local Gamewardens was powered by diesel engines driving water jets. The boat belongs to the Naval Historical Center but has been on loan to the group since 2002.

The monument, an obelisk unveiled in 1980, also has been in storage. The Gamewardens hope the latest location, near the Naval Special Warfare Group 4 headquarters, will be the permanent resting place for both the boat and monument. They plan to hold a re dedication ceremony at 1 p.m. July 21 . "It's important to the people - the relatives and particularly the guys who lost their close friends," said Clarence "Coop" Cooper , 73, who worked on a patrol boat.

This all comes at a time when the experiences of the River Patrol Force, known as the brown-water Navy, are in high demand. The Navy is reintroducing a riverine force, which will be deployed next year, and has approached the local Gamewardens for assistance. "We're absolutely delighted that they're seeking us out. They seem to be genuinely interested in picking our minds ... " Cooper said. "If we can keep these guys from having to reinvent the wheel, it will be worthwhile."

Reach Hattie Brown Garrow at (757) 222-5116 or [hattie.brown@pilotonline.com](mailto:hattie.brown@pilotonline.com).

---

Contributed,  
YNCS Don Harribine, USN(ret)