

## NIGHT WATCH ON THE VINH TE

Medici opened the olive drab squeeze bottle of DEET insect repellent and squirted some into his hand. He rubbed his hands together and then slapped repellent on his face, forehead, neck and ears, then a second squirt for his forearms to the elbow and the back of his hands. The stuff smelled really strong. Where it grazed his lips it stung like a bite.

He looked out the window of his room and the sun was just setting over Mui Nai hill. Another forty minutes till dusk, so he'd better get going, he thought. He didn't want to delay the PBR's departure. He was their new NILO, and didn't want to be late. He had loaded ten clips of M-16 ammo in a cloth belt, and cleaned his M-16. Now he put his flak jacket and the bandolier over one shoulder, carried his helmet and 16 in the other, and headed for path to the floating PBR base.

Tonight was his first night ambush on the treacherous Giang Thanh River and Vinh Te Canal that separated Cambodia from Vietnam for a fifty mile stretch. Each night Vice Admiral Zumwalt's boats left at dusk and set up night ambushes -- "waterborne guard posts" in the navy vernacular -- along the river and canal to intercept any troops or munitions infiltrated across the canal from Cambodia into Vietnam by the North Vietnamese and Vietcong. Only last year, Black Ponies -- the Navy's OV-10 tactical aircraft -- had caught 473 North Vietnamese soldiers (ironically from the 473rd NVA Regiment) out in the open in the Tram Forest just south of the border, and killed them all with mini-guns in an industrial slaughter. The NVA's local guide had been killed by alert PBR sailors as he crossed last with the unit, and with no guide, the hapless troops wandered in circles or hid in the scraggly Tram to no avail.

Tonight Medici would ride with PBRs of River Division 532's two-boat Bravo Patrol, on LT(jg) Bomarito—"The Bomber's"-- boat, along with Boatswain's Mate third Watson, the coxswain, Engineman striker Pogue, Gunner's Mate third Tamarovich, and Seaman Angel, and accompanied by a second PBR, their cover boat. As NILO, he wanted to familiarize himself with the PBR's tactical capabilities, to better understand their operations.

Medici ran downhill along the dirt path that led to the ammi barges where the PBRs nested. He looked in the tiny, screened chow hall, but the sailors had finished dinner and must already be aboard the PBRs. He ran to the second float

and found the sailors aboard Bomarito's PBR, the diesels idling. He stepped to the gunwale and said "Permission to come aboard sir". The Bomber turned, laughed, and said "Get your butt aboard NILO, we're ready to roll." Medici smiled and stepped aboard placing his gear in the corner of the stern.

"Not there NILO," said gunner's mate Tamarovich. "That's in the stern gunner's sector to cover our tail. Move the gear forward." Medici complied. Angel, the forward gunner, squeezed by Medici carrying cans of ammunition for his twin .50 caliber machine guns, then stopped next to Medici, sniffed dramatically, and said "Jesus Lieutenant! What are you expecting an invasion of the giant mosquitoes? You know the VC can smell this stuff 30 yards away." The other enlisted sailors laughed and Medici blushed. As they got underway he reached down to grab some river water which he rubbed all over his face and arms to dilute the DEET smell.

The PBR cruised up Ha Tien Bay toward the mouth of the Giang Thanh River in the fading light. They traveled northeast between the narrow "Fingers", the skinny islands on either side of the river's fairway. Tamarovich grabbed Medici's arm and pointed to the northerly most island and a tall Bael tree, the highest point on the island.

"NILO -- that's the Hangman's Tree," Tamarovich shouted over the diesel's roar. "Navy guys hung some VC from that tree when we first started patrolling the border."

The PBR planed on its bow wave now at 26 knots, and slalomed its way up the long serpentine loops of the Giang Thanh River, past The Bend, where one sailor had been killed and five wounded the week before when an NVA unit ambushed his river minesweeper in one of the bloodiest events in a year on the border. They all remained silent at The Bend. Watson maneuvered the boat 180 degrees around The Horse Head, a deadly section of water where the boats completed a 270 degree turn, then found themselves at the flat grassy Ton Hon crossing point, where Cambodians and Vietnamese crossed regularly to the Cambodian market at Ton Hon hamlet. Run aground on the Vietnam bank they saw Mike 6, an olive drab Monitor Assault Craft, a Navy LCM landing craft refitted with rebar armor and a 105mm Howitzer turret mounted amidships. The river battle wagon was permanently on station at the crossing point because of the amount of night traffic along those paths.

The fiberglass PBRs slowed where the Giang Thanh River turned to the east and connected to the Vinh Te Canal through the locks at Dam Chit. As they

approach the ancient French-built locks, Medici noticed the lock doors had been blown off and that the water level was quite low—it was the dry season-- between the 10 foot banks on each side of the canal. Watson slowed then backed down as they reached the locks so Angel in the forward gun tub could toss a concussion grenade in the water at the locks. The grenade exploded with a big THWUMMP and pushed a wide muddy geyser eight feet in the air.

The Bomber said “That’s preventative medicine, NILO. The VC place command detonation mines at the locks to blow as we go through. If we throw in a concussion grenade it blows anything they might have in place.” They all searched carefully on the banks for telltale wires of command mines, saw none, so proceeded through the locks to the canal. The boats’ stations for night ambush were 2 1/2 kilometers east of the locks, a kilometer apart, so they sped along the canal with eyes trained on the crests of each bank for signs of ambush. They passed some Vietnamese children fishing with hand lines at Cong Ca hamlet and waved them away shouting “Di di mau!” *Run away fast!* but the children did not move and simply waved back.

As they approached their night ambush position Watson slowed and they examined the Cambodian bank for a slight indentation in the brush that would hide at least part of the PBR from sight. Watson expertly found a niche and slid the PBR bow into the north bank. He gave the Jacuzzi drives a goose to slide the bow securely into the niche for their night ambush. It was nearly dark now and Medici was feeling a slight unease, inklings of fear, in his solar plexus.

Watson slid over the bow in the last light, climbed up and over the bank to the Cambodia side and installed a motion and proximity sensor which would transmit an acoustic signal to the earpiece in the boat if anyone approached the boat from that side of the bank. He returned to the boat, turned the unit on and offered the earphone, like that of a transistor radio, for Medici to monitor. Monitoring the low tone of the sensor, Medici vividly imagined a VC sapper inching up the other side of the bank with a satchel charge to throw in the boat and smash them all to meat bits, or to hit them from two sides with B-40 anti-tank rockets.

As darkness fell the night sounds rose. Medici was surprised how noisy the jungle was at night. He noticed that it was not the night sounds, but the periods of complete silence when all the insects and animals would stop, that brought the sailors alert. Watson whispered to him that at any strange night movement the insects and animals would quiet, heightening the boat’s alert status, since it might be a VC moving on the Cambodian bank.

After an hour or so in the dark the sailors stood their watches comfortably, making no noise. Their companion boat was a kilometer away and could not be seen or heard.

Medici was sleepy but wired, filled with adrenaline. His senses were super-heightened, his imagination running wild. He listened carefully to the low tones of the sensor for any accelerating pitch which would indicate movement on the bank. The feeling was odd, exhaustion urging sleep on him, adrenaline in his nervous system keeping him alert. He felt his eyes closing then jerked his eyelids up in a constant tug of war. He was impressed how silent the crew members were, guns manned, dozing but alert at the slightest sound. A frog or turtle plopped in the canal behind the boat and instantly all the crew members brought their guns to bear without a sound. Very efficient, very deadly. These river sailors were real professionals, Medici thought. It was amazing to him how in the combat zone men either got it together quickly or were moved back from "the line". There was always the line in a war, the furthest point out from bloated headquarters staff, the place where the rubber met the road and the probability of death or maiming was highest. And tonight he was there.

He thought of "Z" -- Vice Admiral Zumwalt -- who had come to the border a few months ago and ridden night ambush on a Swift boat. Clearly against doctrine and statute -- flag officers were not to needlessly expose themselves to harm on the line -- Zumwalt did it anyway, and boosted morale 1,000 percent among the river sailors patrolling the Cambodian border at Ha Tien. Zumwalt had his hand slapped by MACV and the Secretary of Defense for that caper, but secretly all the staff officers and sailors in the field admired him immensely for having ridden night ambush at the border.

Watson nudged Medici and pointed to the Vietnam canal bank 20 meters behind them. He said nothing, but pointed to his ear, then back at the bank. Medici's heart pounded. Watson slowly lifted his M-14 7.62-millimeter rifle -- its rounds penetrated the bush better than the M-16's -- and slowly tracked movement Medici could not see, while the Bomber covered the bank with the night vision scope. Watson trained his rifle left at something moving away from the PBR toward the east, then stood quietly for a minute before lowering the weapon. He shrugged his shoulders at Medici and sat down again on the engine cover. Medici's heart slowed and he eased back to a slouch, repositioned the earphone, got comfortable and without realizing it, dozed off.

He thought his obnoxious clock radio alarm was buzzing to awaken him in their home in Imperial Beach for early duty on Tulsa. He reached for the snooze

alarm but hit the PBR's dozing enginemen. Then adrenaline shot through Medici and his heart pounded when he realized the acoustic sensor was signaling, and he didn't know what to do. He reached over and nudged Watson and pointed to the earphone "Contact?" he whispered.

Watson took the earphone and listened intently, then rose and nudged everyone to full alert. Each sailor quickly and quietly sat up and took the safety off their weapons. None moved. Medici could feel the tension in the air around him. Watson gestured to Tamarovich for each of them to go over the bow, one each side, to move up the bank to get cross bearings on whatever was tripping the sensor. Medici thought they were crazy: why not just toss a grenade over the bank from the bow?

Watson and Tamarovich slid silently off the bow and edged up the bank 20 feet apart. Medici watched them with the boat's night vision scope, two solid white silhouettes against a grainy green background. Watson got to the top first, lifted his head silently, turned an ear toward the sensor, then lowered himself to the ground. He picked up a rock and tossed it carefully in an arc, and it hit with a thump. The urgent acoustic alarm peaked, then returned to its rest tone.

Watson and Tamarovich returned to the boat, laughing quietly. "Nice monitoring, NILO. You can even sense ferocious canal rats with that thing." The crew snickered quietly, and Medici heard whispered from the bow "Fuckin' boot NILO," then the boat settled down again.

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The stars moved through the night sky. In a semi-conscious state Medici noticed the constellations he first saw in the east were now well down on the western horizon. He looked at his watch. It was 4:00 a.m. and just a hint of false dawn showed in the east. The boat had remained quiet since the canal rat, except for the hourly "Click-click" on the PRC-25 radio, as the cover boat keyed the mic to signal all was well, and Bomber answered back with a second "Click-click."

Watson stood up, M-14 aimed again at the south bank he had scrutinized before. Then, from 50 yards to the east, a shrill human cry rang out, shattering the night. Watson fired eight rounds quickly over a 20-degree sector in the direction of the cry, and the cry ended. The crew was at the ready, guns cocked. Doctrine taught them the enemy would come from the north bank out of Cambodia, but in fact they were more vulnerable to attack from the south bank in Vietnam. The cries did not resume. The secure radio BOOPed, and their cover PBR asked if they

were under attack. The Bomber said no, just a recon by fire on human-like cries, possibly VC crossing signals.

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Dawn came quickly, surely. When it was fully light they retrieved the sensors, broke ambush and backed to the south bank so Watson could recon the area of the cries. With the PBR idling off the bank, following him slowly east, Watson slowly reconned the hidden side of the south bank, then darted down out of sight and emerged with a bloody parrot, the source of last night's cries.

They cruised quickly along the canal to the Ton Hon crossing after grenading the locks, and slowed as they passed Mike 6. The morning quiet was broken by the clear sound of the Beatles singing "Ma Belle Amie." It was a weird, quirky song whose rhythms and lyrics Medici did not recognize, but knew he would never forget. The adrenaline of a night on ambush burned the song into his grateful mind.

They went alongside Mike 6 but its sailors waved them off yelling "Be careful!" and pointing to an unexploded 106-millimeter recoilless rifle round wedged between their rebar armor. It had been a direct hit during a night attack, but produced only a thud because the round failed to explode. The Monitor Assault Craft had lost her antennas to small arms fire, so they asked the PBR sailors to call Navy ordinance disposal so the crew could bring Mike 6 downriver to Ha Tien to remove the dud round.

The PBR continued downriver. Watson told Medici that the VC use birdcalls as crossing signals, and the unfortunate bird had a cry too much like a human voice. They passed The Horsehead and The Bend and approached The Fingers, the thin islands on each side of the channel leading to Ha Tien Bay.

"Let's sweep The Fingers and show the NILO the Hangman's Tree," Watson said. "There's always action on The Fingers." The Bomber agreed and Watson nudged the PBR into the northwest island, only 20 meters wide. It was already hot. Angel stayed with the boat while Medici, Watson, The Bomber and Tamarovich spread out from the bow, M-16s locked and loaded. They swept through the gorse, then into deeper jungle. They could barely see the outer bank from the thick growth they struggled through. Watson said "There it is," and pushed ahead toward the prominent Bael tree. He started to tell Medici the story of the VC hanged from the tree in Ha Tien's first days of Navy patrols, but yelled and fell to his knees, slapping his back.

Medici froze. Was it a booby trap or punji stakes? Then he felt hot stinging pains on his lower back, and began to gyrate. So did the other sailors. Watson yelled “Fire ants!! Back to the boat!” They ran swatting themselves, jumped on the PBR, stripped off their shirts and brushed the red and black fire ants off each other, cussing them lustily.

“Guess we should have just gone back to base, huh?” Tamarovich said.