



CHARLIE MEAD / THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

From left, Paul Bohn, Clarence Cooper, Monte Blackwell, Jerry Gandy and Robert Fred, all members of the Game Wardens of Vietnam, hold up the book "River Rats" written by Ralph Christopher. The local retirees were members of the Navy's river patrol unit in Vietnam. Christopher will sign copies of his book today.

Ex-River Rats recall Vietnam era through book on Navy boat crews

BY STACY PARKER
CORRESPONDENT

RIVER RATS," a new book by Richmond native Ralph Christopher, is stirring up memories and reuniting local grandfathers of river warfare.

"Ralph's book is one of many that have been written about Task Force 116, code named Operation Game Warden, but it has definitely helped to bring some of us locals together," said Clarence "Coop" Cooper, a board member of the Mid-Atlantic Chapter of Gamewardens.

The Gamewardens are the veterans of Task Force 116, the crews of small river patrol boats and support units described in "River Rats."

"Most Americans do not know our story, and this is one of my reasons for writing the book," said the author, who lives with his family in Nevada and works with young adults, music and veterans affairs.

He will sign copies of "River Rats" from 2 to 4 p.m. today at Borders, 1744 Laskin Road, Virginia Beach.

Local members of the Gamewardens have read the book and will attend the signing.

"There are more River Rats living in the Virginia Beach area than any other area in the world, and we are a very tight bunch," said Christopher.

WANT TO GO?

Pembroke resident Cooper will bring his 40-foot-tall stuffed rat, "A. Billy Ratt Jr.," made by his daughter.

"A. Billy Ratt Sr." is the official mascot of the Gamewardens of Vietnam, which has about 900 members. It is featured on the organization's Web site, www.tf116.org.

The book's artist, Buttons Boggs, who grew up in Virginia Beach and lives in West Point, will also be at the signing.

"River Rats" is 259 pages and contains 47 pictures and original artwork. It was published in March by AuthorHouse.

Cooper was senior enlisted and 35 years old in 1968 and 1969 when he was in Vietnam.

"I was about 15 years older than the average young Navy man there," he said. "The thing I found most interesting about Ralph's book was seeing it through the eyes of a younger, lower-ranked enlisted man."

The book tells the story of the Cambodian invasion of 1970. It's the author's personal story from Vietnam along with the piecing together of stories from many River Rats' accounts.

Christopher described the Brown Water Navy back-

ground: "Beginning in 1966, more than a century after being away from river operations, the U.S. navy started building up a river fleet to combat the Rung Sat assassins and protect shipping in the Mekong Delta. By 1970, there were over 500 river craft."

The Brown Water sailors, dubbed River Rats, fought from the decks of small river boats.

"We were one of the hardest hit units in Nam and highly decorated," said the author. "Our hit ratio was 30 enemy to our one."

For many of the local River Rats, the book describes experiences they remember vividly. Gandy, for example, was wounded during a firefight while operating out of the Advanced Tactical Support Base at Phouc Xwen, a place mentioned several times in the book.

The author recently visited the old battlefields and villages of the Mekong Delta.

"Many times I was overtaken by emotion and happiness," he said. "They all remembered us River Rats as good guys and friends to the people."

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