

GETTING BOMBED ON MY 21ST BIRTHDAY

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When I volunteered for duty with the Short Range Ambush Platoon (SRAP) on 10 February 1969, my final day of in-country training at the 173rd Airborne Brigade's Jungle School, I had no idea that in a few months I would be going to work aboard a rubber boat. On the afternoon of the 10th SFC Donald Harrington, SRAP's Platoon Sergeant, recruited less than a half-dozen soldiers from the group assigned to the 1st Battalion (Mechanized) 50th Infantry. With that smooth confidence that experienced NCOs exuded when they were in their recruiting mode he ascertained that the provisional platoon was composed of highly-motivated infantrymen who possessed the stamina and discipline required for dangerous operations in the Central Highlands. SFC Harrington emphasized that men who volunteered for the platoon were subject to a probationary period, and those individuals who could not meet certain standards would be dismissed and returned to their assigned rifle company. I spent much of my first tour with a provisional rifle platoon in the Iron Triangle, so I was quite willing to volunteer for what I thought was similar duty. This attitude was somewhat prompted by my experiences in III Corps where I witnessed the effects of RPGs and land mines on M-48s and M-113s. In any case, I believe that my choice was the correct one, because I survived an encounter with an explosive device while piloting a rubber boat.

I served with SRAP as an RTO, grenadier and rifleman while the platoon conducted ambush patrols in the An Khe Area of Operations and remained with the unit after the battalion re-located to the Bong Son AO. During the first month or so we operated as both an assault platoon and an ambush platoon. There were a number of combat assaults where SRAP acted in response to sightings made by observers flying above the region. There were also a few multi-day ambush patrols similar to the operations we conducted in the mountains around An Khe. The platoon's tactical direction shifted in mid-May when SRAP was ordered to conduct amphibious operations in the vicinity of Dam Tra O, a large lake a few miles northeast of LZ Uplift.

After a few days of training the platoon deployed to the tip of a peninsula jutting into the lake and set up a small patrol base. One of our duties was sending patrols out onto the lake in an attempt to interdict the enemy's flow of food, ordinance and manpower. The volume of Vietnamese traffic on the lake included quite a bit of legitimate commerce carrying farm produce and seafood from the coastal lowlands to inland settlements, and a substantial fishing fleet that harvested the schools of perch and bream. Mingled among the normal flow of Vietnamese watercraft were a few that carried VC or NVA soldiers, weapons, rations, equipment or documents. Also, on occasion, the enemy used local watercraft as a means of escape from American infantry engaged in search and destroy operations near Dam Tra O.

A typical day patrol on the lake consisted of four or five SRAP volunteers aboard a 15-man rubber boat equipped with a 25-horsepower outboard engine mounted on its plywood transom. From time to time, two boats patrolled simultaneously, a strategy designed to further hamper enemy planning and logistics. An M-60 machine gun mounted on the boat's bow platform gave the search team a little more firepower. The boat and its occupants then



cruised around a given sector of the lake until the leader spotted a Vietnamese craft that seemed worthy of an inspection. The pilot swung the motor around and propelled the infantrymen toward the sampan. Occasionally the Vietnamese attempted to outrun the rubber boats, but most just hove to and waited for the American soldiers to do their duty. At least nine out of ten Vietnamese boats had nothing out of the ordinary within their hulls and after



a check of the occupant's identity cards the patrol leader sent them off with a wave. A few sampans had unusual items such as a large sack of US Agency for International Development rice or quantities of American beverages, but in most cases the patrol leader allowed the sampan to proceed because the rules of engagement did not specifically instruct us to hinder Black Market trafficking.

Yet, not every Black Market shipment passed SRAP's inspection.

The waterborne patrols seized every Vietnamese craft that indicated any links to the enemy. For example, a North Vietnamese canteen and two cases of American beer in one fisherman's boat was deemed just cause to escort the craft back to the SRAP base for further investigation by the National Police. Every now and then we would select a search target with an undocumented individual aboard or one with a fresh bullet wound and take him or her into custody. Infrequently, we would find a small amount of contraband like enemy rations, grenades or ammunition in a Vietnamese boat and seize the craft and its occupants for questioning by the national Policemen assigned to our patrol base. Most of these were declared to be enemy suspects or sympathizers by the policemen and airlifted to LZ Uplift for further questioning.

On the morning of 3 June 1969 I was assigned as pilot of one of the two boats detailed for the morning patrol. Around 07:45 I loaded a couple of gas cans into the boat and attached one feed hose to the outboard motor. Then I loaded four paddles into the boat, grabbed my M-16, claymore bag, canteen and bandoleer and climbed aboard. While the water drained from my pant legs and boots I checked the motor in preparation for the morning run. Meanwhile, the other four members of the patrol boarded the craft carrying an M-60, PRC/25 radio and their personal weapons and equipment.

The second boat's crew, which included our Platoon Leader, Lt. Harper, likewise readied themselves for their patrol. When everyone was aboard I started the engine and turned due East, heading for our intended patrol area. The other boat moved out along a parallel course a few yards away from our watercraft. They too, assumed an alert-and-ready posture as the patrol motored away from the security of our base. About two hundred yards from shore the propeller or lower housing of our outboard motor struck something.

There was a sound, muffled by the weight of the water above it, but still very powerful. The boat's stern lifted about four feet in less than a second as the force of the explosion created an upsurge of lake water. Then the stern plunged back to surface level in another fraction of a second, followed by a drenching from above as gravity pulled the explosive surge downward. Stunned by the sudden blast and shower we looked at each other and began inquiring if anyone was injured. One of the riflemen said he hurt his wrist and arm when he was thrown forward. My back hurt a little bit and there was a line across my butt marking where I sat on the transom, but otherwise all of us seemed to have escaped serious injury. Lt. Harper called on the radio, inquired about casualties, and told us that he was coming alongside. His boat took ours in tow and pulled us back to our base. Upon arriving at the point where we normally moored our boats, I swung the motor upward on its pivot and discovered that the lower half had been blown away by the blast. Two or three of the inflatable tubes that provided the boat with its buoyancy had also been damaged by the explosive device.

The morning patrol was not canceled; Lt. Harper selected alternates to replace the two of us who suffered sprains in the incident. A short while later, the new crew boarded another boat and motored away on their morning assignment. After the medic examined my back I returned to my team's area to rest for a while. When I sat down to enjoy a cup of coffee and a cigarette my good friend Andy Soltis lightened the moment with a cheerful "Happy Birthday Rick; now, you'll always remember your 21st birthday blast."



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