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**PBR 56 (River Patrol)**  
**U.S. Navy**

**Mekong Delta**  
**Vinh Long Province**



**PBR 56 Insignia**

I served in the U.S. Navy. I was nineteen. I enlisted in April of '68 and served until November of '71. I went to San Diego for Basic Training. I got there by bus to Des Moines, Camp Dodge, then we flew. It was a commercial flight but there was only military on it.

My training was all on land. What you do is get in physical shape, and the Navy has a main criterion—to be able to swim. I was the “non-swim Petty Officer”, so I helped teach people how to swim because I was a good swimmer. When I graduated from Boot Camp, I got a rating of E-2. I didn't get any rank change until I went to Panama and became an E-3, then E-4. I became an E-5 when I was in Vallejo, California.

I went to Submarine School in Groton, Connecticut, from Boot Camp. It's a volunteer service, what they called “non-vowed.” The Thresher had gone down in '63, and the Scorpion in '68. Just before I was going to have to do the certification under water, I decided I didn't want to stay in submarines.

Then they shipped me to Panama. I was there twenty-one months. From there I was shipped to Vallejo, Mare Island, California. I was there for seventeen weeks of training to become an advisor for the Vietnamese Navy. We had language training and physical fitness by the Marines. We had weapons training in Hawthorn, Nevada. We had hand-to-hand and we had Vietnamese cultural training so that we understood the culture. We were really prepared at the time. Prior to landing in Saigon, I don't think I ever was afraid. By the time I got to Saigon I was nervous, but not scared. I thought I was bulletproof. Pretty naïve.

Panama was a duty station. Rodman Naval Station was a Navy base across from the city of Balboa, Panama. We were a berthing area for transit military ships that went through the Canal Zone. All countries—English and French ships, Italian and Spanish. Any non-Communist country could tie up there and get fuel and provisions. Not all of them were there to go through the Canal. It was basically a gas station, mostly for NATO countries. When Cuban ships were allowed through the Canal Zone, we went on board as a military force to prevent damage to the locks or scuttling in the canal pass. I think Cuban ships were the only Communist bloc they allowed through there.

When I went to Vietnam, I landed at Tan Son Nhut Airport. I was at the MACV headquarters—that's the Military Assistance, Vietnam—for a couple of days until I was assigned to a division, which was PBR56. I was taken someplace where I waited a couple of days for my boat crew to come and get me. We went back down the river to a barge in the middle of a river. It was probably the Mekong, in the Vinh Long Province. It might have been the Bassac River—there were a lot of different ones. Definitely in the Mekong Delta. In Vinh Long we had a little base offshore.

After a day or two of orientation, we just went out on patrol. My Vietnamese boat crew was well seasoned. My task with the boat crew was to be the liaison between the Navy and the Vietnam Navy. In case of conflict with the enemy, I could bring in artillery and helicopters. I also had the only radio. I had a machine that scrambled your words so when you talk into it the words that came out were gibberish.

On the Vietnamese boat, they were in charge. I was like an observer, but I also had a duty station on the boat. We were actually looking for trouble. Our daily duty was to check sampans for contraband, check IDs, look for enemy concentration groups. We did some village work, where we went into the villages to discuss various things with the village chief. Took medical supplies to them. Tried to keep them from becoming Viet Cong.

All adults had papers and IDs. The papers had your picture, who your parents were, where you were from. If you didn't have that, we detained you, took you to a military base, an ARVN base, and that was it. These papers were often forged, of course. You couldn't tell a Viet Cong from a non-Viet Cong. During the day you were a villager, and at night you were Viet Cong. If you didn't have papers—even if you had papers, and you were someplace where you shouldn't be, then you would be suspect. We always turned them over to the Vietnamese Army.

If it were a sampan we stopped, we could handle it by ourselves. More than half the time, it was a woman that was arrested, mostly young females, seldom an older one. Very seldom did we find a male during the daytime. The females were just as dangerous.

There were hundreds of sampans on the river. There were water taxis, sampans, dugouts, everything. What we looked for depended on where we were, or what the mission was. If you saw a large sampan riding very low in the water, you might suspect that it was carrying something it shouldn't—weapons, or food supplies, morphine, French medicine. We did capture two North Vietnamese doctors. We caught arms, guns, ammo, everything.

We lived with the Vietnamese. We ate what they ate. When we were going out for three days, two nights, we didn't have any way to protect any food. We didn't have C-rats. If we could steal them, we would. Sometimes we'd sneak on an Army base and grab a few cases of C-rats. We had to eat whatever we could purchase. Most of the time it was pho which is a noodle soup with chicken broth. Most of the meals were either rice balls or noodle soup. And Coca Cola on ice. And the ice was brown. I would have Coca Cola if I were someplace where the water might be halfway pure. I always drank the beer because it was brewed. Tiger Beer.

It cost pennies. You didn't have American dollars; it was Military paid certificates. MPCs. One

of us would go to a military base and convert hundreds of dollars of MPCs into piasters, Vietnamese money. I believe that my boat crew made an average of one American dollar per day. Typically I would buy all the meals we ever needed. I could feed my whole crew, both boat crews, for a couple of dollars.

There were parts of our patrol where we could touch the trees on either side of the boat. Some of the canals we could run down at thirty miles an hour, but you would have to slow down if there was any kind of a structure. There were some canals, like the Ben Tre area, which were extensively used by the Viet Cong for supplies. When you went down those particular ones, we would be in danger most of the time. Where it was narrow and the trees of the jungle were that close, you couldn't go very fast. You couldn't even stick your guns out sometimes because you'd hit the trees. A lot of the other canals would have been like a street, thirty feet wide, with farmland and villages on either side. You would traverse them at a pretty good speed.

I wore a t-shirt and cut my pants off and wore sandals. We didn't wear our name, rank, or serial number on our uniform, no identification on our bodies or our uniforms. We didn't even wear our dog tags. If we were missing, we were presumed dead. You didn't want to be captured. Advisors were prized. Pilots were more valuable because they would be sent to Hanoi to be a bargaining chip.



**A PBR Boat on Patrol**

When you lived on the boat, you didn't have a shower. If you wanted to clean up, you used Vietnamese soap, which was basically lye. No deodorant in it because you didn't want it. Charlie could smell the Americans. So you wanted to smell like the Viet Cong. You certainly didn't use cologne. And the food you ate—when your senses become heightened you

could smell what people ate.

I was the only American on the two boats. There were about thirteen advisors in our unit and we had twenty boats. Each advisor had two boats. The cover boat would have had a gunner in front, a coxswain, and an after gunner and the Vietnamese patrol officer. On my boat I would have been the rear gunner. Sometimes we had a side gunner with an M60, but I always had a fifty caliber. The Vietnamese patrol captain would go first and I'd cover a rifle for the B company. I liked to be the cover boat because I had the radios.

My boat crew members were originally Vietnamese Army. They volunteered or purchased their way out of the Army to join the Navy. Most of my crew had had Viet Cong kill family members.

I was on the PBRs for seven months, and then I was five months on a supply boat. It was similar to the landing craft you see in pictures of D-Day, and they might have been that old. They carried fuel, food, and ammo. They went through millions of bullets a month. The equipment I had was first class. My handgun was a forty-five and it could have been from WWII or WWI. It was a 1911 so it could have been over a hundred years when I got it! They wouldn't let me keep it, though. You don't get to bring much home from there at all. Most of the veterans that were in combat that would have had access to souvenirs would never get them back out of Country, but the people who took them from you probably did.

I got out in November of '71. When I came back, I joined the Army Reserves up in Garner. It was an artillery unit and they didn't have anybody that could do coordinates and map reading. When you join the military, you have six years of obligated service, and when I got out of the Navy I already had three years seven months. I had another two and a half years to do. I did the Army Reserves, so I have two honorable discharges, one from the Navy and one from the Army.

I flew to San Francisco, then to Long Beach, California, where I was separated. I was in uniform when I landed in San Francisco, and there was a place where I could buy civilian clothes, so I did. When I landed in Long Beach, it didn't matter, but in San Francisco, if you had a dark tan and your hair cut off, you're kind of hard to miss. Remember, this was Haight-Ashbury time, peace and love. You were pretty obvious.

I have a few medals and commendations. I don't have a Purple Heart or any bronze or silver, but I do have a combat action ribbon for being a combat veteran. I have meritorious medals, which are what most all of those are the same that the Vietnam In Country veterans would have gotten. I have a couple of other ones that are unique to what we did.

All veterans deserve respect. The difference between a Vietnam veteran and a Vietnam Era veteran is considered pretty substantial because the Vietnam Era could have been in the service in Germany or Iowa. But it takes about seven people to support one combat veteran. People forget how much food it takes, or how many bullets it takes, or how much fuel it takes. And then you have to bring it there. How would you like to be in a truck loaded with food, ammo, guns, and then drive down Highway One? I have no idea how many truck drivers died hauling stuff for the combat unit. There are people that are making sure you get paid, that money gets sent home to your family. And paperwork that needs to be done. "All gave some."

After the Paris Peace Accord, when we pulled out of there, everybody knew that North Vietnam wouldn't abide by that. We lost sixty thousand men and nothing came of it. That war was never winnable because of the corruption in the South Vietnamese government. It wasn't that the people didn't want it. The Viet Cong were fighting for an idea, and you can't kill that until the last one is dead. My boat crew wanted to win. They did not want Communism. But you can't defeat the idea.



**An American Advisor with his  
Vietnamese Crew**





**A PBR Boat stopping  
a Sampan for  
Inspection**

**The Mekong Delta**

**Home of the  
River Patrol Force**

**“U.S. Brown Water Navy”**

