Operation Swanee

And

The Ghost Boat at the Mythical Liberty Bridge

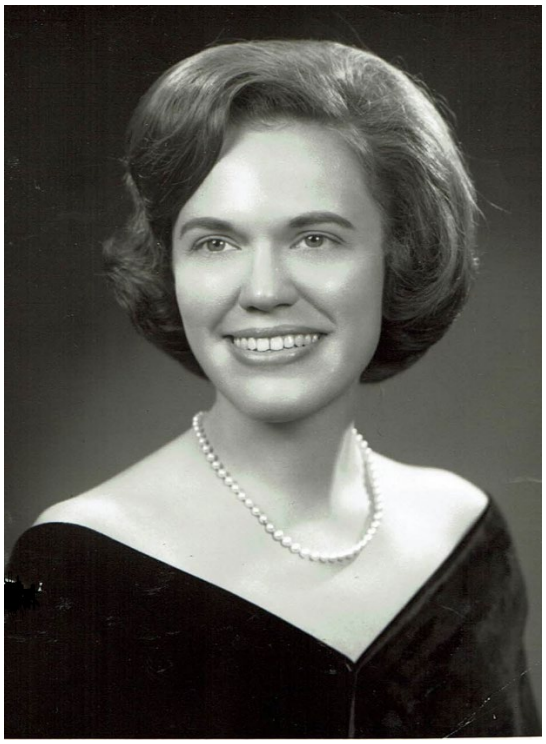
By

Sid Breman

Printed in the United States of America

Dedication

This volume is dedicated to Pat, who waited.



In Memory of

James Black, 1740 - 1781

The true test of one’s mettle

lay not in defense of hearth and home.

Rather it is found in the vigor

With which he comes To the Aid of his neighbor.

About the Author

Sid Breman served for 46 months in the United States Navy from August,1964 until June 1968, twenty of those months were served in the Combat Zone. He survived a helicopter crash into the South China Sea in 1965, and was awarded the Navy Commendation Medal, with Combat “V,” for his participation in Operation Swanee in August 1966. Sid is a CPA. He holds an MBA, Univ. of Pitt, and a BA, Gettysburg College. His wife, Pat, and he have been married for 56 years. They live in Delray Beach, Fl. They have one son, Eddie. Sid and Pat met on the playground at Leechburg Elementary School in Leechburg, Pa., probably in 1948. Previously published works include “Parallel Streams” and “Gwydi: A Wild Goose Tale.”

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1. Chapter: The Worst Day

This is a history and a memoir of Operation Swanee.

2200H, August 20, 1966: The question was not “if” the North Vietnamese would attack. It was “when” they would attack. It was common knowledge that the enemy, whether it was the Viet Cong or the NVA Regulars, would only stand and fight if they determined they had the advantage. Otherwise, they would run. This strategy had nothing to do with bravery or courage. The Communists were playing the long game, as they had been doing successfully since 1917. Our opposing forces were not about to change now.

I was sitting in the Conn of the LCM-8 860, staring into the darkness and, in my mind, playing out all the different possible scenarios of the next twelve hours. I was the Officer-in-Charge of this boat and there was no one senior to me that I could contact for advice or direction. We were thirty kilometers up the Thu Bon River in Quang Nam Province, Vietnam and I was alone when it came to making decisions. There was no radio or any other communication link to anyone, Navy or Marines, that I could turn to for advice or a decision. So how bad was the situation?

My crew of four men, my boat and I were up a river, occupying real estate we did not 100% control. The entire region, Quang Nam Province was a hotly contested area of South Vietnam. So contested, that it took us five days to cover thirty kilometers with the assistance of a battalion of U.S. Marines. Without interference, we should have been able to do that in one morning, assuming we had a long breakfast. We literally could not travel one hundred meters during daylight hours without the security provided by the Marines. We were now located at the site where the Marine Engineers operated a pontoon ferry, sometimes. The ferry connected the northern and southern portions of Liberty Road. Since arriving, we had already taken over ferry duties because the pontoon ferry could barely make it across the river. The ferry site was just east of a small tributary, Song Quang Hue, which entered the Thu Bon from the North.

My boat needed repairs. Two days earlier, we had rammed a gravel bar at full speed (yes, it was necessary), and bent the starboard shaft enough that prolonged operation would have caused catastrophic damage. We could

still run with the port bank of engines, but with a decrease in efficiency. However, we were still operational enough to provide the ferry service referenced above.

Yesterday, two Lieutenant Commanders, who were observers with the operation and riding on my boat, decided they could continue up the river and complete our mission using a fourteen' runabout with a forty hp outboard motor (I was not involved in that decision, nor was my opinion sought). The Marines agreed and the battalion started again early this morning. We assisted only to transport half of the Marines to the North bank of the river.

Figure 1 Marines of the 3rd Battalion 9th Marines, probably M Company, disembark from the LCM8 860, August 20, 1966.

That area had been nicknamed "Arizona Territory," based on previous experience, by the Marines. Shortly after noon, the Marines ran into a battalion of North Vietnamese Regulars. The fighting was intense, and the Marines were forced to withdraw across the river and return to the ferry

site. Within hours we became aware that the NVR battalion had moved into the peninsula formed by the Thu Bon and the small tributary. They were dug in on the west bank of the tributary. Our Marines were dug in on the east bank.

There was a security detail on the North bank of the Thu Bon to protect the pontoon ferry and its crew. This was also where I had beached the LCM-8 860, as we also needed security. I had to rely on the 1st Lt. in charge of the security detail for my information. The scuttlebutt had it that there were somewhere between 400 and 800 enemy occupying the peninsula. The only thing stopping an all-out battle was the small tributary. If they could cross the tributary tonight, we, that is our position, could be overrun. The 1st Lt. suggested that we should be prepared to withdraw with them, in the event we were overrun. I asked him if he could alert us if the NVR started crossing the river. He told me not to worry. We would know they were crossing when we heard the 81mm mortars launch to the east of us.

Neither I nor my crew had any combat training. We had all gone to SERE training, but that could hardly be called combat training. My class had one morning at the firing range which probably qualified me to shoot myself in my foot and not much more. I had done some hunting as a teenager, but not a lot. None of my crew claimed any expertise with firearms either. This lack of training had bothered me from the very beginning of the operation, but there was not much I could do about it, not then, nor now..

Our options, as I saw them, were few. If the NVA crossed the river, our best chance of survival was to get underway and withdraw to the middle of the Thu Bon which was about a quarter mile wide. However, that would preclude our joining the ferry security detail if they were being overrun. In order to join them, we would have to stay beached on the north bank.

Joining the ferry detail while they withdrew would be a crap shoot, at best. They would not be looking out for us. We would have to do our best to keep up with them. Somehow, the vision of the five of us surviving that trip became harder to imagine the more I thought about it.

Our boldest option, if the Marines were overrun, would be to run down river to the South Chine Sea. I believed we could make it in two to three hours, and we would be moving fast enough that the local VC would not know we were coming until we were gone.

I had run through all our options about one hundred times when Smitty came to relieve me. He was my Leading Petty Officer, with 10 years' experience in the Navy. I had chosen him because he was the best boat handler in the LCM-8 Division. That is saying something because I had over one hundred boat handlers. I was glad Smitty was relieving me because I wanted to get his take on our options.

We shot the breeze for a few minutes and just as I was about to broach the subject of our options, Smitty brought it up.

"If we have to run, let's stay with the boat." he said.

"You think we can make it back to Danang? I asked.

"Hell yes, we'll have the current with us and a quarter moon shining off the water. I doubt Charlie has anything bigger than one of those Russian automatics and we have three-quarter-inch steel plate. We'll make it." He said.

"Have you talked to the crew?" I asked.

"Who do you think sent me up here? He responded.

I made my way up to the 1st Lt. and told him our plans. He wished me good luck. He said we would know his position had been overrun when the tracers started coming at us from his location. I wished him good luck.

Back at the boat I joined Smitty in the Conn. Quinn, QM2, our backup coxswain was with him. I summoned the other two crewmen, Chilton EN2, and Richards EM3. With the crew assembled, I asked if anyone wanted to leave the boat and stay with the Marines. We were now talking in hushed tones. They all affirmed they wanted to stay with the boat. Having settled that issue, we went over our plans and procedures for the night. Giving the crew an option may seem overly democratic in a military setting, but this was not about completing a mission. It was about our individual survival.

Whoever was on watch would look for any sign that the battle was beginning. We all agreed that incoming and outgoing fire would be the most obvious. Smitty and I would go to the Conn. Quinn would man the after line, port side (there was only one after line), Chilton would take the forward line, portside and Richards would take the forward line, starboard side. We would withdraw from the beach and go to the middle of the river and idle in

position. Quinn, Chilton and Richards would look for anything floating or moving towards the boat. If something is spotted call out its position relative to the bow, and we would avoid it, shoot it, and/or both. If we started drawing fire from the ferry ramp, we would know the Marines withdrew, and we would head down river. All of us were armed with M1 Garand[1] rifles, and a side arm. I had a .38 revolver.

It was getting late, and we all needed to get some sleep while we could. As we broke up, we all heard the “thump” of one of our 81mm mortars launch. It was followed by several more “thumps.” Before the first one hit, we all said, in unison, without a prompt, “Oh Shit!”

[1] The M1 was standard issue for the Navy in Danang. Yes, it surprised me too.

2. Chapter: Operation Swanee

The mission of Operation Swanee was to complete a hydrographic survey of the Song Thu Bon River as far upriver as physically possible. The stated purpose was to provide information regarding the use of the river for commercial and industrial transportation. The origin of the commercial and industrial activity was not explained in any of the planning meetings. It was simply stated that there would be a need for transportation, and it was necessary to do a hydrographic survey in the middle of a war. However, that was not a major concern expressed by any of the planners. The order came from somewhere above Lt. General Lewis Walt, ranking Marine in Vietnam, and that was good enough for everyone involved.

Documents published after the end of the war revealed that pacification was the root that gave Swanee its priority. In early 1966, two conferences were held on the course of the Vietnam War. Both the highest-level military and government leaders of the United States and Vietnam attended meetings. The objective was to review the course of the Vietnam War and determine its future direction. One of the results was a pledge by President Johnston to support pacification.[2]

Pacification often involved economic development and an area that had the potential to contribute significantly to this goal was the An Hoa region, located to the south of the Thu Bon River. The area held the only coal mine in Vietnam and had the potential to be the home of a chemical fertilizer plant and a source of hydroelectric power. Additionally, the area was a fertile agricultural producer.[3] History has proven these forecasts to be correct. Today, Quang Nam is one of the centers of economic activity in Vietnam.

A necessary resource for the An Hoa region was transportation for people and goods going in both directions. Unfortunately, the war had severely limited the availability of reliable transport, with many roads, vehicle and rail being cut. Someone, in a large office, believed that water transportation could be the answer.

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[2] U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM: AN EXPANDING WAR 1966 **by Jack Shulimson,** HISTORY AND MUSEUMS DIVISION, HEADQUARTERS, U.S. MARINE CORPS, WASHINGTON, D.C. 1982, Page 44.
[3] Ibid. Page 40.

Operation Swanee was a success in that it gathered the required information. However, the real benefit came not from the mission objective, but from the unintended result that the LCM-8 860 was at the right place when the Marines desperately needed a reliable ferry across the Thu Bon River. The beneficial results continued for years. Swanee contributed significantly to the progress of the war and directly affected the lives of every Marine who served at the USMC Base at An Hoa from August 1966 until well into 1969.

Figure 22 Vietnam, source Naval Support Activity, Danang Cruise Book 1966-67

With results like that, you would think Operation Swanee would deserve at least a paragraph in one of the many history books on the Vietnam War, but no such paragraphs existed, until I published "Parallel Streams," by Sid Breman (that is me) Kindle Publishing, 2021 and *All Hands* magazine published my article *THE MOST FAMOUS MIKE BOAT IN VIETNAM*[4] in August 2021. If you did an internet search prior to that date, you could find a barely legible SITREP report[5], but the spelling is Suwanee. not Swanee. Also, in Wikipedia a search yields "The *page 'Operation Suwannee' does not exist."*[6], and the spelling is different from the previous entry. Other than those, nothing. A search of the most relevant history books also yielded nothing. The only references that can be found cite a "hydrographic survey"[7] but do not mention Operation Swanee by name.

I could provide several explanations why an operation that yielded such long-term, positive benefits got missed by the historians, but it would be all

[4] *All Hands Magazine*: August 2021, *THE MOST FAMOUS MIKE BOAT IN VIETNAM*, Navy Production Division, Defense Media Activity, 6700 Taylor Avenue Fort George G. Meade, Maryland 20755
[5] (http://www.recordsofwar.com, US Marines in Vietnam-Records of War, OP FILE, OPERATION SUWANEE, 15-22AUG1966 - dated 8/21/1966 Document No. 1201064010)
[6] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_allied_military_operations_of_the_Vietnam_War_(1966) List of allied military operations of the Vietnam War (1966)
[7] Ibid. page 208, U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM: AN EXPANDING WAR 1966 by Jack Shulimson

conjecture on my part. Rather, I would like to insure that somewhere, a history of Operation Swanee is recorded. The sacrifice of the men, including myself, who participated in Swanee needs to be honored. It should be noted here that six Marines lost their lives and fifteen were wounded in action during the trip up the Thu Bon River.

3. Chapter: The Terrain: Vietnam and A Brief History

The East Coast of Vietnam is 1,150 miles long when measuring the rough "S" that forms the Western border of the South China Sea. The Country is strategically located south of China and is blessed by weather that favors agriculture. Much of the history of this Asian Country has been written in fire and blood, especially during the last two-hundred years.

The French colonized the area in the mid-nineteenth Century. It was an occupation that produced constant conflict between the Vietnamese people and the occupiers. That conflict was interrupted by World War II when the Japanese pushed out the French and became the overlords. History would have been very different if the French had not reoccupied Vietnam after WWII, but they did.

The conflict between the Vietnamese people and the French ended in 1954 when the French forces were defeated at Dien Bien Phu, by the Communist Viet Minh. The Communist Party took over the northern half or the country and the Buddhists and Catholics formed a government in the south. Now there were two Vietnams, North Vietnam and South Vietnam. But the Communists were not content with that arrangement. They immediately formed the Viet Cong and continued fighting.

In 1964, the government of South Vietnam appealed to the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization for military assistance. SEATO had been formed in 1954 to stop the spread of communism. The members of this treaty were United States, France, Great Britain, New Zealand, Australia, the Philippines, Thailand and Pakistan. These nations provided financial and military support for South Vietnam. South Korea also sent aid and military assistance for the war effort.

The United States was the largest supporter of South Vietnam. In August 1966, approximately six thousand American service men had died in Vietnam. That number would rise to over 58,000 before the war was over. The United States Marine Corps operated in the northern section of South Vietnam. The area was known as I Corp.

Figure 3 Quang Nam Province, source Naval Support Activity, Danang Cruise Book 1966-67, modified by the author.

Quang Nam Province: Quang Nam is located just south of Danang. It starts at Hoi An and stretches seventy-eight kilometers south, and 118 kilometers west to the border of Laos. Today it is a popular tourist destination, with the attraction being the cultural and historical sites along with the beautiful beaches. The province is also a manufacturing and export center. In 1966 it possessed none of these attributes, only the potential. It was a hotly contested area of Vietnam because of its resources, which included the only coal mine in Vietnam and vast spreads of fertile farmland.

I cannot verify this statistic, however one site reported that 10,000 of the 14, 000 Marines were killed in Quang Nam Province.[8] It was a dangerous place to serve.

Figure 4 Thu Bon River, source Google Maps 2022, modified by the author.

[8] Obituary of Theodore Hubert Dalton, Hermitage, PA, U.S. Marine Corps, Vietnam. Web site: https://www.avenueofflags.com/ Avenue of 444 Flags.

4. Chapter: The River

The mouth of the Thu Bon River empties into the South China Sea about thirty kilometers south of Danang. The city of Hoi An is located on the north bank of the River's mouth. It divides a fertile plain that stretches from the southern end of Danang Harbor south to the Quang Ngai Province, a distance of 110 kilometers. Traveling up the Thu Bon River to the Liberty Road, the land is flat. At that point, travelers can see the foothills of the Annamite Mountain Range.

The Thu Bon starts in the south-central part of Quang Nam and flows, generally, north, then begins to turn east just before the Liberty Ferry. After that, the flow is, generally, east to the South China Sea.

I was told by the Marines that the average current flow of the Thu Bon was eight knots. There may have been a time during the year that the river flowed that fast, but it was not so in August,1966. During most of the Operation, current flow was less than four knots. The width varied but averaged about three hundred meters. In the United States, it would have been a great recreational and commercial waterway.

The water was a deep, steel, blue color, much like the Allegheny River in the summer. It only turned muddy brown when one of the LTV's would hit a mud bank and churn the waters. The water was probably 82F degrees and felt cool the two times I swam in it. One swim was on purpose, the other was when I fell overboard.

Weatherwise, our normal high temperature was 95F with a low of 79F, humidity at 95%. Winds were southeasterly at five to ten knots. Sunrise at around 0630H and sunset around 1915H. [9]

Beyond the Liberty Road, is Arizona Territory, so named by the Marines because it was a free-fire zone, and a hostile response was guaranteed when traveling in that area. What constituted AZ T depended on to whom you were talking. Most maps place it an area bounded on three sides by the Thu Bon River, the Quang Hue River, and the Vu Gia River. The southern point is parallel to the USMC Base at An Hoa on the west side of the Thu Bon. The boundary tracks northeast for a few miles, and then turns

[9] Command Chronology, 1st Battalion, 1st Marine Division, August 1966. PDF page 66.

north to intersect with the Vu Gia. If you trace the boundary on a map, it looks like a stone-age arrow point. That’s a little ironic.

Informally, any real estate around the Thu Bon River was considered the Az T. I favor this second definition.

5. Chapter: The Participants

The Marines: There were four US Marine battalions involved in Operation Swanee, but, generally, only one at a time, sometimes with parts of a second. The LCM8 860 was handed off from one battalion to another as we moved from one TAOR, Tactical Area of Responsibility, to the next.

Note: All the information in this section comes from the Battalions' "Command Chronology" submitted by the individual commands to their headquarters. The Command Chronology's vary greatly in length from Battalion to Battalion, with the 1st BT 1MC and the 2nd Bt 1MC reports being 141 pages and 232 pages in length for the July 1966 time period. The 1st BT 9th MC has one report for the July to December 1966 period[10], which is twenty-one pages and an August report, which is twenty-three pages. The 3rd BT 9th MC July report is twenty-three pages, and the August report is fifteen. Therefore, the amount of information available also varies.

The 1st Battalion 1st Marines provided security for the LCM-8 on the first day. The Battalion average strength during the month was 984 men: 900 USMC enlisted, 28 USMC officers, 53 USN enlisted, and 3 USN officers.[11]

The assigned mission of the 1st BT 1st MC was "conducts aggressive patrols and ambushing within its TAOR, to locate, fix and destroy enemy forces and material in the area; and conducted unilateral and/or combined operations with U.S. and/or RVN forces beyond the boundaries of the TAOR.

Concurrently, the battalion conducts operations in order to strengthen the support of the civilian population for Marine and RVN forces."[12]

In the previous month, July 1966[13]:

- The Battalion received 268 enlisted and five officer replacements.

[10] No explanation was given as to why a July-December report was filed and also an August and an October-December report.
[11] The USN personnel were medics and doctors.
[12] Command Chronology, 1st Battalion, 1st Marine Division, July 1966, PDF page 5.
[13] Ibid.

- The enemy initiated 129 incidents including twenty-eight engagements and 101 harassing fire.
- Enemy mines detected were twenty-eight.
- Ten US Marines were killed in action, and one died of wounds. Two US Navy[14] personnel were killed in action.
- Thirty-nine Marines were wounded in action. One US Navy person was wounded in action.
- Intelligence reports indicated that two Viet Cong companies were operating in the area adjacent to their TAOR.

The 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines[15] provided LCM-8 security on the second through the morning of the fifth day. The Battalion average strength during the month was 1,073 men: 985 USMC enlisted, 37 USMC officers, 48 USN enlisted, and 3 USN officers.

In the previous month, July 1966:

- The Battalion received 106 enlisted and six officer replacements.
- The enemy initiated twelve significant engagements. The Battalion initiated seven significant engagements.
- Seven US Marines were killed in action. No US Navy personnel were killed in action.
- Sixty Marines were wounded in action. Three US Navy personnel were wounded in action.
- Intelligence reported the following enemy units operating in or near the Battalion's TAOR: The 810th operating in the southern portion of the TAOR, supported with local and main force guerrilla bands (no reported strength). The R-20th Battalion with a strength of five hundred men. The Q-15 Company with a strength of one hundred men. The 70th Battalion with a strength of five hundred men. Unidentified battalions (no strength reported).
- Noteworthy: The August Command Chronology lists the Company Commander of G Company as First Lieutenant C. C. Krulak. Although I have yet to confirm, that this is the same

[14] Note: US Navy personnel serving with the Marines were Medics.
[15] Command Chronology, 1st Battalion, 1st Marine Division, July 1966, various pages.

man, a Marine officer named C. C. Krulak rose through the ranks and became Commandant of the Marine Corps in 1995.

The 1st Battalion 9th Marines: Provided LCM-8 security on the third through the eighth day. The Battalion average strength during the month was 1,044 men: 955 USMC enlisted, 33 USMC officers, 53 USN enlisted, and 3 USN officers.

The Command Chronology on file covers July to December. The Battalion departed Vietnam at the end of September 1966. During the months of July, August and September the Battalion had:

- Twenty-Three enlisted marines were killed in action.
- Three officers and 106 enlisted marines were wounded in action. Four Navy enlisted and one officer were wounded in action.

The 3rd Battalion 9th Marines: Provided LCM-8 security on the seventh day. The Battalion average strength during the month was 1,011 men: 924 USMC enlisted, 29 USMC officers, 55 USN enlisted, and 3 USN officers.

In the previous month, July, 1966:

- Spent most of the month occupied with Operation Macon where they engaged the R-20 VC Battalion in the area around the An Hoa Combat Base.
- Twelve Marines were killed in action, one died of wounds.
- 109 Marines were wounded in action, 56 of whom had to be Med Evaced.
- Intellegence reported that there were two battalions of enemy operating in the hills south of An Hoa, neither of which was the R-20 battalion. One was reported to be North Vietnamese.[16]

Supporting Forces, US Marines and Navy : "*The operation was supported by one (1) platoon LVTP-5's, two (2) LVTC's, four (4) LVTR-6's, Engineer Detachment, Artillery and one (1) destroyer in direct support, and fixed/rotary wing aircraft on call."*[17]

[16] Ibid. page 208, U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM: AN EXPANDING WAR 1966 by Jack Shulimson
[17] Command Chronology, 1st Battalion 1st Marines, August 1966: After Action Report Operation Swannee.

The LVTs were later replaced by tanks. The 3rd Engineer Battalion 3rd Marines operated in support of Operation Swanee.

Naval Support Activity, Danang: 1. There were five of us. I was the Officer-in-Charge. I picked, what I considered, the two best coxswains in the LCM-8 Division, the best engineer and electrician I could find. Both coxswains were Second Class Petty Officers, and the engineer and electrician were Third Class Petty Officers. All four of them were highly qualified in their rates. Me, on the other hand, had almost no credentials that qualified me to be the Officer-in-Charge. I will return to this subject later.
Our boat was a Landing Craft Medium-8, the largest of the LCMs in use at that time. She was as unsinkable as the Titanic, in that the hull was divided into eight large voids.[18] In the event the water-tight integrity of the void was punctured, each space had heavy duty bilge pumps. The hull and superstructure were made of ½ inch and ¾ inch steel plate.

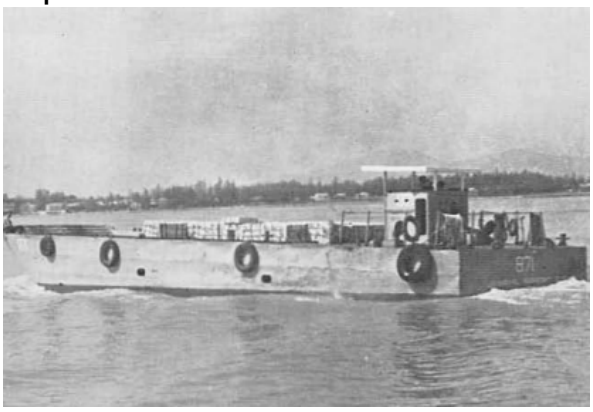

Figure 5 The LCM-8 871, one of my boats. Source: Naval Support Activity, Danang Cruise Book, 1966-1967

The power plant was two banks of two 6-71 Gray Marine diesels, producing a total of 1000 horsepower. The original purpose, according to sailor's scuttlebutt, was to deliver a tank to the beach and have the power to pull itself off the beach and get another one. The Mike-8 had a rated speed of eleven knots, but we knew she was faster than that.
At the Naval Support Activity, Danang, these vessels became the workhorses in the early years when deep-water piers were not available. Each LCM-8 could haul sixty tons of cargo and deliver it to a shallow water cargo ramp where the load could be quickly removed by rough terrain forklifts.
I selected the 860 because it was the best maintained boat in my Division, and Smitty BM2, Chilton[19] EN2 and Richards EM2 were already part of the crew.

[18] Void: A closed space on a boat or ship, accessed only through a hole that was normally covered by a bolted plate to a bulkhead.
[19] William Chilton and I are still in contact today. We reconnected via the internet. Unfortunately I have lost both Smitty, whose real surname was Smith, and Richards first names.

2. An NSA Explosive Ordinance Detonation Team was a last-minute addition to the Operation. The Team consisted of one Lt. J.G. and three senior enlisted men.[20] More on this later.
3. Other Navy: a) A CTF 116 Officer, a Lieutenant Commander: Several Marine "Command Chronology's reference " CTF 116" being the primary element/s of the Navy participation in Operation Swanee. However, CTF 116 had no part in the planning or execution of Operation Swanee. There was one Lt. Commander from CTF 116 who showed up the day before we kicked off on August 13, 1966, but he was only, in his words, "an observer". Along with him were two other Lt. Commanders, one from the Swift Boats and one from MACV Saigon. They, too, said they were observers.
b) Two men dressed in fatigues and wearing Lieutenants bars showed up the day before we left, August 12, with the sonar gear to do the actual survey work of Operation Swanee. I do not remember their names. I say that they showed up wearing Lieutenants bars because I was never convinced, they were actually Navy officers, mainly because they did not behave like Navy Lieutenants. I doubt I said more than ten words to them during the entire trip. They did their work, kept to themselves, and were gone on August 18.
c) A Navy photographer showed up the day before we got underway. I am eternally grateful to this man for the photographs he gave me. Most of the photographs in this volume were taken by this photographer.

Marines Aboard the LCM-8 860: Each Battalion that had Command Control of the LCM-8 860 placed a security detail of 9 to 12 men aboard. I was told this was to protect us in the event the boat came under direct attack. This was a last-minute change, literally the morning of August 14, after the start of the Operation. I suspect their presence had more to do with a conversation I had with a Marine Colonel during his inspection of the 860, a few days before we left, than it had to do with the Marines concern for our safety. More on that later.

Other: 2/4 APC Sqdn (ARVN)[21] This was a troop of Army of the Republic of Vietnam who were with the Operation on the Second day. I have no further information about this unit.

[20] I do not have the names of any of these men.
[21] Ibid. 2 BT 1MC After Action Report, August 1966.

The Enemy, Local Viet Cong:

The 1st Battalion 1st Marines Command Chronology, August 1966 reported that two Viet Cong companies, the Q-12B and Q15, were operating in their TAOR[22]. However, neither company was operating as a unit. Rather, they formed three- and four-man cells to work with village guerrillas to form tactical units. The political network was also maintained through these cells. The interconnected relationships gave them the ability to morph into larger forces, such as squads, platoons or even companies, as the situation dictates while the smallest units were ideal for terrorist activity and harassing engagements.

The Marines were primarily subjected to harassing, small arms fire and the mining of well-traveled areas of either foot or vehicular traffic from these cells. The local inhabitants saw the assassination of village officials and retaliatory action against individuals and families who supported the Government of Vietnam. These actions gave the VC a measure of control over the population. Additionally, the cells supported VC front organizations and youth groups. Participation in these activities was both voluntary and forced recruitment.

"The inherent advantage of the cellular type deployment of forces lies in the capability of the Viet Cong to strike at USMC or GVN forces and then dissolve into the Indigenous population of the village or hamlet."[23]

Each company consisted of approximately one hundred men.

The 2nd Battalion 1st Marines reported several enemy units operating within or near their TAOR. The units were the R-20th Battalion with a strength of five hundred men; the Q-15, unit strength of one hundred; 70th Battalion, unit strength five hundred; an unidentified battalion of unknown strength. The 2nd BT 1st Marines were experiencing increased harassment fire and mining incidents.

1st Battalion 9th Marines did not report which enemy units were active in their TAOR. However, the Command Chronology details numerous daily contacts with opposing forces. The report listed five enlisted Marines KIA

[22] TAOR: for more information see U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM, AN EXPANDING WAR 1966 by Jack Shulimson. 1982

[23] Ibid. 1st BT 1MC Command Chronology, August 1966

and 22 WIA. Most of the month of August was limited to harassing small arms fire by forces less than squad size. However, there was strong evidence that on at least two occasions, the 1st BT 9th MC engaged company size units.

The 3rd Battalion 9th Marines estimated that the enemy activity in their TAOR was like the previous month. The exception was during Operation Swanee on August 20, 1966. The Viet Cong R-20 Battalion was still active in their area and Intelligence reported the possible presence of two battalions size units of unknown origin.

6. Chapter: Runt of the Litter

My involvement with Operation Swanee started very early on in the process, in mid-June 1966. But, before I start there, I need to go back in time a few more months to explain how I, the most junior and inexperienced officer in the Division and probably at NSA, Danang, ended up being selected as the Officer-in-Charge of the LCM-8 860, the primary element in an important, combat operation. Of course, all operations are important when someone's life in put in jeopardy for its completion.

I arrived at the Naval Support Activity on April 5, 1966, in the middle of a brief civil war between two elements of the South Vietnamese Government. It took me two days to report to my assignment because every officer in the Division was sheltering in place, wherever that happened to be. I was assigned the Lighterage Division and I had to have someone explain to me just what Lighterage[24] was.

I was an Ensign with twenty months of Navy experience. Unfortunately, none of my previous assignments had anything to do with my current job. I was a blank slate, destined to make all the possible mistakes available to me. I was also the most junior officer in the Division. I might have been the most junior officer on the base.

I was part of the "warm body" consignment to Naval Support Activity, Danang. NSA had been formed in October 1965, and was the fastest growing, and soon to be the largest, Navy support base in the world. As such, any "warm body" available was being assigned there. Qualifications did not matter. Assigned officers would have to come up to speed through OJT, On The Job Training. It worked during World War II and Korea; it would work in Vietnam.[25]

There were nine officers in Lighterage, one thousand enlisted men, 11 LCM-3s, 11 LCM-6s, 29 LCM-8s, 25 LCUs and several other small

[24] Lighterage refers to the small vessels used to haul cargo from a ship anchored in a harbor to the shore.
[25] I did have a lot of experience working on engines from my teenage years working in garages and working on my own cars. Of course no one but me knew that.

vessels.[26] I was assigned to be the second officer, I do not think I had a title, in the LCM-8 Division, which had about 250 men. I also had to ask what an LCM-8 was.

So how did the most junior officer with no real experience, management or combat, end up as the Officer-in-Charge of the primary element of an important combat operation?[27] Here is my version.

Every Navy unit has some duties that must be performed around the clock, duties like steering the ship or keeping the engines running, duties like that. The entire crew shared these jobs, generally in four-hour shifts called watches. In the Lighterage Division, eight of the ten officers shared a twelve-hour watch, Lighterage Officer Afloat, radio call sign Lima. The duties of the LOA were (1) to cruise the harbor and report on the location of all lighterage equipment, (2) assign equipment to ships as directed by the Operations Officer, (3) communicate with the Operations Office, call sign Mortuary, by radio as required, and (4) other duties not specified. The Lima officer would ride an LCM-6 boat around the harbor and keep a running log of each piece of equipment. This does not sound like a tough job to perform. At this point, it sounds pleasant.

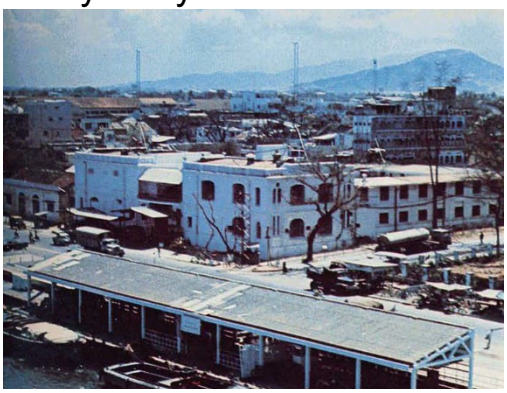

Figure 6 Figure 7The White Elephant, NSA Headquarters and home of "Mortuary". Bach Dang Pier is in the foreground. The building was located on the West bank of the Han River, about 3 miles from the river mouth.

However, the LCM-6 boats were powered by two, unmuffled 6-71 Gray Marine diesels. The noise, plus the diesel exhaust, would guarantee a monster headache that would start about one hour into the watch and last for most of the next day. Additionally, in order to hear the radio, the volume and squelch[28] would have to be turned up to maximum, creating ear-splitting noise. Add all of this together, and it made for an unpleasant,

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[26] *MOBILITY, SUPPORT ENDURANCE: A Story of Naval Operational Logistics in the Vietnam War 1965-1968* by VICE ADMIRAL EDWIN BICKFORD HOOPER, USN (Retired), NAVAL HISTORY DIVISION, DEPARTMENT OF THE NAVY, WASHINGTON, D.C., 1972, Page 73.

[27] Yes, that is the second time I asked that question.

[28] I have no idea what “squelch” is. All I know is that it improves reception but adds loud static when not transmitting.

sometimes painful, twelve hours on a boat with no creature comforts, not even seats[29].

In mid-May 1966 I came off the Lima watch one morning and noticed that I had the watch again the next day at 1900H. I should not have been scheduled again for four days and I asked my boss about it. He told me the watch-bill had been modified because there was a big “Wetting-Down” [30]party that night and since I was junior to everyone, I had the watch. Everyone else was going to the party, end of conversation.

The next evening, I was back in the harbor. Most of the Lima watches were just boring and uncomfortable and this one started out that way. However, around 2300H the environment changed. I was located about one hundred yards from the Tien Sha boat docks when I saw a lot of headlights moving around and heard people shouting. It was not the pleasant kind of shouting, but the angry, aggressive variety that sounded like a brawl. I instructed the coxswain to head for the docks and informed Mortuary of my destination.

Almost instantly, Mortuary told me to stand down because the situation was under control and no assistance was needed. No problem, I did not feel like putting my butt in the middle of a fight if I did not have to. However, I did not mind being a spectator either, so we cut our engines and drifted closer.

There was no outdoor lighting anywhere in the harbor, but the night was clear and there must have been moonlight because I could see the outline of the docks and some boats. At about a distance of two hundred feet I saw a group of men standing on the edge of the dock, yelling, and waving at us. I told the coxswain to back down as I wanted no part of whatever was happening and I, fortunately, had been ordered to stay away. And then the men started jumping in the water and swimming away. I remember thinking that there must be one hell of a fight going on over there. I was surprised and amazed that there was no gunfire. Eventually the noise subsided, and the headlights disappeared. Time to get back to a boring, uncomfortable, Lima watch.

There is no communication system faster than the U.S. Navy Grapevine. Nor is there any that can spread so many rumors. In the morning, as the

[29] Of course, it was still preferable to being in the jungle getting shot at or blown to pieces.
[30] Wetting Down Party: A celebration of a promotion. In this case, ten supply Ensigns were promoted to Lt. J.G.

boats were changing crews, several stories were already brewing in the pot. The favorite seemed to be that the Shore Patrol broke up a smuggling ring operating out of Tien Sha ramp. I am not sure how any of the sailors, who were probably asleep or out in the harbor when the ruckus happened, would have the slightest idea what really happened. However, as with most scuttlebutt, believe it until someone has a more interesting version of the events. I was content to wait until I got into the office to find out what the real story was. I picked up a fresh crew and headed for Mortuary at the White Elephant as my relief was nowhere in sight.

When I walked into the Lighterage Office, I had the feeling I had walked into a wake. All the officers except the boss were present including a lot of senior petty officers who I recognized as Chiefs in charge on the LCUs. Everyone looked like shit! Several looked as if they had gone swimming, fully dressed, and then let their clothes dry on their bodies.

Before I could ask any questions, my boss, a Lieutenant JG, got up and took me by the arm. Outside he told me I would have to take the watch until they got some things straightened out.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Things are really screwed up right now. I’ll fill you in later.”

He never did. As a matter of fact, I never saw him again.

The Grapevine had shaken off any rumors and was passing only good skinny (information). The Lighterage Division Officer, a Mustang[31] Lieutenant, had a real fun streak in him and he loved to party. I had, apparently, missed this side of his personality, probably because I had never been invited to one. Of course, this is a speculation on my part, but there was ample evidence to support that assumption which I will get into in a moment.

The Wetting Down party had been a blast. Several people woke up the next day in strange places, wondering how they got there. Not so the entire officer corps of the Lighterage Division, minus me of course. When the Wetting Down party broke up around 2130, our Fearless Leader suggested

[31] Entered the Navy as an enlisted man and was promoted up through the ranks. This one had 18 years’ experience.

the party continue at Tien Sha boat ramp and took up a collection to send a flatbed truck into a village to pick up a load of prostitutes. Meanwhile, he broke out the beer, wine, and whiskey for everyone at the ramp that included about fifty enlisted men. Sometime around 2300 the party was in overdrive, and then the Shore Patrol arrived.

I mentioned earlier there was ample evidence to support the assumption our leader had held similar parties. The fact that the Shore Patrol landed in force, the estimate was sixty men led by an officer equal in rank to our leader, one who was known to dislike him, means someone was waiting for him to make a mistake. He did. One report said he was caught running down the beach in his skivvies. The Grapevine speculated that he would have gotten away if he had not been drunk. Some of the men I saw jumping off the dock were my fellow officers.

I would never see most of the officers of the Lighterage Division again. All of them were reassigned as far from Danang, but still in Vietnam, as possible, except for the boss. The boss was singled out for special attention. He was not reassigned. He stayed at NSA in the least important job the brass could find. Status among officers means a lot and he had none. Additionally, the brass made sure he would never be promoted to the next highest rank and his career in the Navy would be over as soon as he was eligible for his pension, which we understood would be in two years. He would spend those years inventorying yards and docks, somewhere. It was a sad end to his career.

I spent another day and a half on watch, taking out some time to sleep, and wishing I could talk to my direct boss and find out what was really happening. I finally decided to go to the Lighterage Division office and find someone to take the Lima watch. I walked into an office full of strangers. Everyone was gone. New faces were looking at me, and I received a warm and cheerful greeting. I had walked into the middle of a meeting where I was the topic of the day. I was the officer who knew more about the Lighterage operations at NSA than anyone else. More specifically, anyone else who was not banned from the job. I was considered The Expert, and I was still junior to all of them.

It works like this: Assume for the moment that you have never seen a duck, and don’t know anything about ducks. You meet a duck at the intersection

of two busy streets. You are surprised to see the duck because you have never seen one. The duck cannot cross the street because of all the traffic and asks you to carry him across the street. Why not you think. It will be my good deed for the day. While you are carrying the duck, some of your friends, who do not know anything about ducks either, see you carrying the duck. They assume you know a lot about ducks. To them, you are now the duck expert.

This is where I found myself. I went from dunce to expert overnight. At the end of the day, I had provided everyone with the little knowledge I had and was appointed the new LCM8 Division Officer, a position for which I was totally unqualified and unprepared. I do not think I would have survived if it had not been for the extremely competent, trained, and experienced senior petty officers who worked with me. However, I was unaware that another assignment was coming down the pike that would make my new assignment look like a walk in the park or, as it turned out, a swim in the river.

I did not realize it, but I had just experienced a, once-in-a-lifetime, improbable, life-changing event, the magnitude and results of which went beyond my imagination.

7. Chapter: Or So I Thought.

June 1966 – We worked seven days a week and 8 to 14 hours a day. The weather was hotter and more humid than I had ever experienced, which meant you were sweat soaked from morning on. Most of my job involved untangling messes caused by processes that were either incomplete or poorly conceived and/or hastily built. I also spent a lot of time dealing with sailors, generally the young ones on their first enlistment, who bent or broke the rules and the related administrative work that accompanies 250 men. The base was in the building stages and the top brass may have known where we were going, but the details of getting the work done were left to the bottom brass. The work was anything but pleasant.

Every day was a challenge magnified by the ubiquitous presence of ambient temperatures and humidity above ninety and a lack of air conditioning. Unpleasant does not adequately describe it, something above unpleasant and directly related to painful does. Most of us alternately bitched about our life and then gave thanks to God we were not in the bush getting shot at or wondering if the next step would be in a booby trap or punji stake. We knew we did not have the worst jobs in the world. The Marines did. Whatever discomfort we were enduring, theirs was a multiple worse than ours.

I doubt that any war was much different. A lot of resources and people are thrown together and someone at the top says, “build something, because we need it tomorrow,” and the people do it. The history of World War II is filled with stories of bases and factories that sprang up overnight and got the job done. I never thought we were doing anything new or different.

Occasionally, I could get my mind beyond the everyday discomforts of life and look at the pure beauty of Vietnam. When I was on watch in the harbor, I was often struck by the fact that the hills to the east and south looked so much like the hills on the banks of the Allegheny River in Pennsylvania. I saw many places in Vietnam that reminded me of home.

On the personal side, I decided to ask my girlfriend of three years to marry me. I sent the letter off and was awaiting a reply. (Mail took five days to

travel back to the Land of the Big PX and five days to return.) This is a separate story unto itself, reserved for another time[32].

Additionally, much smaller in the grand scheme of things, I was promoted to Lieutenant Junior Grade and our, there were four of us, Wetting Down party was great, but much calmer than the one in May.

I cannot remember the exact day, but sometime shortly after the Wetting Down, my boss, a career Lieutenant, told me that the Operation Officer, a Commander, wanted to see me. I quickly went through the catalog of things that I may have screwed up badly enough that the Commander would want to see me personally to deliver an old fashioned, Navy, ass-chewing, but I failed to think of anything that extreme. I had never even talked to the Ops Boss, nor had he ever talked to me. My ass-chewings came directly from my boss. Now that I was a Lieutenant Junior Grade, had I possibly moved up the ass-chewing chain of command?

A quick side note here. In the Navy, habitual screw-ups got assigned to inventorying yards and docks where they could do no harm and, I should add, they never got an ass-chewing. The theory behind this treatment is summarized by the expression “Never try to teach a pig to sing. It will frustrate you and irritate the pig.” However, if you are doing a good job, and your job is critical to the operational mission, you do not get fired from that job and you catch an ass-chewing almost every day. Ass-chewing is Navy motivational speech.

I asked my boss what the Commander wanted, and his reply was. “Go find out.” I was in his office within a minute.

The Commander looked ancient. He was bald, wrinkled, mumbled and in my 25-year-old eyes he had to be in his late fifty’s. If he was any younger, then he had led an extremely hard life.

He told me that the Marines were planning a mission and wanted to use one of our LCM-8s. I was to go to a meeting and be the liaison officer for the exchange and the meeting would start in a half an hour at the III MarDiv compound directly across the river. I knew I could make it if I hurried and

[32] My Engagement story is detailed in “The Misadventures of a Young Sailor”. Expected publication date is 2023.

caught the ferry at the right time. Before leaving, I picked up a can of C Rations cookies for breakfast.

At III MarDiv, I found the meeting room, but it was not what I had expected. It was a large, dimly lit, lecture style room that would seat about fifty people. There was a junior officer giving a presentation to an attentive audience of about 20 Marine officers. I was able to quickly assess that I was the most junior officer in the place except for the presenter who was a first lieutenant. I took a seat in the last row, not noticing that I sat down beside a full bird colonel. I whispered to the colonel, still not realizing his rank, “Is this the operation that needs the Navy boat?”

He responded: “Next up in about 10 minutes.”

It was about then that I realized the room was air conditioned, a rarity in Danang, and my body sweat was drying. It felt good, and I thought how nice it would be if the meeting lasted an hour or so, maybe a couple of days. I looked around and saw a coffee stand about fifteen feet behind me. Great!

With my can of C Ration cookies in hand I went to the coffee table. There were cups, but I was not about to assume they were there for any Junior Navy officer to use. With my P38, I opened the cookie can, removed the contents, bent the lid back and used the empty can as a coffee cup. I had done this many times before, sanitation being what it was in Vietnam, and saw nothing wrong with the practice. Back to my seat where I began to enjoy coffee and cookies.

I was only vaguely aware that the officer next to me got up and walked away. When he returned, he placed a cup in front of me, picked up my coffee “can” and poured my coffee into it. With a steady even tone he whispered, “We are not quite that barbaric here.” It was only then that I noticed he was a full bird colonel.

For the first time in my life, I experienced professional embarrassment. I should have known the cups on the table were for anyone. I felt my face flush and I was frozen in place, afraid to move because I might not have complete control over all my bodily functions.

Aside: The reader must understand that Marine Colonels are a breed unto themselves. In the animal world they would be at the absolute top of the

food chain. Feared and respected by all, their reputation was as the fierce warriors who had fought their way from island to island in the Pacific during WWII, landed at Inchon in Korea, withdrew from The Chosen Reservoir and now were leading the Marines in their third war. Additionally, my brief, but memorable encounter with one while on Seventh Fleet Staff impressed upon me that Marine Colonels saw Navy Junior Officers as the lowest form of life on Earth, perhaps in the Universe. End Aside.

The Colonel apparently understood my situation (probably saw my face glow brilliant red even in the dim light). He placed a hand on my shoulder and whispered, “For God’s sake, son, it not a big deal.” And then he smiled or, at least, showed what passes for a smile on a Marine Colonel.

That was it. The lion had taken the thorn out of the mouse’s paw. We had what would pass as a friendship between a Colonel and a Lieutenant J.G.

The presenter finished his spiel, asked for questions, answered same, gathered his slides and papers, and left. Another first lieutenant moved into position. Scanned the room and asked if the Navy was present. I looked around the room and did not see any other Navy officers. I was contemplating identifying myself as “The Navy” in a room full of Marine senior officers when the Colonel poked me in the side. “Here” I said, loud enough to be heard. Most of the officers looked around to see “The Navy.” None seemed impressed or surprised. And the presentation started.

This was the first briefing on the proposed Operation Swanee, whose mission objective was to map the Thu Bon River complex from Hoi An to the An Hoa Combat Base. This would be a first step in determining the feasibility of river borne supply operations to the An Hoa base. At least, that was my understanding at the time.

The meeting/briefing lasted about 30 minutes and the presenter suggested a second meeting next week. The assembled room agreed, and another presenter took the stage. I took that as my cue to leave rather than making a fool of myself and asking when the Marines wanted the Mike-8. That question would probably be answered at the next meeting, or so I thought.

I left the meeting with the understanding that the area to be covered by Swanee was not real estate that we owned or occupied. The Viet Cong were very active in the Quang Nam Province especially in the region on

either side of the Thu Bon. When pushed, they would dissolve into the hills to the west. They would only stand and fight when they had a superior advantage.[33] To be truthful, I was not paying close attention given that the information did not apply to me, or so I thought.[34]

July 1966 – But my question was not answered at any of the following meetings. Each meeting got a little longer and more detailed with the fourth meeting lasting a full hour. The Colonel and I were getting along famously, exchanging twenty or thirty words per meeting. We were getting to be old buddies. As the fourth meeting was wrapping up and we were a month away from the start of Operation Swanee, I leaned over to the Colonel and said, “When are they going to send a crew over so we can train them on how to run the boat?”

The Colonel looked at me and his expression was an odd oleo of surprise, sadness, sympathy, and humor. I do not think I had ever, or since, seen so many emotions on a human face.

Finally, he said, “You don’t know, do you?”

“Know what?” I said.

He did not say anything more. He just kept staring at me with that odd expression. (Had this been a comedy skit, someone in the background would have been whispering “wait for it, wait for it.”)

All my respiratory functions ceased as the enormity of this non-verbal communication sunk in. I was the one who would take this boat up that river! Me!

“No!” I said.

The Colonel just shook his head “Yes.”

I was gone, out the door and headed for the Commander’s office.

I did not wait for permission to enter. I just walked in.

“Commander, I was just told that I’m taking that boat up the river.”

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[33] Not a criticism, just an observation.

[34] Yes, that is the second time I used that expression. I went for the best part of a month living in the delusional bubble of “or so I thought”. While writing this footnote, I decided to change the Title of this chapter to “Or So I Thought”.

“Oh, didn’t I tell you that?” he said.

“No, you told me the Marines needed a boat, not a crew,” I said.

“Sorry,” he said almost apologetically “must have forgot. Yes, you are in charge of the boat.”

I wheeled and headed for the Lighterage Office just thirty feet away. Standing over my desk, I studied the dirty coffee cup I had left there earlier. My mind would not wrap around the fact that I was, not only going to the front, but would be the primary element (translates to target) of the operation. I was already closer to the front than I wanted to be. Operation Swanee would put me on the tip of the spear.

Everyone who joins the Navy quickly learns that “You Volunteered.” Regardless of what happens, “You Volunteered.” When you stood up and raised your right hand and said “I, Sidney Breman, do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; and that I will obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. So help me God." (Title 10, US Code; Act of 5 May 1960 replacing the wording first adopted in 1789, with amendment effective 5 October 1962), “I Volunteered”.

My boss finally interrupted my little “Pity Party.”

“Hey, what’s up?” The office was empty except for him and our Yeomen. He must have addressed me several times.

“I just found out I’m the guy who is going to take that Marine boat up the river,” I said.

I had briefed him on the meetings at III MarDiv several times, so I knew he was aware of the operation, but I was not ready for his reaction. Nothing. Dead silence. He knew. And the Commander knew. Why had they not included me in that important piece of information? My boss knew that I was only planning to turn over a boat, not a boat and crew. I have never been able to come up with reasonable answers to this question. However, at that moment, my mind was not working. Everything was jammed up. I grabbed the keys to the Division pickup truck and headed out the door, not

to return until the next morning. When I did return, I was ready to start working on Operation Swanee.

None of the questions I have had about the way I was assigned to this operation and the way I found out have ever been answered. However, over the last fifty plus years, I have managed to distill all the questions down to just one (which, of course, still cannot be answered). Why was an inexperienced, junior officer sent to the planning meetings and left to flounder around? The Marines had a room full of brass pondering and planning. The Navy sent a junior officer whose only qualification was that he had spent two months watching sailors drive boats. What happened? Did the entire Navy Command structure miss the fact that this was a combat operation? We were not hauling picnic supplies for a Marine party. This was combat! And here I was, probably the least qualified Navy officer in Vietnam (OK, that is an exaggeration, but not much of one) leading the charge! I was the best they could send? Somebody really missed the boat (pun intended)[35].

I have been eternally grateful that this error of commission and omission by the Command structure did not produce any fatalities or injuries (at lease none that show) for me and my crew. Many aspects of the mission could have been improved with competent and qualified leadership. I had no illusions about my level of competence, then or now. One of the most terrifying aspects of the mission for me was being aware that I lacked the training to perform my duties and to protect myself and my crew. I was faking it because I had no other choice.

Another part of my life was also moving forward. My girlfriend had responded to my marriage proposal. Although it took several letters (I had to ask her parents), she said yes. She did not know that I had purchased the ring in 1965 and it was at home. I arranged to have my parents hold a surprise engagement party on August 23, 1966. That, of course, would be August 24, 1966, in Vietnam.[36]

[35] There is a lot of Navy terminology that would describe this situation, but none of it is fit to print.
[36] The story of our engagement is detailed in “The Misadventures of a Young Sailor” by Sid Breman, due to be published in 2023.

8. Chapter: "Theirs Is Not To Reason Why"[37]

She holds him to her bosom,
And protects him from the storm.
She nurtures sole and body
When all else have gone away

Gently does she rock him
When in his bed he lay.
He pours himself into her
As payment for her care.

Fates entwined, he will defend her
From all who mean her harm.
Neither wife nor mother be her
She's his ship that keeps him warm. SDB 8/7/2021

Most of my time during the month preceding the start of Operation Swanee, scheduled for August 13, 1966, was consumed with planning, and equipping the boat. At one point my boss told me he thought I was spending too much time preparing the 860 and I was ignoring my other duties. I asked him how much time he would spend if he was going up the river. The subject was never mentioned again.

With the advice of my three leading petty officers, I selected the LCM8 860 because it was the best maintained and had the best crew. Our crew members were: BM2 Smith (Smitty), who had 10 years of Navy experience. EN2 William Chilton the best engineer I ever met. EM2 Richards, an electrician mate. We added Qm2 Quinn as the second coxswain later.

We started gathering supplies, tools, spare parts, and the weapons we estimated we would need. I kept a small notebook in my back pocket and as an item would come into my mind, I would write it down immediately. The list would grow over night as I would wake up from a deep sleep with two or three items in my head, then write them down and fall back to sleep.

[37] "The Charge of the Light Brigade" by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

I am eternally grateful that we had an abundance of everything.[38] By the time August 13, 1966, would roll around we would be ready to move.

Just as my “To Do” list continued to grow, so did the complement of the LCM-8 860. First there were two men from Saigon who would run the sonar equipment to map the river. Then one week before departure, I was informed that three Lieutenant Commanders were coming from various parts of the Navy (finally, the Brass shows up… with tons of last-minute suggestions). They represented Task Force 116 (the PBR’s), Swift Boats and MACV Saigon.

Upon arriving, one of the Lt. Commanders informed me that he was SOPA, Senior Officer Present Afloat. SOPA is a U.S. Navy regulation that makes the senior officer on any ship or vessel responsible for the safe operation of the craft. Which means that SOPA can overrule the Commanding Officer of a ship or the Officer in Charge of a boat if, in his judgement, the ship or boat and the personnel aboard will be placed in danger by the poor judgement of said C.O. or O.I.C.

Then (we are into the last week before D-Day) someone (Brass) had the bright idea that we should have an EOD (Explosive Ordinance Demolition) Team on board. (Where the Hell were these people in June?) So, a four-man team (a Lt.J.G. and three NCOs) showed up at my boat. They also brought along a 14-foot runabout complete with forty horse outboard. The outboard, of course, needs a supply of gasoline (there is a liquid I always wanted aboard a boat going into combat and, yes, that is sarcasm) and oil and a place to be stowed. Then a Navy photographer showed up from Saigon.

Now we had nine additional bodies that would have to be fed and watered. I told my leading petty officer to stock the 860 with enough C Rations and water to last 60 days. Fortunately, the LCM8’s had a lot of storage space in the voids, but we were running out of people space. And, fortunately, he doubled my order. With all these people showing up, we used a twenty’x20’ tarp to make a tent over the rear of the well-deck as protection from the sun and rain. It was a last-minute modification but, fortunately, sailors are the

[38] We often had to barter to obtain possession of some items. For those items we could not obtain by barter we would steal.

best jury riggers[39] in the world and our tent looked like it had been made for the LCM-8.

During that last week, I was informed that a Marine Colonel wanted to inspect the 860. It was an irritation I didn't need because it meant I would have to take the boat to The White Elephant, a two hour round trip, and we would have to use precious time to "trice up the boat " (make it pretty for a senior officer). One of the modifications we had made to the 860 was a 50-caliber machine gun mount on the stern sheet. It was strictly for the use of the Marine Corps if they wanted to use it. We, me, and my crew, thought it would afford us a lot of protection.

We arrived at Bach Dang Pier next to the White Elephant a good half hour early. I told the crew they could leave and gave them two hours to come back. I knew that would give them enough time to make it to the Take 10 Club for a few rounds. It was early afternoon.

The Colonel arrived and his facial expression said, "Someone put sand in my Preparation H." We exchanged salutes and he glanced around the boat. He was not quite sure what to look at any more than I could assess the combat readiness of a tank. However, he spent some time looking at various parts of the boat, nodding his head or shaking it and mumbling to himself.

Finally, he pointed to the 50-caliber mount and said, "I want that off immediately".

I said it was for the Marine Corps use.

He cut me short. "I don't care. I want it off now. The next thing you will do is remove that mount".

It is worth noting here that the Marines passionately believe that the most dangerous thing in the world is a sailor behind them with a weapon, a belief that has been reinforced many times over the centuries.

It was obvious that the Colonel had not intended this to be a discussion, so I said, "Aye Aye Sir." I hoped that would be the end of our exchange, but I was disappointed.

[39] Jury Rig: Makeshift repairs using the tools and materials at hand.

“And” he said, “I don’t want you or your crew armed”. He waited for me to do the “Aye Aye” thing again.

I felt his words go down to the bottom of my sole and bounce back. I had spent two months attending meetings where I was told about all the different ways we could get our asses shot off, that we would be constantly pushing the enemy out of our way, like a bubble rising up from the bottom of a fish tank, we would always be surrounded by the enemy

This was the point in my life where I lost all, complete and total, respect and trust in and for authority. And I would never reverse my position.

There was a long moment of silence.

“Sir, I will not give up my sidearm nor my weapon, nor will I instruct my men to give up theirs. If you do not like it, then I suggest you arrest me now.” I paused and waited for the Colonel to detonate. To say that my heart was filled with a little fear would be to say that the Titanic took on a little water after hitting the iceberg. I had not just disagreed with a Marine Colonel, I had, point blank, in no uncertain terms, told him to “kiss my ass.” I would not follow a direct order. Another long moment of silence. We held each other’s gaze for what seemed like an hour but was probably only five seconds. Then he said, “Aw fuck it,” and he walked away. I never heard directly from him or anyone else on the subject. Indirectly, he made his presence felt.[40]

August 12th, 1966: On the day before leaving, I arrived at the boat to find the EOD team building a sandbag wall from gunwale to gunwale about ten feet from the loading ramp. They told me the sandbags would provide protection when the ramp was down and having the ramp down would afford a better view of what was immediately in front of us. The runabout would go in front of the sandbag wall. EOD teams were combat trained, and I considered them a welcome addition to the operation. But, again, where the Hell were these people in June?

The hardest part about not knowing what you are doing is that you do not know what you do not know. That is a well-worn phase today, but in 1966, I did not know that I did not know it. And, when someone points out the

[40] See “Security Detail in August 17.

obvious, you feel like the idiot you are. The Lt. J. G. apologized for making the modification without consulting me, but he felt that time was short (no shit?) and was sure I would agree with the changes. I was incompetent and I knew it. I just hoped that my lack of training did not get me or someone else killed. On that day, I wondered if I would live long enough to become engaged. Where would I be on August 24, 1966, and, more importantly, would I be alive and in one piece?

August 13th, 1966**:** Our scheduled departure was 2100H hours, August 13, 1966, when we would meet up with a Swift Boat at the mouth of the harbor and follow them south in the South China Sea to the rendezvous with the Marine landing force of approximately two hundred men and four Amtracks (officially LVPT5, armored, amphibious tanks weighing about twenty tons). The Marines would land[41] at first light and we, the Navy, would follow them into the mouth of the Thu Bon River. Progress would be determined by the resistance encountered. We would keep pace with the Marines by staying abreast of the lead Amtrack.

Author's Note: From this point forward to the end of Operation Swanee, the reader will be presented with alternate, sometimes different, descriptions of the days' events. First, The Marines perspective, as recorded in the Command Chronology and After-Action Reports for August 1966. Next will be the events as I recorded and remembered them aboard the LCM-8 860. These two recordings of history do not always agree. I have included these discrepancies so that the reader may judge for themselves the events and draw their own conclusions. End Author's Note.

[41] Most of the Marines were already ashore. They simply moved into position as opposed to making an amphibious landing.

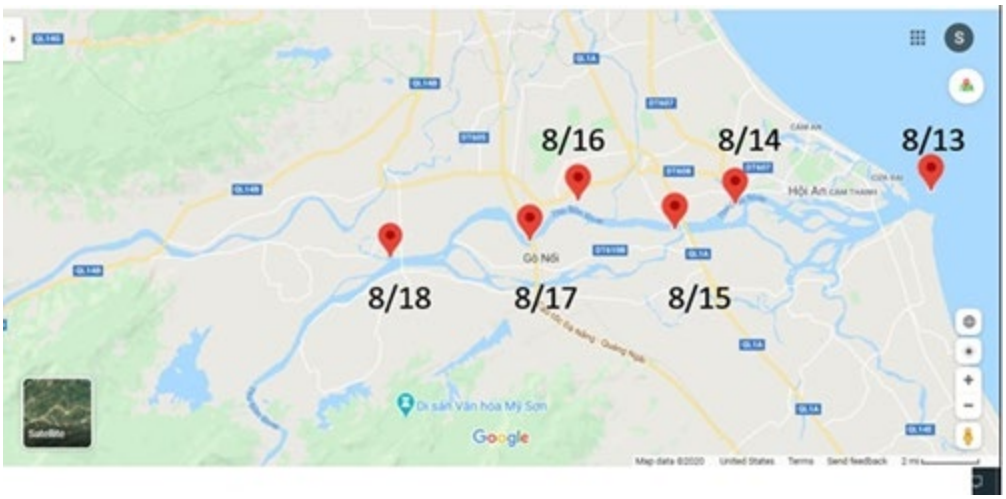

Figure 7 Operation Swanee End-of-Day locations on the Thu Bon River. Google Maps © 2020

August 14th, The Marines: At 0400H, artillery and 81mm mortar preparation fire commenced on the northern bank of the Thu Bon River about two kilometers west of the river mouth. One half hour later, 1st Platoon Company A moved into a blocking position one half kilometer east of the area covered by the preparation fire.

The area remained quiet until sunrise when the Platoon received small arms fire followed by a grenade. The fire was returned, and 2 VC were killed during the exchange, one male and one female. There must have been at least one more VC as the enemy weapons were not recovered.

Two hours later, two tanks from Company C, 1st Tank Battalion, attached to Company C, were returning from a supply run when they spotted a VC attempting to escape the tanks in a small boat. The tank crew fired warning shots in front of the vessel, but the VC kept paddling. The enemy was killed with one round from the 90mm tank cannon.

On the South Bank of the river, the artillery observer reported 5 or 6 enemy soldiers running for cover. A squad was dispatched to check the area. They captured one VC. The prisoner was taken to the Command Post.

In the same area, just two days before the start of Operation Swanee, at 2000H, a squad from Company A, on the North Bank of the river, saw 15 VC moving west. The Marines set up an ambush and killed at least eight of the enemy. The squad moved out to find a crossing spot so that they could recover the VC weapons, when they came under heavy automatic weapons fire and were surrounded by a force of forty, estimated, VC. The squad called in 81mm mortar fire, which disbursed the enemy. The squad

remained in place until daylight. Blood trails were found leaving the area the VC had occupied.

At 1015H, the 1st Bt 1st Marines recorded the first casualty of the day, but it was not in Operation Swanee. It was with Operation County Fair nearby. A crewman from an LVT, supporting Company D, walked away from his vehicle into a bushy area to answer Nature's Call. The other crew members heard shots and found the first crewman dead, shot 13 times with an automatic weapon. The body was found in an abandoned house. One female VC was later captured by an ARVN unit and forwarded to their Command Post.

August 14, Aboard the LCM-8[42]: As we entered the river from the South China Sea, I immediately realized that we had no communication link to the Marines. Everyone involved dropped the ball here. I blamed myself, but the blame could be spread around to the entire chain of command. My epiphany arrived when we left the Swift boat and started west.

Smitty asked: "Where do we go now?"

"Hug the North Bank until we see the Amtracks" I said.

The magnitude of this "screw-up" felt like a weight on my shoulders. I decided to wing it until someone pointed out that we were deaf as far as the Marines were concerned. We found the Amtracks about five hundred meters into the river. I was able to make physical contact with the Marine Commanding Officer. To be more specific, I was summoned to a meeting with him.

. I could have done without having three Lt. Commanders on board. As soon as they heard I was meeting with the Marines, they assumed they were included. As I had suspected, there were disadvantages of having three Lt. Commanders aboard as observers. The chain of command became very fuzzy. Each one had an opinion and were not reluctant to voice it when the Officer-in-Charge was a Lt J.G., and I, being junior to all of them, was obliged to give deference to them. However, if the whole thing

[42] The information we received aboard the LCM-8 860 was not always the same as the information reported in the Command Chronology or the After-Action Report. For instance, regarding the VC in the boat killed by the tank crew, we heard the VC was hiding behind a tree.

blew up (literally or figuratively) in my face, they would be standing back as "observers." In Navy terminology, I was the Duty Neck.[43]

The Marine Major, who had operational control, was not happy with the existing security on the 860. He felt we were too exposed to attack and so he had decided to assign a security team with a radio to ride on the boat. I could not have agreed with him more, especially since this arrangement would solve my communication screw up. As soon as the team showed up, we could get underway. What I did not know was the real reason the Security Detail was placed aboard. I would learn that later.

Nine Marines came aboard within minutes. They dropped their gear and started cleaning their weapons. That really impressed me. The Lance Corporal in charge of the team sought me out and introduced himself. He said he needed C Rations for his men for breakfast and he had been told that the Navy would supply them. I retrieved a case, which had twelve meals, and gave him the whole case, as I silently thanked God that we had a six-month supply of C-rats aboard. I noticed that his men were laughing and appeared to be incredibly happy.

I asked, "Why are your men so happy?"

"Because we don't have to walk today, sir," he replied.

We both smiled and I was struck by the relative nature of happiness.

With the Marine radio aboard, we started getting reports on the progress ashore. Minimal resistance had been encountered during the early morning hours and a squad was checking out a reported sighting of a small group of VC. On a somber note the Lance Corporal told us that a Marine was killed when he sought some privacy to have a bowel movement. He was found with a dozen rounds in his torso. Also, a tank had an encounter with a VC who refused to surrender. The tank shot him with their cannon.

The Lance Corporal quickly became a valuable source of survival information. I learned that enlisted men do not render salutes in the field because doing so would identify the officer to the enemy. A make-shift stove can be manufactured from an empty C Rations cookie can, using an alcohol "heat tab," like Sterno, as fuel. And, probably the most useful, a

[43] Duty Neck: The person who would get hung if anything had gone wrong.

cardboard commode could be fashioned from the outer sleeve of the C Rations box. When we had a question about daily living, he was the answer man (again, I could have used this information sooner).

The Corporal also became our local and regional newsman. Any information he received from his radioman was quickly passed on to the entire boat. It was only through this information channel that we were able to navigate and stay within the protective security bubble provided by the Marines who were afoot on both banks of the river. I was also able to judge the seriousness of our situation by watching him and his men. If they were relaxed, we could relax. But when they would “lock and load,” we knew to be ready for action. Except for a few surprises the VC were able to pull off, they were always reliable.

We received word to move out around 1000H hours and “guide on” the Command Amtrack which the Corporal identified for us. We would observe their progress and when they were one thousand feet upriver from our position, we were to advance to their location. We, my coxswain, and I, were able to navigate the boat accordingly using the large, detailed map I had and some quickly fashioned measuring sticks. Everyone was learning quickly.

Initially, I was concerned about being two tenths of a mile behind the Command vehicle, but the Corporal told me that the rear guard provided us ample protection. I grew comfortable with the situation, but never really let us fall a full one thousand feet behind, it was more like 750 feet. The coxswain was also quick to keep us moving forward.

The Thu Bon River, like most rivers that flow into a much larger body of water, has a delta region at its terminus into the South China Sea which is composed of multiple islands and channels. Our first job was to identify the best path through this natural maze because we quickly discovered that some channels looked good upon entering and then quickly narrowed preventing our passage. We also needed to maintain visual contact with the Command vehicle. I asked the two men operating the sonar mapping gear if they could help us and received blank stares back. So much for consulting the experts.

We were making our third attempt when we encountered a Vietnamese fishing trap, a 100-foot, square net, spread flat by an X frame, which is lowered into the water at night with a light over the center. In the morning, the fisherman, raises the net, removes the fish, and leaves the net suspended in the air. The suspended net was blocking our path, and we did not want to damage it if possible." Our task was complicated by the fact that trees were hanging low over this channel.

Figure 8 Vietnamese Fishing Trap: Source, Naval Support Activity Cruise Book 1968

"KABANG!!!" The first gunshots rang out and my coxswain and I hit the deck. More gunfire and we could hear the bullets ripping through the trees overhead. One slug rang like a bell when it hit our conning tower. We both suddenly realized that no one was steering the boat and we both leaped for the wheel. For a few seconds we both had the wheel while we squatted to look through the narrow slits in the conning tower. Then I let go of the wheel and the coxswain took over. We discovered that we could not do much squatting, looking through the slits. I also gained a good understanding of the phrase "there are no atheists in foxholes."

Fight or Flight kicked in and our fear was relegated to second place as we stood up and started driving the boat. It was a lesson I would not soon forget. You cannot let fear dictate your functions. You must do your job, and that always means you put fear second to doing your job. Fear will never completely disappear. It will always be there. You must learn to live with it. Any man or woman who is not afraid in combat is either suffering from a mental disorder or is stupid.

Damage to the fishing net was no longer part of our consideration. We powered through it and made for open water. It was shallow but safer than picking through the channels looking for the deep ones. The gunfire

continued for a few more minutes and each muzzle blast felt like it was attached to our spinal cords. We discovered that gunfire sounds quite different when you are in front of the weapon.

By noon, we had cleared the delta area and were in the widest part of the river. It was several hundred yards across, but we could still see the Command vehicle as we made our way forward. The Corporal told us there were “just a few” of the VC in front of us, which may slow our progress.

August 14, The Marines, 1st Bt 1st MC: Shortly after 1000H, elements of Company A on the South Bank, 3.5 km west of the river mouth, observed 5 VC run into a palm grove. Supported by an LVT, they surrounded the grove and received several rounds of small arms fire. One VC was captured and forwarded to the Command Post.

Progress during the remainder of the day was slow, having moved Ten km inland. All forward movement ended when the Survey Boat ran aground and could not go around the mud bank. The boat remains stuck in the mud and is expected to float free with the incoming tide sometime in the early morning hours. One LVT is also aground. LVTs have been placed around the Survey Boat.

Aboard the 860: Most of the rest of the day progressed according to plan. Marines move forward, we wait then move up. Around 1700H hours, we went aground in the middle of the river. Smitty maneuvered but we kept running into the same sand bar, or mud. (I think it was mud. The Marine reports referred to it as a sand bar.) After about an hour of trying, we received word that the ground troops would bivouac for the night and the Amtracks would surround the LCM-8 for security. Since we were aground, the Amtracks provided a five-foot armored wall around most of our boat. It had been a long day. I knew I would sleep soundly, if not comfortably, that night.

Perhaps, we had run out of water completely and this sand bar was as far as we could go. Perhaps Operation Swanee was over. I certainly would not have been upset if that was the case. I contemplated the prospect of spending the next day trying to find the deep water.

It is worthy of note that a lot of my experience from Boy Scouts started kicking in and would continue to prove useful during the operation. Daily

living was not unlike a camping trip (except for, of course, getting shot at and the other dangers of combat). Food was coming out of cans and had to be self-prepared. Personal sanitation and grooming took some improvising. One recommendation from the minimal Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape (SERE) training I had was to shave every day and I discovered it was a good practice. Comfort was relative to your conditions and there were no hot shower at the end of the day. In all, I was glad I had spent time camping as it was the most useful training I had for this expedition.

The coxswains slept in the conn and I slept on the stern sheet with a poncho rigged as a tent. Everyone else slept in the well-deck where the life preservers were used as pillows and or mattresses. Fortunately, we brought sixty of them. Of course, we always had one man awake and on watch.

August 15, The Marines 1st BT 1 MC: Survey boat and LVT have floated free due to the high tide. At 0600, the LCM is moving to the bridge with an ETA of 0745.

LCM at the bridge at 0830. Operation Swanee is terminated for the 1st Battalion 1st Marines as 2nd Battalion 1st Marines assumes responsibility.

It is recommended that LVT not be used in similar operations due to the vehicles becoming stuck in sand and/or mud bars.

August 15, The Marines 2nd BT 1MC: The Battalion's stated mission for Operation Swanee was "To conduct river survey and security screening operations along Song Ky Lam River[44] commencing 150830H August 1966 from vicinity BT 092552 on south bank and vicinity AT 977566 on the north bank; on order conduct security for exit of elements of CTF 116[45] from west to east. Coordinate and effect relief with 9th Marines on 9th Marines boundary south bank (AT 998547) and north bank (AT 977566)."

The stated Concept of Operation was "Two companies from their semi-permanent base camps on north bank of river provide security within zone. One platoon moves by motor convoy to bridge vicinity BT 091555 to provide security for both banks at that location. One company (-) moves by

[44] I cannot find KY LAM RIVER on any of my maps but do find reference to the Thu Bon-Ky Lam River. I will leave this to the geographers.
[45] The only presence CTF 116 had in Operation Swanee was a Lt. Commander observer.

motor convoy to bridge (vic BT091555) and proceeds to “leapfrog) along south bank to provide security to the west.”

At 0830H, assumed command of Operation Swanee. Movement during the day was slow to non-existent, covering only 2.5 km. Initially, the LCM reported difficulties loading and was not prepared to move out until mid-morning. Secondly, the LTVs continued to bog down in the sand and/or mud bars.

Just before noon, elements of Company G received sniper fire from across the river. The platoon responded with small arms fire and 81mm mortars. The sniper ceased firing. Twenty minutes later, the platoon located the sniper in a tree and fired several rounds into the area. The sniper was seen falling out of the tree. One VC was confirmed to be WIA.

Forward progress of the river survey ceased at 1300H due to problems aboard the LCM. The survey will start at 0630H.

Elements of Company G received twenty rounds of sniper fire. An artillery mission was called in on the location and the sniper fire ceased.

August 15, Aboard the LCM-8 860: When I awoke, the five-foot steel wall that had surrounded us at last light yesterday had been reduced to a foot that morning. Another testament to my inexperience, I had totally forgotten about the effect of the tide while we were still close to the South China Sea. We now had plenty of water to proceed. Was I disappointed? No. I was as vested in seeing this operation pursued to its successful conclusion as anyone. It took some time to “saddle up,” but we were underway by 0730H hours.

Progress was the same as the previous day, slow. We would wait for the Marines to proceed one thousand feet and we would move up. Shortly after we got underway, we came to a bridge with several spans dropped. The vista in front of me looked like it came out of a movie from World War II. The sniper rounds and small arms fire from the previous day had made the war real to me. I had no doubt in my mind that any one of us could die in an instant. But this was a tangible reminder of the determination of our enemy.

I received orders from the Marine CO to beach next to the southern end of the bridge while the command of the 860 passed from one battalion to another. We needed to stop anyway. Everyone needed to answer nature’s

call and that was not the easiest task accomplished aboard an open, 70-foot, boat while under way.

We were about fifteen feet away from the bridge, with our 9-ton ramp holding us to the riverbank. The crew had also passed a line from our stern to the first span, which was one of the dropped spans, of the bridge to prevent the current from pushing us down river. The dropped span made an excellent docking pier. Once the boat was secure, I told the crew to take care of whatever they needed to do, and I would stand watch on the boat. Standing by the conn, I decided to shave, as was recommended by the survival training guide.

I noticed several ARVN soldiers moving about the area. They had disembarked from armored personnel carriers and were, just as we were, preparing for the day. Most were preparing breakfast. Two ARVN soldiers walked down the fallen bridge span. I thought they were going to wash up or get some water and paid little attention to them. Had I known what they were really doing, I would have stopped them.

Just as I was laying the razon to my right cheek, an explosion threw me against the conn, knocking most of the wind out of my lungs. I assumed my boat was under attack and looked for damage or smoke. My thought was to get the boat ready to get underway. When I stood up, I saw the two ARVN soldiers scooping a large fish out of the water. They had thrown a concussion grenade in the water and stunned the fish.

I drew my revolver and cocked the hammer. For the first time in my life, I felt the genuine urge to actually shoot someone. I did not shoot.

The crew returned and we did a quick inspection of the boat to insure the grenade did not break a seam. Fortunately, she was still watertight. We also did a check of the engines and the related pumps that kept the engines cool. All was well including our fuel supply. We were ready to move in an hour. In was now about 1030H.

We started looking for the best channel to use to get under the bridge. Smitty felt we needed to be extremely careful because a steel snag would do a lot more damage than a tree or rock. I called the crew together and we discussed the problem. We came up with the following solution.

Quinn, Chilton and Richards would lay down on the edge of the ramp to look for underwater obstacles. The water was clear enough that they could see two to three feet into the water. Which should get us through without a snag. I would stand on the forward edge of the stern sheet, about eight feet from Smitty, who would be driving the boat. My purpose was to relay any verbal instructions to Smitty from the crew members on the ramp, given that the wind and engine noise could interfere with Smitty's hearing in the conn. Smitty would proceed as slowly as possible. We were blessed with a slow west wind, about four knots which aided in breaking the forward movement of the boat and help keep us moving in a straight line. This was going to take a lot of time.

First, we tried to pass under one of the spans that had not been dropped. Unfortunately, we kept running aground into, fortunately, just mud. The deep water was always under a dropped span. Whoever engineered the destruction of the bridge knew what they were doing, as they stopped land travel, north and south, and blocked the river in the process. After probing the water under the downed spans, we finally found one that looked passable.

Smitty eased the 860 forward slowly. Most of the boat had passed under the fallen span and we knew we had enough depth to make it, when I noticed that the wooden roof over the conn might hit the span. I told Smitty. He stopped the boat and held it in place while he surveyed the situation. We had about two feet of clearance on the starboard side between the boat and the bridge pier. Then he gently "walked"[46] the boat sideways one foot. This gave us the clearance we needed to make it under the bridge. [47]

Once clear, everyone on board gave Smitty a cheer and applause.

[46] "Walk a boat": Using a combination of forward, reverse, rudder direction, current and wind, move a boat sideways.

[47] Another testament to my inexperience was being totally unaware of the tidal effect of the water levels under the bridge.

Figure 9 The 860 getting ready to pass under a downed span of the bridge. The man walking on the starboard gunwale is Quinn Qm2. Members of the Security Detail are standing around the sandbag barrier.

Progress during the remainder of the day was slow. The LVTs were bogging down in the mud with increasing frequency, and they were experiencing mechanical problems often as a result of bogging down. We would watch a 20-ton LVT ride up on a mud bank (we knew it was mud, not sand as reported by several Command Chronologies, this far inland) and then the treads would start digging and the vehicle would just settle down into the hole it had dug. Then one or two other LVTs would motor over to the one stuck in the mud. They would pass lines across and churn mud, eventually pulling the stuck vehicle free.

From top to bottom, the Amtrack measured about ten feet high, but when afloat, only had about two feet of freeboard. This meant that it needed eight feet of water to float. When it proceeded into shallow water, the vehicle would rise out of the water, somewhat like a beast arising from the deep. It was intimidating. Unfortunately, the weight of the vehicle and the action of the treads often created a machine that dug itself into a mud hole and if the hole was deep enough, the Amtrack would be stuck and needed another Amtrack or two to pull it out.

Smitty chuckled, “You would think after two or three times, the driver would know not to drive up on a mud bank, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes,” I said, “but I’m not about to start giving the Marines seamanship lessons.”

“You know,” Smitty said, “we could jerk that tank out in 2 minutes.”

“Yes,” I said, “but somehow I don’t think the offer of assistance would be well received.”

We both chuckled, but quietly. Progress remained slow.

I was still nervous about being hit by “Charlie”[48] once the main body of Marines had moved forward and left our flanks unprotected. The Corporal joined the Coxswain and I to discuss this possibility and we concluded that Charlie was not quite sure what we were. With the number of people we had aboard, we would constitute a lethal threat to a local militia unit. Additionally, they could see that the boat could maneuver quickly and could catch them in a pincer move. They may have assumed that was our purpose and were declining to take what they saw as the “bait.” We hoped Charlie would not figure out that we did not have the capacity to be an offensive weapon.

The word to bivouac came around 1730H hours and we were instructed to beach on the bank of the river adjacent to the Command Amtrack. Once we were secure on the riverbank, using our 9-ton boarding ramp as a land anchor, I noticed a Marine take off his boots and wade into the water with a bar of soap in one hand. Once wet he soaped up his clothes, rinsed by dunking himself, then stripped and washed his body. Other Marines soon followed.

I asked the Corporal if this was normal behavior. He told me it was when they were near a body of water. This was their only laundry service. Every Marine carried a change of clothes in their pack, and they would hang the wet ones up to dry during the night and the next day, maybe. With the humidity in Vietnam, nothing really dried. My crew and I decided to join in, and the stern sheet of the LCM-8 became a swim platform for anyone who wanted to take a recreational dip after their “bath”. We and the Marines enjoyed the water for a half hour or so.

[48] Charlie: the Viet Cong. Often abbreviated as VC. In a radio transmission, using the military phonetic alphabet, VC translates to Victor Charlie.

Figure 10 Bath and swim time on the 860. The author can be seen diving off the stern sheet. The children in the foreground came to watch and probably spy.

While we were swimming a group of Vietnamese children came down to the riverbank and watched us frolicking in the water. They were laughing, pointing, and making the sounds children do when they feel they are being entertained as the Marines were doing "cannonballs" off the LCM8. I asked the Corporal, who was getting ready to launch himself into the river again, if the children posed a threat of any kind. He replied "No" and explained that when the children showed up, it was safe. Their parents would not let them come down to watch us if an attack was imminent. Either the local village was friendly, or no attack was planned. Some of the children were probably spying, but there was noting we could do about it.

After bath and swim time, the Marines started pulling out their C Rations. It was dinner time and the children disappeared into the vegetation. It was probably dinner time for them too, or so I thought. But the Marines duly noted their absence. I was sitting on the pile of life vests, eating whatever meal I happened to pull out of the box of C Rations when I heard a small group of Marines discuss which one of them was going to do something first. The debate did not make any sense to me, mostly because I did not know what the disputed task was.

"It's your turn," Marine #1 said.

"No," said Marine #2. "I did it yesterday. He can do it today," he said, pointing at Marine #3.

Marine #4 rose to a standing position. "You guys are a bunch of pussies. I'll do it."

With that he gathered up his empty cans and other trash and started walking towards the “garbage pit” that had been dug in the center of the bivouac site. As he was getting ready to drop his trash… KABANG!... a single shot rang out and it was louder than the shots we had heard earlier in the day. It was the “Duty Sniper.”

The Duty Sniper was probably a lone VC who would move into position as everyone was eating dinner, close enough so that his shot would ring loudly, but far enough away that he could make a safe exit. His (or her) purpose was to give the entire unit indigestion and, therefore, probably a poor night of sleep. The Marines told me that we could expect him (or her) every evening.

The senior Lt. Cmdr., SOPA, decided that everyone should dig foxholes and sleep on the ground rather than sleep on board the boat. His reasoning was that if people were bunched together, there was a higher probability that several would be injured or killed in the event of an attack.

I was growing increasingly skeptical of the decisions authority figures (anyone senior to me) were making about my safety and I decided that this one was not in my best interest. Putting everyone ashore to sleep may keep the people safer, but it did nothing to safeguard the boat without which there would be no operation. I decided to ignore the order and instructed the crew to do the same.

When the Lt. Cdr. noticed that I was making no progress on preparing a foxhole, he asked me why I was not digging. I told him I did not think the order applied to me and my crew because in the event of an attack, we would have to get underway to prevent the capture or destruction of the boat. The Lt. Cdr. and I shared a brief, tense moment, but he decided not to pursue the issue. Most of my crew and I slept aboard for the rest of the operation. Later, around twilight, I sought out the Corporal and told him that he and his men could slip back aboard and sleep on the boat. Our security force gladly returned and took up sleeping positions behind the sandbag wall. I was very glad they were in place.

As to the indigestion, I know it worked on me every time. We settled in for the evening and it was a quiet night except for the rumbling of our stomachs.

Figure 11 One of the two men operating the sonar equipment digs a foxhole. He did not get the word to remove rank insignia from his uniform. The spade was part of our equipment inventory, a luxury the Marines did not have.

August 16, The Marines 2nd BT 1MC: The first sighting of the enemy BT 011624 was at 0755, when a sentry at the G Company sighted four men BT 015627running from rock to rock. The sentry fired one warning shot in the air, but the men continued to try to conceal their movements. The sentry then fired two rounds at them, and they disappeared into the tree line.

All units were in position to provide security/screening for the river survey at 0853H. Forward progress was resumed. AT 1217H, an Amtrac was stuck in the middle of the river BT 043554. At 1310H, F Company reported being held up for an indefinite period of time due to mechanical problems and one LVT being stuck on a sand bar BT 046556.

At 1915H E Company/2 sweeping west with tanks attached (vic BT 025538) saw fifty uniformed VC. BT 025588. The tanks fired 11 90mm rounds and blanketed the target area. A sweep of the area was not conducted due to the distance involved.

At 1945H F Company/2 patrol (vic BT 041549) received sniper fire from a tree line west of their position. The sniper was sighted and platoon opened fire. The area was searched, and patrol found one shower shoe with blood on it; however, no body was located.

During the remainder of the day, sniper and small arms fire was received from several areas. In one instance the tanks returned fire and the sniping immediately ceased. In the other cases, small arms fire and 60mm mortar fire was returned. All fire ceased at 2120H.

August 16, Aboard LCM-8 860: The day started off the same as the previous two and proceeded quietly until noon. The Marines started encountering more contacts at that time and our progress slowed to a crawl. We were, as described in the planning meetings, a bubble rising up from the bottom of a water tank. But unlike the bubble, the further we progressed, the slower we progressed. I could feel the pressure building as we moved forward. The mood of the Marines aboard also changed. They seemed to be more alert than the first and second day. I wondered aloud to Smitty if this would continue and what it would be like in three days.

The LVTs continued to bog down. After watching a couple of these extractions with amusement, we noticed that the Amtracks had extraordinarily little pulling power in the water, somewhat like a large animal that was all powerful on land but slow in the water. These extractions were slowing us up considerably. The first one today took over a half hour and the second an hour.

Smitty tapped me on the shoulder and said, “How long are you going to let these guys screw around? You know we are sitting out here exposed while they try to get these things unstuck.”

I could tell Smitty was itching to show the Marines how it should be done. I was not sure the Marines would appreciate our offered assistance. What the hell. We both knew that the LCM-8, at 60 tons and one thousand horsepower could jerk an Amtrack out of a mud hole with ease.

“Let’s do it.” I said.

Smitty eased the 860 towards the towing LVT. When he was about twenty feet away, he blew the air horn, startled the LVT crew, and motioned for them to move aside. He ordered Quinn forward with a one-inch nylon line. Quinn passed it over to the stuck LVT and told the three Marines sitting on top of it to hold on, then paid out about forty feet of line and secured it to

the forward, starboard cleat. Now we would witness nautical poetry in motion.

Smitty slowly back the 860 until the line was taut. Then rotated the boat[49] to starboard, keeping the line taut. When the line was perpendicular to the bow ramp, he gave it full power and snapped the boat back to port.

The Amtrack popped out of the mud hole like a rubber ball on a string. It happened so fast that the crew was almost thrown off. They were laughing and clinging to their vehicle. From then on, when an Amtrack was stuck, we were called to extract it. Score one for the Navy.

Figure 12 Quinn QM2 making a line fast on the 860s starboard cleat. The next step was to swing the boat to port, then swing rapidly back to starboard. The resulting force would jerk the 20-ton LVT out of the mud hole in which it was stuck.

Before the beginning of the operation, I was told that we, the LCM-8, would be considered the slowest element of the force. As such, the Marines requested that I do everything I could to try to "keep up" with the main body. They assured me they would not leave us behind. When I questioned their "slowest element" calculation, a 1st Lieutenant told me the flow speed of the river was eight knots and the LCM-8 had a top speed of eleven knots, which meant that we could only progress at a speed of three knots. Three knots was slower than a Marine could walk and, therefore, we were the "slowest element."

I accepted the 1st Lt.'s assessment, but I knew that if we were in a race, the LCM-8 would not come in last. Seeing the Amtrack stuck in the mud gave

[49] LCMs were designed to pivot on their axis. "Brute, The Life of Victor Krulak" page 78.

me a small amount of satisfaction, but that smug little comfort one receives in such moments was quickly overruled when I realized that, during such retrieval maneuvers, we made great targets for whatever enemy might be in the area. We learned to work quickly and keep our heads down.

The day proceeded predictably with sporadic encounters with Charlie. The Corporal said we were probably up against some local militia, farmers who came out when called, and they would generally fire a few shots and fade back and away from the river. He said it was mostly harassing fire. “Just to keep us on our toes,” he said with a smile.

That evening we bivouacked on a flat, open field about the size of a football pitch. There was little vegetation, and the bank of the river was lower than we had seen along most of the trip. It was low enough that we could step from the bank into the water. Most of the river had a 3 to 6-foot bank that had to be navigated to reach the water. It was an ideal bivouac location for the Marines and our boat. We were able to lay the ramp down flat which anchored us securely to the land. I had an anti-broaching line run from the port, stern cleat.

Just before I was getting ready to eat, the Corporal told me the 1st Lt. wanted to talk to me. I found him towards the center of the bivouac giving instructions to his NCOs. He was all business.

When he finished with his men, he turned to me. “When they hit us tonight, it will come from there.” He pointed west-northwest, upriver on the north side.

“Don’t you mean ‘if’?” I asked.

“No. When,” he said. “Be ready.” He turned and moved on to other tasks.

The evening progressed normally except no one washed their clothes. Nor did any children show up. The Duty Sniper got one round off and a group of marines on the south bank opened fire (scared the hell out of me). The Marines had had enough and had been waiting for him/her. Several Marines went out to search for the body, but all they found was a bloody sandal.

As I had the previous days, I sat watch in the Conn from 1800H to 2200H hours. The tension was palpable. We could all feel it. The Coxswain and

his backup and I went over the plan we had devised in the event the boat was under direct attack.

Whoever was at the Conn would start the engines and slam the ramp shut. The second man, who would have been awoken by the start of the engines would cut (we had a machete for this job) all lines and the one driving the boat would do full reverse on all engines and we would be underway. We would proceed to the center of the river and hold. If the Marines were overrun, we would proceed in the direction of their retreat. If we could not tell which direction they were going, we would move east.

After the Coxswain relieved me at 2200H hours I found a cot in the well-deck under the tent. Now that I was alone and in the dark my mind started working against my sanity and reason. I was slowly losing control of my breathing and several times I held it trying to calm down.

“Are you alright?” a voice said out of the darkness.

I was shocked out of my panic attack by the voice and the realization that I was not alone. I had suppressed my fear in front of my men but could not hold it once I thought I was alone. The voice belonged to the oldest, not the most senior, of the Lieutenant Commanders who were observers. I say oldest only because he looked older than the others. He had probably been in the Navy long enough to be a World War II veteran and then Korea. When he came aboard the LCM-8 860, he was suffering from a stomach ailment. His distress increased and the first day of the operation he laid down on one of the cots and stayed there. I had almost forgotten he was aboard.

It took me a few seconds to respond. “No. Not really. I’m scared shitless,” I said.

“You would have to be a fool or stupid not to be,” he responded.

“Any advice?” I asked.

“Yea. Get some sleep. You will be awfully tired in the morning if you don’t and the show must go on,” he said. There was a long pause.

“Sleep with your boots on. You may need to run without much notice,” he said. Another pause.

I asked, “Have you ever been in combat, sir?” Another long pause.

“Yes,” he said.

“What’s it like?” I asked.

Another pause. “Sorry, I’m not feeling up to talking. Ask me again in the morning.”

“Sure. Thanks for the advice,” I said.

The brief exchange with the Lt. Cdr. had brought me back to reality and calmed me down. I was probably more afraid than I had ever been in my life. However, as I had learned the first day, you cannot work or function when you let your fear take over your mind and body. I threw a blanket over my head and lit a cigarette. Then I completed my calming down process. After finishing my smoke, I was ready to fall asleep, and I did.

August 17, The Marines 2nd BT 1st MC: At 0030H, F Company at BT 037555 and BT 045549 received twelve rounds of 60mm mortars from vicinity BT 031556; muzzle flashes were seen, and fire was returned with approximately two hundred rounds of .50 Cal fire; enemy mortaring ceased.

At 0630H, one LVT was in was disabled due to a generator failure. A helo was sent to pick up a replacement part.
At 0700H, elements of H Company began a sweep of Route #14 to Route #1 to rendezvous with the armored personnel carriers.
F Company would provide security for the inoperable LVT.
By 0800H, all units were in position to move forward. However, one LVT was experiencing mechanical problems.
Forward progress began at 0900H.
Elements of H Company linked up with the armored personnel carriers and led them to F Company’s position shortly after 1200H. F Company personnel were transferred to the APC’s. The LVTs crossed the river and proceeded to Route #14 and moved west towards the 1st BT 9th MC TAOR.
At 1600H, one LVT struck a mine and lost a track. No casualties were reported. Forward progress remained slow.

At 1730H, one man from the F Company patrol stepped on a punji trap. The man was med-evaced at 1830H. Shortly after liftoff, the med-evac helo received sniper fire. The helo returned fire with M-60 machine gun fire. Two

tanks were dispatched to the suspected sniper's area. Two buildings were destroyed with 90mm cannon fire where the sniper was believed to be hiding. Elements of H Company swept the area. The sniper was not found.

F and G Companies were to remain with the LCM until relieved by 1st BT 9th MC.

F Company located a "Tomato Can" anti-personnel mine, which was disarmed and forwarded to the Battalion Intelligence Officer.

At 2210H, H Company detected activity close to its position, and dispatched a squad to investigate. The squad identified a VC squad and called in 81mm illumination rounds, then engaged the enemy with small arms fire. The enemy retreated into the tree line.

August 17, The Marines 1st BT 9th MC: Operation control of Company E, 2nd BT 3rd MC was held by this Battalion from 161125H to 211000H. This increased the force by 25%. During the same period, the Battalion search and clear operation in conjunction with Operation Swannee on the southside of the river. The Battalion also held operational control of Company I, 3rd BT 9th MC from 170400H to 171750H.
Operational Control of the LCM-8 was held from 180700H to 200600H. Company C, 1st 9th MC engaged an unknown number of the enemy in the vicinity of AT 979530. Seventeen Viet Cong were killed. One weapon and several documents were recovered. Additionally, the Artillery Observer reported killing twenty enemy personnel.

August 17, Aboard the LCM-8 860 0030H:

I was propelled out of my cot either by the blast or the noise of the explosion. It was a mortar shell. I woke up mid-flight and landed in a pile of life preservers, simultaneously with a Marine, who must have taken advantage of the darkness to slip aboard the LCM 8 860 and avoid sleeping in the dirt for a night. The pile of life preservers was a spot I had picked out before dark as the most likely spot to provide, well, life preservation, in the event of an attack.

The Marine and I exchanged the minimum number of words while a hail of mortars rained down on us, but he would very shortly save my life because he knew what to do when attacked and I didn't have a clue. Adding to the noise were three fifty caliber machine guns returning fire.

Imagine you are sitting in a fireworks' display and the blasts are going off beside you and the whole display goes off within a few seconds. Add to the noise the fact that one might go off in your lap and you have what the Marines called the Ultimate Pucker Factor. Pucker Factor is a measure of your internal fear.

Although not scientific, it works like this. When the human body is threatened, it reacts instinctively to minimize the damage. The capillaries constrict to decrease the flow of blood if the skin is cut, damaged or otherwise punctured. We all recognize this as "goose bumps" on our arms when we are really scared. The Ultimate Pucker Factor comes at the point where your skin cannot constrict anymore. "At that point," a Marine will tell you, "you will taste something hairy in the back of your throat. Do not try to spit it out. It's your asshole."

It is hard to say how long the attack lasted, either seconds, minutes, or hours, but when it was over, there was dead silence.

I whispered to the Marine "What happens now?"

"Nothing." He whispered back.

"Nothing?" I questioned again.

"You move and someone will shoot you," he whispered. And that statement saved my life because I probably would have gotten up to check on my boat.

We fell asleep shortly, somehow confident that the people who were supposed to be awake, were.

<u>August 17, Aboard the LCM-8 860 0630H</u>

The first light of dawn woke us. We had slept like two brothers sharing one bed, nestled together, almost cuddling. Upon gaining consciousness, we quickly separated, somewhat internally embarrassed by our positions, and

went our separate ways. The mortar attack let us know we were in, what the Marines called, “Arizona Territory.”[50]

The Viet Cong had probably correctly calculated where we would bivouac that night and had measured off where to place their mortars. They simply waited until everyone was soundly asleep and launched.

Before we got underway, the old Lt. Commander motioned me to his cot. “Now you know what it’s like,” he said.

Fortunately, no one sustained major injuries. The grapevine said that there were two or three Marines who were hit by shrapnel. I had a large abrasion on my right leg that had bled a little. I had not even felt it until I started moving around in the morning. I sought out the Medic and had him treat it. I had learned that even the smallest scratches should be treated in the hot and humid environment of Vietnam.

Some damage was done. One of the EOD men had taken off his boots and placed them beside his foxhole. A mortar round landed inside his boot and exploded. Only the sole was left on the ground.

We were underway by 0730H, just as the previous days. The mood continued to change. It is difficult to say that the Marines were more alert than normal. They were always alert. I never saw them relaxed to the point of being careless. But there was a subtle change. Perhaps there was less chatter, less banter. Perhaps it was the knowledge that, with every foot we moved west, we were going deeper into enemy held territory.

Around Noon, the Corporal told me that they were going ashore. We were leaving their battalion’s tactical area of responsibility (TAOR)[51]. He said that another squad of Marines would be assigned, and we would pick them up shortly. We dropped them off at a spot they requested. Everyone wished them well. They were a great bunch of Marines to have on board.

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[50] There is a difference of opinion as to where Arizona Territory started and ended. Some authorities believe it started 15 km west of our position. I’ll go with it started where we were when they dropped the mortars on us.

[51] This event does not reconcile with the Command Chronology for the 2nd BT 1st MC. That document fixes the change of battalion responsibility on August 18th.

As we moved away from the drop-off point, I watched them get ready to move out. Then they stopped and formed into a semi-circle with their backs to the river.

“Something’s wrong,” I told the Smitty.

He looked and agreed with me. He reversed his starboard engines, and we spun around on a dime. The people in the well-deck were taken by surprise. I yelled to the EOD team to be prepared to assist on-loading the Marine squad and they immediately responded.

We were about ten feet from the riverbank when the squad started leaping aboard. As soon as the last Marine hit the ramp, the Coxswain did full reverse on both banks of engines and our 60-ton craft withdrew at a speed I did not know was possible. We were at mid-river when the Corporal made it to me.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Wrong drop-off point,” he said. His expression was a mixture of embarrassment, amusement, and relief.

Fifteen minutes later we found the right drop-off point and watched the Corporal, and his men rejoin their Company. Another squad from a different battalion was waiting to join us. In addition to Amtracs, our force now had four tanks. Again, we had about one hundred Marines on either bank of the river and our procedure for moving forward was the same. Marines advance one thousand feet. We wait until notified and then move forward one thousand feet.[52] The replacement squad was as happy as the first group to be relieved of walking that day. Their Corporal came to the con and introduced himself. He was a large man, over six feet tall, that seem larger because he was wearing a flak jacket and helmet. He told me that he had been told his job was to protect the crew and the boat, and he would personally look out for my safety and wellbeing. I cannot quote what he said, but here is the message he relayed to me: “When the action starts, I will place myself between you and the enemy, and I want you to grab hold of my belt so that I will know you are directly behind me.” He paused and

[52] As I mentioned earlier, I never let the gap get to a full 1000 feet. Also, I do not know why the Marines used “feet” as a measurement in this case instead of the usual “meters”. Perhaps they figured we, Navy, did not understand the metric system.

looked directly into my eyes. Neither smiling nor frowning, without any emotion in his voice he said, “If I don’t feel two hands on my belt, I will assume you are going for your weapon, and I will turn around and shoot you myself.” He paused again. “Are we clear Sir?”

I cannot remember what my response was. He nodded and left. I do remember it was quite clear to me that you do not tell a Marine colonel to kiss your ass and not have unintended consequences.

This group of Marines fit right in, just like the first ones.

Figure 13 - Dropping off the Marine security squad.

I had jury rigged a map table in the Conn and, using a handmade ruler (who knew I would need a ruler, not me) was able to follow the Marine Command vehicle’s, now a tank, location and our location on the map. We were moving slower than we had on the previous day. About mid-afternoon, the Corporal came to the con and said the troops on the north bank of the river were encountering more resistance than expected. That was the reason for the slower movement. He wanted to know if the slow movement was interfering with our mapping. I checked with the two men operating the mapping equipment. They said, “No.” (That was the most exchange I had with the survey team during the entire trip.) I told the Corporal we were doing fine. Speed was not a problem for us.

Figure 14 The Marines on the north bank of the river encountered a pocket of resistance. The action was just beyond the tree line. We could hear, but not see, the action.

He started to leave and then paused. “Uh, this probably doesn’t affect you, but you might like to know that we have encountered some women Cong.” He paused and appeared to be thinking about his next words, then said, “They’re vicious.” It was a warning; the kind one man gives to another about a dangerous situation or circumstance.

The heat, humidity and the Sun seemed unusually oppressive that day. It could have been everyone’s awareness that we were encountering more Cong. It could also be that the wind had shifted and was now coming from the east, astern of the boat. Given our forward movement, the net affect was that we felt as if the wind was not blowing at all. Under these conditions, the boat’s exhaust was hanging with the craft, and the diesel fumes were hanging in the air. The smell was ubiquitous and, in large quantities, nauseating. These conditions elicited several complaints from the occupants of the well-deck. Except for the Marines. They were still happy to be riding.

Of course, the fumes were blown away while we were stopped, but, as soon as we started moving upriver, the boat would catch the cloud of diesel exhaust and the coughing and choking would begin. We, the Coxswain, and I, were not much better off as the exhaust ports were directly opposite the Conn, which would quickly fill with fumes. I noticed that the Marines had moved forward of the sandbag wall and stretched ponchos out for makeshift tents. They seemed comfortable.

After about an hour, two of the Lt. Commanders poked their heads up and engaged me in a conversation about how to remedy the situation. They were still in the well-deck, so I had to lean forward to see and hear them. We had just started our 1000-foot forward movement and my attention should have been on the boat's movement, but I also had two senior officers bending my ear. In the middle of it all, the Corporal appeared beside the officers and said, "Sir, we have passed up the main body!"

Our discussion of the air quality stopped.

"By how much?" I asked.

"Eight hundred feet! Be prepared to get hit!" he said. He disappeared under the tent and seconds later he took up position with the rest of his squad, now behind the sandbag wall.

Smitty slowed the boat as if there was no problem and gently did a 180 turn. Then he eased the engines forward. He did not want to appear that anything was wrong. I agreed with his strategy and told him so. He smiled.

I moved the safety lever of my weapon to "Off" and rested it on the Conn bulkhead which was about chest high. The "pucker factor" was at maximum. I do not know if there is a level of "functional fear" above what I experienced in those moments. Nor do I ever want to find out.

Now imagine the scene. The entire boat is ready to get hit. We are totally exposed to the enemy and the possibility some or all of us will die in the next few moments is very real. And then the Navy photographer jumped up on deck and started taking pictures. It did break some of the tension.

Figure 15 - The author during a tense moment of Operation Swanee.

We slowly motored back to the security of the main body and as we passed by the Command vehicle, a fire fight erupted behind us (I was going to say a little fire fight erupted, but when you are in the middle of it, there is no such thing as a “little” fire fight.)

Afterwards, the Corporal speculated that the Cong probably thought we were trying to catch them in a “pincer” move and held off firing on us. They were still trying to figure out what we really were. While the Corporal was giving us his analysis, the Radioman told us that we were to stay parallel to the Command vehicle from now on. No more 1000-foot movements. Fine with me.

Later, we bivouacked on the North bank of the river, close to the Command Vehicle. I expected the Lt. Commanders would want to discuss “who screwed the pooch” when we passed up the main body. However, they never mentioned it. Neither did I.

Just before we bivouacked, I could see a group of Marines, like a football huddle, on the south bank. After about 15 minutes, I heard a chopper coming. The Corporal came up and told us it was a Medivac chopper. He said a Marine had stepped on a punji stake and was being flown to the hospital. He would be in the Danang hospital in 15 minutes. It was hard to grasp the fact that civilization, or what we considered civilization, was that close.

As the med-evac chopper rose into the air, the door gunner sprayed an area of the jungle with M60 machine gun fire. The corporal said he, the gunner, was probably just keeping Charlie’s head down.

August 18, The Marines, 2nd BT 1st MC: At 0804H, Operation Swanee was passed from the 2nd BT 1st MC to the 1st BT 9th MC.

The After-Action Report for Operation Swanee contained the following information:

"6. Supporting Forces.

a. The operation was supported by a reinforced platoon of LVT's (9 LVTP-5, 1LVT-C-1, and 4 LVT-H6, a LCM-8 with elements of CTF 116 embarked, a troop of ARVN APC's, 1/11 in direct support, and both fixed and rotary wing aircraft."

This report references the "LCM-8 with elements of CTF 116 embarked". However, CTF had nothing to do with the planning or execution of Operation Swanee, other than an observer from CTF 116 being aboard the LCM-8.

The report continues:

"b. The LVT's proved to be completely unsuitable for an operation of this nature. There was not sufficient water in the river and the vehicles were continually being stuck on the many sandbars. The constant necessity of fixing the vehicles slowed the operation's progress to a "snail's pace." On 17 August, when the survey had reached the vicinity BT 035560, it was apparent that the LVT's would experience increasing difficulty should they continue. Therefore, all but the 4 LVTH-6 were brought out of the river at this point and driven along Route 14 to the west and passed on to the 9th Marines. By remaining out of the river as much as possible and traversing the south bank, the LVTH-6's proceeded without too much difficulty to the southern boundary vic BT000546. However, at this point one vehicle experienced mechanical difficulty and could not proceed. A lack of helicopter support made it difficult to deliver the necessary repair kits; however, when the first repair kit was delivered and emplaced, it immediately broke. After a delay of an additional day a second repair kit was delivered and installed. The four vehicles proceeded to cross the river from the south bank and the second repair kit broke. The vehicle was taken in tow to get it across; in the process the towing vehicle broke a track. On 21 August 1966 representatives of the Amtrac Bn came to the scene and final repairs to the vehicle were completed.

c. The LCM experienced no difficulty in moving within our TAOR and was instrumental in freeing the LVT's when they went aground.

d. The APC's negotiated the terrain very well and posed no problems what-so-ever."

While I was doing research for this book, I was particularly pleased that the Marines gave the LCM-8 and our crew credit for assisting in the successful completion of the operation.

August 18, The Marines 1st BT 9th MC

The Command Chronology, August 1966 does not contain any specific events for this date. There is, however, a description of the Battalion responsibilities for the month. This description runs for a page and a half and contains the following excerpts relevant to Operation Swanee: "provide security for…..LCM beaching point of the Song Thu Bon, "and maintained traffic control points at junction of Liberty road and Route 14".

August 18th, 1966, Aboard the LCM-8 860

Before we got underway that morning, I was summoned to the Command vehicle. Two of the Lt. Commanders heard the summons and came along, and I am glad they did (the third one was still too sick to get out of his cot).

I didn't know the rank of the Marine officer who was in command of the operation because no one, neither NCOs nor officers wore rank insignia in the field (a lesson I was taught by a young Marine in the first hours of the operation). However, by his age, I would have said Major or Lieutenant Colonel. (It really did not matter because he was in change.) He told us that he was changing tactics and would make a full push forward so they could overrun the Cong in front of us. The enemy was taking advantage of our slow (slower than normal) forward movement and was raising hell with the perimeter. Today that would end. His intention was to capture or kill as much of the force in front of us as possible and he would not stop 'til he hit the tributary entering from the north. We would have to keep up as best as we could. He was not asking for our opinion. He was telling us what he was going to do.

When he was finished talking, he said, "Any questions?"

The three of us were staring blankly at him.

“No? Good.” And he was gone.

We looked at each other. It was the pregnant pause. Until now, I understood that the LCM-8 was under the command of the Operational Commander. I was the officer in charge of the boat, but I drove it where the Commander directed. Now, the Operational Commander had just cut us loose and, in effect, said, “You are on your own.” As such, deciding where we go and how we go was above my pay grade. Had no other officer been present, I would have had to make those decisions myself. However, Navy Regs were very clear. The Senior officer is in charge if for any reason the Commanding Officer is unavailable.

It occurred to me that, not only were we on our own, but I did not think any of us knew what we were doing. Granted that the Lt. Commanders had Swift Boats, PBRs and the Riverine Force experience, but we were an LCM-8 with a squad of Marines for protection. Everything would be guesswork from here on.

I turned to the senior Lt. Cdr. and said, “Sir, I believe that puts you in command of the boat. Am I correct?”

He viewed the situation the same as I had. “Yes, I guess it does,” he said. He was not happy about it, but that was understandable. No officer or petty officer wants to be thrust into a position of authority and responsibility before being prepared. I empathized with him. The other officer and I waited for him to speak.

Finally, the senior Lt. Cdr. looked at me and asked, “How far is this tributary?”

I pulled out my map and made a quick calculation with my home-made ruler. “About 8 klicks,” I said.

“Even if they go at maximum speed, can you keep up?” he asked.

Thoughts of my “slowest element” conversation with the Marine 1st Lt. jumped to the front of my mind. “Given that most of their force is walking, I can pass them up if we want.”

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” I said. I explained to him that the estimated speed of the current had been eight knots and we had not seen anything close to that since leaving the delta region. Right now, we were seeing four knots, tops, in midstream. If we moved towards either bank, it would be less. Besides, the specs on the LCM-8 said speed of eleven knots, but we knew that wide open she would do a lot more. I did not think the Marine vehicles could do more than ten knots in this terrain.

The three of us then conferred and after we had gone through most of our options, the Lt. Cdr. decided we would run about 100 feet behind the Command vehicle. If we lost them or they outran us (fat chance, I thought), we would maintain our pace until we found them again or we reached the tributary.

Back at the boat, I briefed my crew and the Corporal. The Lt. Commanders did the same with the map makers and the EOD Team. We were ready to move out as soon as the Command Vehicle started.

Other than the variation in our “start-stop” pattern moving forward, each of the four previous days had been the same. Every day we fired up the four 671 Grey Marine diesels and let every Cong within ten klicks know exactly where we were. Our enemy would then pick out his best hiding places and wait for us to show up. A bend in the river was always good as it afforded him or her maximum cover from the Marines and a good vantage point from which to take a few shots at us. We suspected there was a team of snipers (not exceptionally good ones, thank the Lord) who’s job was to harass us.[53] We, the LCM-8 860 and crew, were the biggest and best targets on the river. Additionally, Smitty and I were the most exposed individuals on the boat.

You never “get used to” being shot at. No matter how many times a bullet goes “ferping” (that is the sound a bullet makes cutting through the air – I just made up the word and gave that definition to it), like a jet-propelled bug, you don’t “get used to it.” You may alter your reaction to it, but you do not “get used to it.” Smitty and I had stopped ducking as much as we did

[53] The Command Chronology, 3rd BT 9th MC, August 1966, Significant Events, Intelligence noted that harassing and sniper fire increased during the month and stated, “Accuracy at long ranges and percentage of hits, indicates a marked improvement in marksmanship and use of scope mounted rifles by VC in this area.” We apparently had luck and God’s protection with us.

the first day, but we were still hyper-aware of every shot. A Marine told us you will never hear the one that gets you. Besides, he told us, given the distance from them to us, the slug is gone before we hear the bang. We knew we would hear a lot more ferping today.

The Command Vehicle started out at about 0830H hours and, initially, I did not notice any appreciable increase in its speed. However, that changed. At about 0900H hours, the Command Vehicle, traveling on the North bank, suddenly picked up speed and I noticed that the ground forces on the South bank disappeared into the vegetation. We could hear them, but not see them.

The Marines were not out running us, and we were not at full throttle. Both the Coxswain and I were smiling. After a half an hour, we could tell it was going to be a short day as the tributary was only one klick away. I did not need the map. I could see it dead ahead. The Coxswain saw something else and called my attention to it.

About fifty yards in front of us, we could see ripples in the water indicating that we were going to hit some shallow water. The specs said our draft was four and a half feet, but we knew that with bottom effect and no heavy load we could probably push through about three feet. We had no way of knowing how much water was in front of us.

Smitty opened the throttles and I yelled (screamed) to the men in the well-deck “Brace for collision! We are going to run aground!” Seconds later we hit, and the inertia threw me and the Smitty into the dashboard. I could see that some of the Marines up by the sandbag wall got tossed around and, from what I could hear, so did the people under the tent.

Four (three Lt. Commanders’ and the EOD J.G., officer’s) heads immediately popped up at the back end of the tent. Everyone was screaming instructions. I was also screaming back at them. We knew we were sitting ducks if we could not move, forward or backward, quickly. Everyone was shouting out their suggestion at once. It was the definition of chaos.

Smitty stretched himself larger than his six-foot frame and in a voice louder than all of us together shouted “If you Sirs, would kindly shut the FUCK UP

and let me drive my boat, I'll get us the HELL out of here!" We did and he did.

When we ran aground, I was expecting to hear the bottom hitting sand or mud. It was generally no big problem for a landing craft to run aground. That was what they were designed to do, land solidly on a beach, then have the power to pull off and go back to deep water. Additionally, the prop-wash, in forward or reverse, removes mud and sand upon which the boat is resting. But the design was for sand or mud. We hit a gravel bar. And the sound we heard during our movement over the bar was metal props grinding rocks and stones. We, the crew, and I, knew that the boat was not going to survive undamaged.

It took several minutes for Smitty to get us over the bar, but it genuinely seemed like an eternity as we prayed that we would not be hit by the enemy. When we finally left the sound of the grinding behind us, Smitty said, "Our starboard shaft is gone."

"Let me hear it." I said.

He engaged the starboard engines slowly forward and I could hear the metal bearings grind. It was done. Fortunately, the port drive train was running normally. We made it to the mouth of the tributary at the same time as the Command Vehicle.

Our stopping point was not what I had expected. There was a road going north and south on either side of the river and a pontoon ferry that, theoretically, would shuttle vehicles across the river. The ferry had an outboard motor and the pontoons looked like the ones that were used to construct temporary bridges. It did not look sturdy enough to carry a jeep, let alone a truck. Someone remarked, "It looks like something a Marine would put together." We laughed. There were also construction vehicles,

sandbag bunkers and an M50 Ontos tank with six recoilless rifles. It appeared that this location was permanently manned by the Marines.

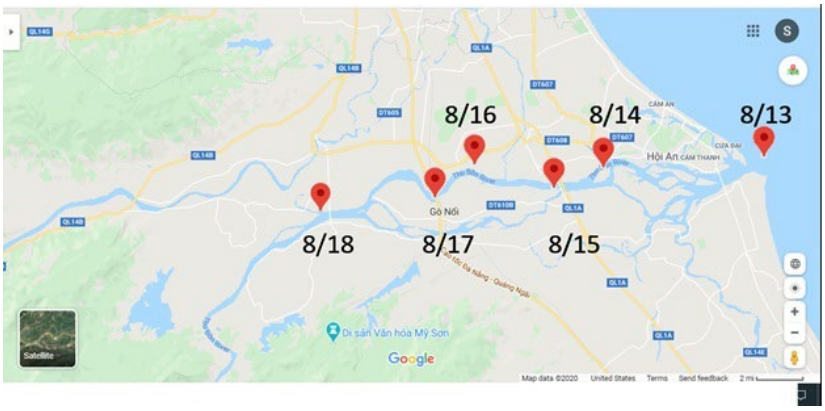

Figure 16 - Operation Swanee End-of-Day locations on the Thu Bon River. Google Maps © 2020

The road was Liberty Road and would be the main supply route for the Marine base at An Hoa. The Seabees were going to build the bridge (later named The Liberty Bridge) that would connect the north and south portions of the road. But the bridge was still in the planning stage.

The Commander told us that the rapid push forward had been a success. Several of the enemy had been killed or captured and the Commander told us he believed the force in front of us had been significantly diminished. He was confident that our forward progress would be better in the coming days. We were about halfway to our destination of An Hoa.

Since the Lt. Commander. was not speaking up, I was the one who told him we would have to lay up for repairs. The men from the EOD Team, who were trained divers, were helping us to assess our damage. He was not disturbed at the prospect of staying put for the rest of the day. His men could use the rest. He wanted a report as soon as we knew the operational status of our boat. He asked if we were operational enough to transport some Marines from the south bank to the north. I said we could.

Figure 17 The 860 transports Marines and POWs across the Thu Bon.

August 19, The Marines 1st BT 9th MC

Execution: Company A, in the vicinity of AT 967548, received 81mm and 60, mortar fire along with small arms fire. There were ten probable VC killed.

August 19, The Marines 3rd BT 9th MC

Execution: Companies L and M and the battalion command group moved into positions in the vicinity of the splash point at (AT 902547) They would be joined by C Company, 1st BT 9th MC, elements of Co. B 3rd Tank Battalion, and Co. B 1st Amtrak Battalion the next morning at 0630H. Company I, reinforced was in position to secure dominating terrain features on the east bank.

August 19, Aboard the LCM-8 860: The LCM-8 860 was finished as far as Operation Swanee was concerned. The starboard driveshaft was bent so much that it would not operate without doing more damage and fail completely. With only one bank of engines and the prospect of encountering more shallow water (once you hit shallow water going upriver, there is more ahead of you), I could not say that we were able to continue. Another grounding like the one we just experienced, and we could all be dead.

The Lt. Commanders agreed with my assessment and backed me when we went to the Marine Operation Commander. However, the Lt. Commanders had developed an alternative plan, of which I knew nothing until hearing about it at that moment. They proposed that the Operation be completed using the runabout the EOD Team had brought with them. It would be driven by the EOD, Lt. J.G. along with one or two of his men.

A few minutes were spent discussing possible problems and obstacles and then the Marine said, “When will you be prepared to start?”

“Tomorrow morning,” the Senior Lt. Commander. said.

The two map makers from Saigon and their equipment were gone when I got back to the boat. I had told them the boat would not be continuing upriver and, after consulting with the Lt. Commanders they packed their equipment and hitched a ride in a Marine resupply truck heading north. I

never saw or heard from them again. The Lt. Commander who had been sick the entire trip also left.

I briefed the crew on what was happening. We felt that we had given our all to the success of the Operation, but we also were glad our part was done. They wanted to know what we were to do next. I told them I did not know. We would have to wait for instructions from NSA Danang. I had sent a message through the Marines, and we should hear something soon. We were standing on the ramp of the boat during this discussion when a jeep pulled up. It looked like the driver wanted to board the boat.

A Marine senior officer (I am sure he was a Colonel, but officers do not wear rank insignia in combat areas) got out of the jeep and was staring, wide-eyed at the boat. “Who’s in charge of this boat?” he asked.

“I am,” I responded. “Can I help you, Sir?”

“Yes. Where the hell did you come from?” he asked.

I was not quite sure what he meant by that question, but I answered, “We are part of Operation Swanee mapping the river.”

“And where are you going now?” he asked.

I told him we were down for repairs because we lost our starboard prop shaft, and I was awaiting orders from Danang.

“Who’s your boss?” he asked.

I gave him the name of the Lighterage Division Officer and the Ops Boss. Now I was getting curious.

“Ok, don’t go anywhere. Do not leave here,” he said. He seemed genuinely concerned, almost anxious, that we might try to leave (Fat chance, since it took one thousand Marines to get us this far). “Do you need anything?”

“We could do with some beer[54],” I said, half joking.

“You’ll have to pay for it. How much do you want?” he said.

[54] A beer ration was expected at the end of an operation (Command Chronology, 2nd BT 3rd MC, August 1966, page 5). Yes, we got a little more than a ration per man, but then we also paid for it.

We all went through our pockets and came up with $30 bucks. (That was fifteen cases in 1966 prices.) He took our money and before leaving said, “Remember, do not leave until you talk to me.”

We almost saluted him, then remembered that you never salute an officer in combat. We just waved.

What we did not know was that the Marine engineers were desperate for a reliable ferry across the Thu Bon to carry supply vehicles to An Hoa several miles south of our location. Their pontoon ferry was not cutting it and the 860 looked like it had just fallen from heaven.

We called for “All Hands” to offload the runabout and watched while the EOD Team got it running. They motored around the river for a while, testing the engine. We put our heads together and tried to think of a complete list of tools and supplies they might need. Chilton produced a hand full of wrenches, screwdrivers, and pliers for engine repairs. Smitty and Quinn found some line in the lazarette, and we put out life preservers. When the Team returned, they said the engine was running rough and Chilton started working on it. I had nothing to do but be a spectator and decided to take a nap.

Chilton shook me awake. “Sir, beer’s here,” he said.

The other crew members were walking towards the boat, each carrying multiple cases of beer and big smiles. We thought about cracking a few but decided to wait until dark.

After dinner I took up my Watch position in the Conn. I was relaxed and just watched the sky turn from blue to black. Smitty and Quinn joined me in the Conn, and we shot the breeze, finding humor in most of what we said.

And then the show started.

Some distance away we could hear helicopters. It was too dark to see them, but we heard their props beating the air and they were not flying in a straight line. Then they started firing. We saw the tracers first, which formed a red, dotted line that seemed to wobble down to the ground as the gunner moved from one side to the other. The sound came several seconds later, giving us an estimate of how far the action was from our location. We

guessed one to two miles. We all watched for several hours. It was entertaining.

9. Chapter: The End of Operation Swanee……for the Marines

August 20, The Marines 3rd BT 9th MC

Concept of Operations: The original Marine plan for Operation Swanee called for 3rd BT 9th MC to provide security for the survey party from the Liberty Bridge site to a point due west of the Marine Base at An Hoa (vic AT 836454) and return to the Liberty Bridge site. Prior to the execution of Phase III,[55] the concept of execution was changed, and the Operation would terminate at the furthest point of advance or a point due west of the An Hoa base. 3rd Bt 9th MC would then provide security for the survey party to return to the Liberty Bridge site.

The Marine component for Phase III, Operation Swanee would consist of four reinforced companies. Three companies would land on the west bank at the eastern point of the peninsula formed by the Thu Bon and Quang Hue rivers. Two companies would attack and secure the riverbank, while the third would be held in reserve. The fourth company would secure the east bank of the Thu Bon.

When the furthest point of advance was reached, the two advance companies, including the Command Group, would cross the Thu Bon by boat[56] and return to the An Hoa operating base. The reserve company would assume OPCON of the armored units on the west bank and return to the Vu Gia. Once all elements had crossed that river, OPCON would be relinquished by 3rd BT 9th MC.

Execution of Operation: On the afternoon of August 19, the Command Group and Companies L and M moved into positions close to the splash point (AT 902547). The next morning at 0630H, C Company and the armored units joined them. I Company reinforced was in position to secure dominating terrain features on the east bank.

M Company moved out at 0730H and immediately secured the crossing area. They were followed by a heavy section of tanks from B Company. Following the tanks, L Company crossed the river and began to move

[55] None of the precious Command Chronologies referred to Operation Swanee in phases.
[56] Given that the LCM-8 860 would remain at the Liberty Bridge site, there is no mention of the source of the boat that would transport 500 combat equipped men across the Thu Bon.

south. M Company then moved southwest to protect the right flank of L Company. At this point, there was a heavy section of tanks in support of L Company and a light section in support of M Company. The Command Group and security force reserve followed both companies.

L Company reached the Thu Bon River at mid-morning and provided security for the Navy detachment which consisted of a small runabout and three individuals. M Company continued to secure L Company's right flank.

Shortly after noon, the first enemy contact was made (vic AT 872571). L Company engaged an estimated 40 VC. No friendly casualties were sustained and there were an undetermined number of enemy killed or wounded.

M Company, at the same time, engaged an estimated 40 VC (vic AT 973525) resulting in ten enemy killed in action, confirmed, and an additional twenty killed in action, probable. Friendly casualties were five killed in action and five wounded inaction.

The enemy broke contact and retreated to the northwest. However, sporadic engagements continued until 1430H.

At 1500H, the Officer-in-Charge of the survey party reported that they had obtained sufficient data, and the decision was made, at 1530H, to terminate the operation.

I Company received small arms fire from the opposite bank of the river and responded with small arms and 60mm mortars. Additionally, one marine was wounded by a mine explosion.

At approximately 1700H, all units on the west bank of the Thu Bon River cross the river by foot (vic AT 867514). The crossing was completed by 1900H. C Company, 1st BT 9th MC along with 2nd platoon B Company 3rd Tank Battalion move east to their crossing point (AT 902547). Operational control of C Company was returned to their parent unit at 1825H.

Phase III of Operation Swanee was terminated at 2000H.

The After-Action Report lists 5 Marines killed in action and sixteen wounded in action. Ten of the enemy were confirmed killed in action.

The Command Evaluation, contained in the After-Action Report of Operation Swanee read as follows: “The enemy located west of the Son Thu Bon did not want a major engagement with USMC force at this time. Moving troop units into the area by foot gave the enemy more than ample opportunity to escape.” A Command Recommendation followed: “That when an offensive operation is launched against enemy forces located between the Song Thu Bon and Song Vu Gia that all mechanical means of mobility available be utilized to deliver large numbers of USMC troop units to the most likely point of contact as quickly as possible in order to make enemy escape improbable in not impossible.”

The 3rd BT 9th MC Intelligence report contain the following information Operation Swanee: “Enemy forces estimated to be in the objective area prior to commencement of the operation were the R-20 Battalion with a strength of approximately 400 men, plus undetermined number of guerrillas in each of the hamlets.”

The report further noted that the enemy withdrew from the area of operation and conducted a delaying action to cover the withdrawal of the R-20 battalion. 200 VC were observed by a reconnaissance aircraft. The enemy was fleeing to the west. The area contained elaborate systems of trenches and fighting holes.

August 20, The Marines 1st BT 9th MC: C Company made contact with a company of the enemy (vic AT 901545). They received small arms fire and 60mm mortar fire. They reported five enemy killed in action, probable.

Retrospective:

Retrospective: The 3rd BT 9th MC Command Chronology, August 1966 does not convey the intensity of the fighting that took place on the afternoon of August 20. For that description, I need to turn to another source.

Two Silver Stars were awarded to Marines that day. One, to a rifleman in M Company, was awarded posthumously, and the other to a tank commander in support of M Company. The citations for those awards tell the story of how intense the combat was that day. Sergeant Kappmeyer was 22 years old.

“The President of the United States of America takes pride in presenting the Silver Star (Posthumously) to Sergeant Paul Joseph Kappmeyer (MCSN: 2013858), United States Marine Corps, for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action while serving with Company M, Third Battalion, Ninth Marines, THIRD Marine Division (Rein.), FMF, on 20 August 1966. While serving as Platoon Guide with the First Platoon, Company M, Sergeant Kappmeyer was engaged in a sweep and destroy mission in the vicinity of An Hoa, Republic of Vietnam. With a section of tanks, the first platoon was leading the company advance when suddenly they came under a vicious volume of small arms, automatic weapons and anti-tank fire from a well-entrenched and concealed company of Viet Cong Insurgents. Upon receiving the enemy fire, the First Platoon deployed and on order of the Platoon Commander, fixed bayonets and assaulted the enemy positions. Sergeant Kappmeyer during the assault was in a position to the rear of the platoon commander. As the assault approached the entrenched Viet Cong, Sergeant Kappmeyer observed that his platoon commander had been hit by enemy fire. Without hesitation he advanced to his platoon leader's side and administered first aid. Then observing another Marine being hit and lying fully exposed to the still intense enemy fire, Sergeant Kappmeyer, with full knowledge of the hazards involved and with complete disregard for his own safety, moved to assist the fallen Marine. As he was pulling the fallen Marine to a position of cover he was mortally wounded by a burst of automatic small arms fire. As a result of his extraordinary initiative and inspiring valor Sergeant Kappmeyer saved the life of his fellow Marine although giving his own. By his daring actions and loyal devotion to duty in the face of great personal risk, Sergeant Kappmeyer upheld the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service. He gallantly gave his life for his country.”

The four other Marines that gave their lives for their country that day were all 19 years old. The names of those men are:

Lance Corporal Daniel Eugene Morris

Private First-Class Thomas Robert Kyle, Jr

Private First-Class William John Schultz

Private Joseph Herbert Walton

The citation for Sergeant Jose Juan Alvarado follows:

“The President of the United States of America takes pleasure in presenting the Silver Star to Staff Sergeant Jose Juan Alvarado United States Marine Corps, for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action while serving as a Tank Section Commander with Company B, Third Tank Battalion, THIRD Marine Division, in connection with military operations against insurgent communist (Viet Cong) forces in the Republic of Vietnam on 20 August 1966. During Operation SUWANEE, Staff Sergeant Alvarado was participating in a coordinated tank and infantry operation as the leader of a section of two tanks in support of Company M, Third Battalion, Ninth Marines. As the infantry unit moved along an open area, it came under an intense volume of automatic weapons, rifle grenade, and anti-tank rocket fire from concealed ambush sites. The ferocity of the attack pinned down the Marines so effectively that they were unable to maneuver into assaulting positions without suffering heavy casualties. Reacting instantly and with great professionalism, Staff Sergeant Alvarado immediately positioned his tanks between the Viet Cong force and the Marine unit while he directed effective 90-mm. and machine gun fire on the enemy positions. The enemy responded with a heavy concentration of anti-tank fire which hit Staff Sergeant Alvarado's accompanying tank, wounding the Tank Commander seriously and severely damaging the communications system. With complete disregard for his own safety, he left his armored vehicle, maneuvered under intense small arms and anti-tank fire, to assist his wounded comrade to a position where he could receive medical aid. He then returned to the disabled tank, reorganized the crew, and utilized arm and hand signals to direct the movement of the tank. Again braving the enemy fire, he returned to his own tank and maneuvered his section to positions where they were able to gain fire superiority over the enemy. Exhibiting outstanding courage and presence of mind, he successfully maintained his section of tanks as a cohesive fighting force and contributed significantly toward the death of at least 27 Viet Cong and the ultimate defeat of the enemy. By his inspiring leadership, resourceful professionalism, bravery, and loyal devotion to duty, Staff Sergeant Alvarado upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and of the United States Naval Service.”

The 3rd BT 9th MC Command Chronology listed 15 Marines wounded in action, all from M Company, that day. Most of those were med-evaced to the Navy Hospital at Danang.

Figure 18 Med-evac choppers arrive to take wounded Marines to the Danang Hospital. The outboard motor of the EOD runabout can be seen in the lower lefthand corner.

August 20, Aboard the LCM-8 860 – The outboard motor was running perfectly and after a little breakfast, lots of good luck wishes, they were ready to move out. The two Lt. Commanders had decided they would ride in the runabout and the rest of the EOD Team would join the Marines on the ground. A Marine officer, probably a Major, came down to the LCM8 and asked if we could transport his men across the tributary and land them at the point where it joined the river. No problem. The Navy photographer told me he was joining the Marines. His choice, and "good luck."
Several minutes later we watched as the Marines disembarked and disappeared into the vegetation.

Figure 19 Marines disembark from the 860 on the morning of August 20, 1966

Now it was just my crew and me. We slowly motored back to where the road met the river, within the protective semicircle of the Marine encampment. The officer in charge, a 1st Lt., came down to the boat and asked if we had any spare C Rations. He was short some meals and the re-supply truck would not be back

till late afternoon. We happily gave him two cases. A Lance Corporal took them away to be distributed and the Lt. and I smoked a cigarette and shot the breeze for a while. We both squatted down, Vietnamese style, with our arms outstretched, our upper arms resting on our knees. That position had become second nature.

I made sure the Coxswain had set the Watch. He had and he put me in for my regular 1800 hours to 2200 hours. Although we had shaved every day, none of us had bathed in the river since the mortar attack. Perhaps we had lost trust in the water. Perhaps we were afraid to be caught naked in the water by an ambush. I needed to do something because I smelled like a goat, maybe worse..

I took a gallon of water to the rear of the stern sheet, behind the Conn and stripped down. Using a washcloth, I wiped over my body until I felt clean and then poured the rest of the water over my head. With no clean towel, I let myself air dry, then put on the last of the clean underwear and socks I had. Then I picked out the cleanest, dirty shirt and pants I could find. I had just enjoyed a luxury that few of the Marines had that day, and I thanked the Good Lord for it. I have never forgotten to be grateful to God that I have had so much clean water during the rest of my life.

Refreshed, I called the Crew together for a meeting. We had a full day ahead of us and, literally, nothing to do. After discussing the situation, I decided to declare “Holiday Routine” (which is Navy speak for relax, take a nap or whatever). We set up a Watch for the day and started relaxing. None of us had had a day off in weeks or maybe months. It was good to do nothing. While I was talking with the crew, it occurred to me that during all my meetings with the Marine planning group, no one had ever said anything about how we would get the boat back to Danang. Nor did I think to ask. Maybe I should think about that.

Around 1630H hours, the Marine 1st Lt. came down to the boat with a worried look on his face. He told us that we were to proceed to the South Bank of the river and be ready to transport Marines to the North Bank.

“What happened?” I asked.

“They ran into a buzz saw,” he replied. And he was gone, giving orders to his men. They were preparing for something. We took the tent down and

moved the cots to the side. We did not know how many men we would be transporting, and I wanted to be prepared. We stowed our beer in the lazarette and decided to keep it our little secret for now. I did not think the Lt. Commanders would approve if they saw it.

On the South Bank, an officer, probably a Major, came aboard first, followed by a lot of men. The officer came up on the deck. He greeted me and said, “Thanks for being here.” He was irritated. That was very, very obvious.

“Glad to be of service,” I said. I thought better of asking what happened, so I just kept my mouth shut.

On the next trip, the two Lt. Commanders, the Lt. J.G. and the rest of the EOD Team were first on board. The all came up on deck. None of them looked good. Stress will do that to you. And then they filled me in.

They were making good progress for the first several hours when the Marines on the west side of the river ran into a large force, they thought a battalion, of North Vietnamese regulars, about twice as large as our Marine force. They were pushed back to the river and were able to get all the Marines across only by using the runabout. The Marines put their gear in the boat and held on the sides. The Lt. J.G. made several trips that way.

Figure 20 US Marines crossing the shallow part of the river on foot. The EOD runabout, which can be seen at the top of the picture, was used to "ferry" the Marines across the deep part of the river. August 20, 1966.

The best information they had was that the Marines did not know the NVA were there and the NVA did not know we were coming. (Surprise!) Now we were going to have to keep them from crossing the tributary and pushing us back to Hill 55. They made it sound like it was a real possibility.

That night we had another part of the war to see and hear. The Marines had taken up position along the East bank of the tributary. Our best information was that the NVA forces were on the West bank, and they would probably try to cross at night. There was sporadic fire and mortars (ours) until about midnight. The gunships were back but still one or two miles away. We thought we might see them closer, but it did not happen.

Somewhere after 2200H hours, we heard the low, steady growl of a twin engine, propeller driven aircraft, not a helicopter. It was about the same

distance away as the choppers, so the time delay between any action and the related sound was the same. Suddenly what looked like a laser beam shot down to the earth and seconds later, we heard the high-pitched scream of the fastest guns in the world. Puff the Magic Dragon had joined the fray. It sounded like a rip saw tearing the Earth. We prepared to get underway if our position was overrun.[57]

August 21, The Marines 1st BT 9th MC: Operation Swanee was terminated at 0600H.

Retrospective: Swanee was now officially terminated for the Marines and there is scant mention in the Marine Corps documents of the LCM-8 860 after this point in time. Nor is there any direct mention in the Marine Corps documents of the action that took place on August 21 and 24. Any speculation as to why these omissions occurred would be pure conjecture on my part. The official Marine Corps history describes the events of August 20, 1966, as follows:

"Nevertheless, through August, contact with the enemy in Operation Macon was only sporadic and few enemy units of any size were engaged. Indeed the major action for the 3d Battalion occurred outside of the Macon area of operations in support of a Navy detachment conducting a hydrographic survey of the Thu Bon River. On the morning of 20 August, the battalion with two of its own companies and a company from the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines reinforced by tanks and amphibian tractors crossed the river onto the peninsula formed by the Vu Gia and Thu Bon Rivers – the so-called "Arizona Territory" where Operation Mallard had taken place earlier.

Shortly after noon, the battalion encountered about 100 VC from the *R-20 Battalion* in the hamlets of Giang Hoa (2) and Phu Long (1) and (2) on the western banks of the Thu Bon. Unwilling to stand up to the Marines who were supported by air and artillery, the VC fought a series of delaying actions and made good their escape to the west and north. The Marines sustained casualties of five dead and sixteen wounded while killing at least ten of the enemy. Most of the Marine casualties were a result of enemy

[57] See Chapter: The Worst Night

mines. With the completion of the survey, the 3d Battalion returned to its An Hoa base that evening."[58]

The descriptions of the events of August 20, 1966, as contained in the 3rd BT 9th MC Command Chronology and *U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM, AN EXPANDING WAR 1966* are at variance with my recollections of that day.

August 21, Aboard the LCM–860: The night before had been punctuated with small arms fire and mortar fire in both directions, and artillery fire from us to them. The action never rose to the level of a full-scale assault in either direction. Everything got quiet around Midnight.

It was not fully light when I woke up and, after taking care of life's necessities, followed the smell of the hobo coffee Chilton was brewing.[59] We were exchanging "Good Mornings" when we heard explosions off in the distance, East Northeast of our position. The crewman noted that they were a good way off. I agreed. Then something ripped through the air, almost directly above us, then another, another, and another. An artillery barrage had begun.

The projectiles were exploding in the peninsula formed by the West bank of the tributary and the North/West bank of the Thu Bon, no more than one klick away. We could see the shock waves ripple out from the point of impact, followed by fire and smoke. From the sounds coming from the East, we guessed that there were four artillery pieces firing.

I walked up to the bunker where the 1st Lt. was observing the effects of the barrage and asked if he knew what was happening. He told me it was the beginning of the assault on our neighbors whose estimated strength was about four hundred. They needed to be stopped before they tried to cross the tributary. He also told me that I should be prepared to provide transportation for the Marines to the battle site. That was a sobering thought. Newsreel clips of D-Day came into my mind.

Back at the boat, I briefed the crew. We all turned-to and got the boat ready. Meanwhile the barrage continued. We were set within an hour. Our

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[58] *U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM, AN EXPANDING WAR 1966* by Jack Shulimson, The Unites States Navy, Marine Corps Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1982, Page 208, 209.

[59] Hobo Coffee: Fill a large coffee can with ten scoops of coffee and a quart of water. Heat over any kind of fire until the water churns or bubbles, then drink. We used diesel fuel. Left an awful taste but, it was coffee.

tent was down, the cots were stowed, and the engines were warm. The coxswains and I discussed how we would approach the beach. Fortunately, we had already made one landing in that area and we knew what the bottom was like. We also discussed who would take the wheel if the driver was shot or otherwise disabled.

The cannon stopped and everything was quiet for a while. Then we heard jets coming in from the south; they were Air Force. We watched as they dropped bombs in the peninsula. The bombs were much larger than the 105-artillery shell and we could clearly see most of the explosions.

After the Air Force, the Marine Phantoms came in, flying lower than the Air Force jets. At almost treetop level, they dropped napalm. The first one landed close to the riverbank and we saw the bank engulfed in flames. Seconds later, a wave of hot air rushed by us, and we were surrounded by the smell of burning gasoline.[60] I wondered how anyone, or anything could live through this kind of pounding.

After the air assault, the ground troops opened fire along with a second barrage from the artillery. I looked around, but did not see any gathering troops, so it did not appear, at least yet, that we would be called upon. Still, I stayed mentally prepared for anything.

It was late morning when I realized I had not eaten anything yet, so I sought out some C-Rations and made another cup of coffee. Most of the firefight was over before I finished my meal. The rest of the day was quiet. Even so, we stayed alert all day and night. None of us had any illusion or delusion that we were not on the tip of the spear.

August 22nd, 1966 – The day passed quietly. The 1st Lt. was busy, and I did not want to bother him as he seemed to have his hands full. We remained ready. If attacked, we would get underway and try to stay in the area. If forced to, we would run for the ocean. We would rather take our chances there than abandon the boat and go on foot. The EOD team marched north with a company of Marines.

August 23rd, 1966 – The 1st Lt. said his information was that the enemy force in the peninsula had withdrawn, but he was not sure. “Stay alert” was his

[60] For any “Apocalypse Now” fans, napalm does smell different in the morning.

advice. In the afternoon, we noticed that the ground troops were moving north. By evening, it was just the security detail at the ferry crossing and us. The two Lt. Commanders left us early in the day, catching a ride north in a jeep. We are down to just the five of us.

August 24th, 1966**,** early morning – The explosion was so loud I thought a bomb had hit the boat. I had been sleeping on a cot in the well-deck, but the blast had slammed me to the steel deck. It was dawn and still not dark, not light. I scrambled to the gunnel and peered over the side. The Ontos was enveloped in a cloud of dust, and it appeared as if it had exploded. I heard our engines start and saw two of the crew manning the forward lines. We were ready to get underway. I made my way to the Con.

The Marines, including the Ontos, were directing their fire towards the peninsula. I discovered that the loud explosion that woke me up was the Ontos firing all six recoilless rifles at the same time. I assumed that (1) all the enemy had not withdrawn as reported and (2) they were coming after us. I watched the Marines to see what they were doing. If they started withdrawing and were heading towards us, we would get them onboard and withdraw to the center of the river. If they were moving away from us, we would close the ramp and withdraw to the center of the river.

The firing subsided within a short period of time, but nobody moved. The Marines stayed in their bunkers, and we stayed on our boat. Two of our crew were in the well-deck and three of us were in the Con. I looked at my watch. It was 0807H hours.

I announced to the two coxswains, “I just got engaged.”

The look they gave me was one that told me I had better explain what I just said. I did. I told them that my family was holding a surprise engagement party for my girlfriend back in the States and it was supposed to start at 8:00 p.m. Since we were 12 hours ahead of them, it was happening at that moment. It occurred to me that my fiancé’s engagement anniversary would be August 23rd and mine would be the 24th.

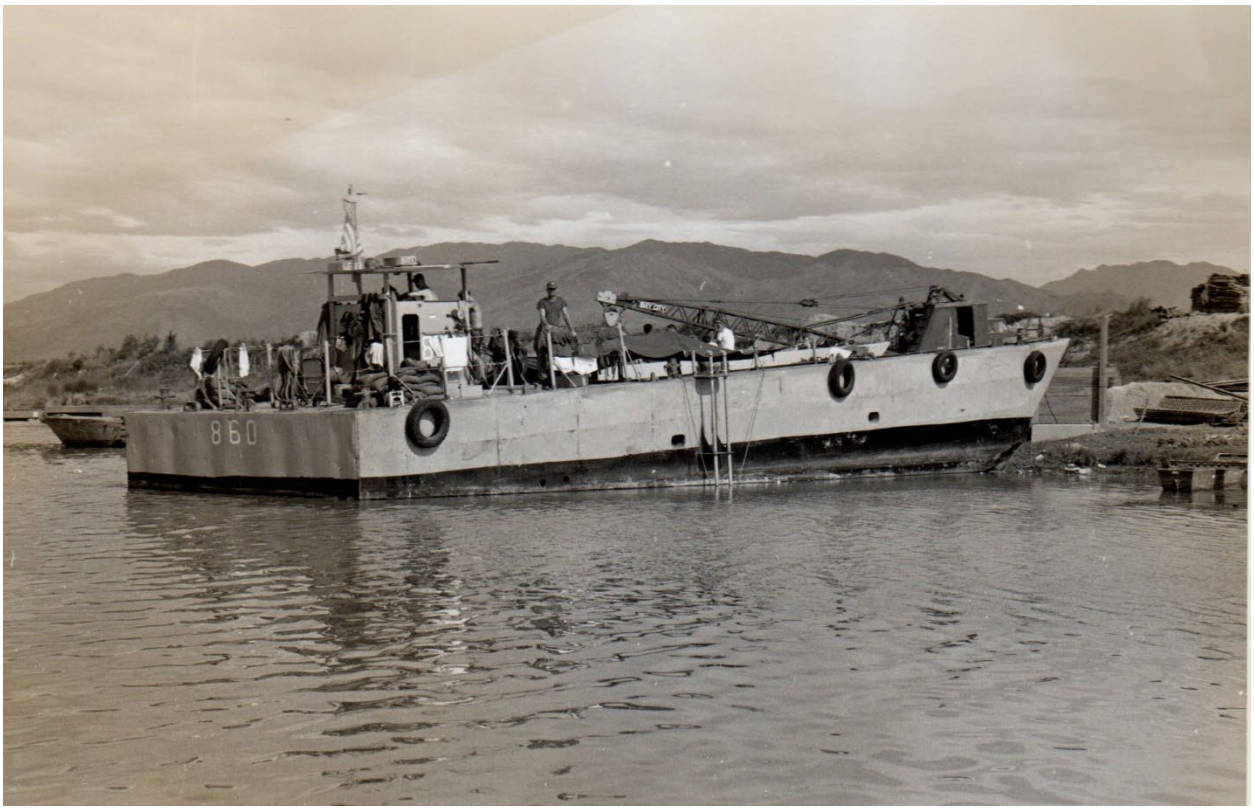

Figure 21 The LCM-8 860 beached at the north bank of the Thu Bon. The picture was probably taken on August 19, 1966. The author is sitting on the port gunwale, wearing a white T-shirt.

Around 0900H hours, the 1st Lt. came down to the boat and told us he had received an all-clear message concerning our enemy. The firefight this morning was from their rear guard. They were gone for now and probably would not be returning.

Around 1600H the crew decided it was time to open our beer, but before we did, the crew wanted to be sure we took care of the Marine security detail. I approached the 1st Lt. and asked if he would accept a few cases of beer to celebrate the withdrawal of the NVA force. He gladly accepted. He also told me that he had just received a message for me. I was to be ready to return to Danang tomorrow at 0900H hours. A jeep would take me to Hill 55.

Back at the boat, the crew had anticipated that we would celebrate tonight, and they had been cooling the beer in the river since noon. With the

Marines happy with their beer, we had an impromptu picnic on the stern-sheet. The crew toasted my engagement and to returning to Danang. We wished we knew how that would happen. I assured the crew I would be back with supplies and relief as soon as possible. The day ended with all of us watching the gunship light show and, of course, the grand finale with Puff.

August 25th, 1966 – At Hill 55, I was invited to meet the Battalion Commander. He was a Lt. Col. and he greeted me as if I was a friend of an old friend. I had the best cup of coffee I had had since leaving Danang and became acutely aware of how dirty I was and how badly I smelled (actually, your nose smells and your body stinks). We shot the breeze for a few minutes. Then he thanked me for bringing the boat up the river and shook my hand. I did not understand that “thanks for the boat” comment.

I took a seat in the back of a Six-by truck along with five or six Marines who were also traveling to Danang. As we got underway, I felt the cooling breeze created by our forward movement. I was not sure, but it felt like we were going into the wind which was drying the sweat that had accumulated in my clothes. I wondered if the breeze would blow the stench away. It did not.

My mind was overtaken by a feeling of weightlessness. I felt as if a huge burden had been lifted from my body. I was floating and I thought the breeze might blow me out of the truck. But there was no fear. I was amused by the thought that I might be able to float all the way back to Danang.

The truck passed some rice paddies, and I could see farmers working their crop. The women were in knee deep water performing tasks and I saw men, in groups of two, working an irrigation device that looked like a large cornucopia. They were rhythmically moving back and forth scooping water from a small canal into the paddies.

I realized I was looking at a scene that had not changed in hundreds of years. There was no sign of anything that would indicate we were in the Twentieth Century, or the Nineteenth for that matter. Slowly, the scene unfolded and eventually it disappeared, and the thick vegetation returned. It had been pleasant, peaceful. I never saw anything like that display again, nor did I ever feel so unbounded, free, and released from my body.

I stayed in my daze until the sounds of the traffic in Danang woke me up and brought me back to reality. I attributed my unusual state of mind to the removal of my constant responsibility for the life and limb of my crew and myself. Today, I am not sure that was the origin of my mental escape. I thought that Operation Swanee was over, but I would soon find out that it had just begun.

10. Chapter: Operation Swanee Continues

The six-by truck stopped in front of the White Elephant, and I jumped out. Never the most sure-footed creature on Earth, my landing was only partially successful and fell down and rolled over on the dirty pavement. One of the Marines jumped out of the truck and helped me up. I thanked him. He smiled and helped me brush off the dirt. He asked if I was hurt. “Just my pride,” I said.

At the Lighterage Office, I did not even make it in the door. My boss welcomed me back and congratulated me on a successful mission. He had me by the arm and was telling me I had to report to the new Ops XO immediately.

“New? What happened to the old one[61]?” I asked.

“He rotated out,” he said. “Our new boss is Commander Collins.”[62]

Seconds later I was standing in front of the new boss. When he looked up, he had a stunned look on his face. No wonder.

I had been wearing the clothes on my back for four days, this time and a couple days before now. They were not clean when I put them on. I had shaved that morning, but the dust from the road trip to Danang had covered my clothes and my exposed skin with a light film of dirt. In the short time it took me to fall off the truck and make it to the spot where I now stood, I had started to sweat and I could feel a droplet coursing down the right side of my face, carving a canal in the layer of dust. My body stunk and I looked like shit, and I knew it.

My, still loaded, AR-15 was slung over my right shoulder. The holster for my thirty-eight revolver was strapped around my waist and the weapon was in place. It was an illegal weapon. I hoped the new boss would not call me on it. What a great way to meet the new boss I thought. Turned out I was wrong on that count.

I had removed my cover and was standing at attention.

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[61] I have totally forgotten the old Ops Boss’s name. He was the one who assigned me to Operation Swanee.

[62] Commander Collins would eventually be promoted to Admiral. More on the Commander later.

“At ease Lieutenant,” he said. He reached out and shook my hand. “Have a seat.”

My direct boss, the Assistant Lighterage Officer, had not followed me into the XO’s office. It was just the two of us.

I sat down across front him but had no idea what to say. The Commander took care of that.

“You managed to impress a few Marines down there,” he said. Then he described the reports he had been receiving and the conversations he had had with the Marines. The bottom line was they liked the way we, the crew of the 860, handled ourselves in combat. We were a credit to the Navy. He said that one colonel did not think we had it in us to travel with the Marines, but we surprised him.

I sat and listened. I really did not have anything to say. I wanted to get out to the APL 27 and put together a resupply mission. I also wanted to know how we were going to bring the 860 back. But, the Commander had more to say. He had just given me the good news. Now came the bad.

“The Marines want your boat.,” he said. “They need it to be the ferry until the bridge is built.” He went on to tell me that it had been decided we would send a crew of four and one officer to run the boat. They would stay for two weeks and then rotate a new crew in to run the boat. Two officers would be assigned to be the Officer-in-Charge. One would work as the Assistant LCM-8 Division Officer in Danang while the other was the OIC of the 860. Every two weeks they would switch positions.

The longer the Commander talked the worse I felt. The two officers he was talking about were the two Ensigns who had been assigned to me about three weeks before I left. I had requested additional officers and senior petty officers to help manage my 250 men. I could already see that this assignment effectively took the Ensigns away from any management duties I had in mind. Theoretically, I was only losing one officer to the 860. In reality, they were both gone. I knew I was right back where I started management wise. Additionally, the 860 would probably require two to four days of my time each month. The Liberty Ferry was going to put an increased workload on the LCM-8 Division.

Now I understood what the Marine Battalion Commander meant when he said, “thanks for the boat.”

The Commander paused, probably because of the expression on my face. He asked if I had anything to say. I did, but I did not say anything. I shook my head.

He congratulated me, again, on a job-well-done and shook my hand again. Operation Swanee was far from over.

Later that evening, I had dinner with my boss, and we worked out the details of how the 860 would be manned, supplied and maintained.

August 26, NSA Danang: My Senior Petty Officers and I were up most of the night getting the resupply mission together. I thought that finding the volunteers to crew the boat would be the hardest part, but it turned out to be the easiest. Everyone wanted to do a tour on the 860. The diver we needed to access the damage of the bent shaft was the hardest, probably because the Officer-in-Charge of the divers was the former, now disgraced, Lighterage Division Officer. Thanks to the laundry on the APL 27, I had clean clothes to wear.

We left shortly after 0900H in a 6-by truck. We had been told the road would not be open till then. The Marines had to “sweep” the road for mines and booby-traps each morning. What we were not told, and would not learn till several trips later, was that we should not be traveling alone on that road. Charlie would often wait in ambush for solo travelers. Fortunately, we were never hit. It is true that God protects fools, drunks and sailors, especially when they qualify in more than one category.

At the Liberty Ferry site, we were enthusiastically greeted by Smitty, Quinn, Chilton and Richards. I briefed the crew on what had happened in Danang and asked them to get with their replacement counterpart and fill them in on the status of the boat and the river conditions. The diver finished his assessment by noon, and we all had a C-rations lunch and told stories about the trip up the river. After we finished eating and telling sea-stories, we started preparing to leave.

The Marine 1st Lieutenant came down to the boat and asked me about the operational status of the boat. I told him we would have no problem operating on one bank of engines. He told me to be prepared to transport

the first convoy in the morning. I decided to stay with the boat for another day. The Ensign I had brought to act as the OIC was very new to the LCM-8's, and to the Navy for that matter.

I told everyone about the first convoy and said that I was staying. Smitty immediately said he was also staying, then Quinn, Chilton and Richards added "me too." I agreed. We would make sure everyone, and everything was functioning properly.

August 27, Aboard the LCM-8 860: In the morning, everyone "turned to"[63], and we did a through "field day"[64] on the 860. She looked great when we finished, just in time to welcome the convoy from Danang. When the first truck had backed into our welldeck, we closed the ramp and backed away from the north bank. Someone got out of the passenger side of the truck and made his way back to the Conn. He was older than me, but I could not tell if he was an officer or senior non-commission officer. Did not really matter. He was obviously the individual in charge of the convoy. He stood on the deck and looked around, then he said, "How in the hell did you get this boat here?"

"We had a thousand Marines clearing the way.," I said.

"Well God bless you son. You got some balls on you." He said.

We talked about the trip up the river, and he filled me in on the convoy. All the resupply for the base at An Hoa had been done by helicopter till now. This would be a giant step forward in quality and quantity of supplies reaching the Marines. Before he left, he said "Keep up the good work and thanks."

This is probably a good place to address some variations in the recorded history of the Liberty Bridge Ferry. There is the Marine Corps version and my version. I will start with what the Marines wrote.

In *U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM: AN EXPANDING WAR 1966* by Jack Shulimson[65] page 208 the following picture and caption appear:

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[63] Got to work.
[64] Through cleaning or all surfaces and spaces.
[65] U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM: AN EXPANDING WAR 1966 by Jack Shulimson HISTORY AND MUSEUMS DIVISION, HEADQUARTERS, U.S. MARINE CORPS WASHINGTON, D.C. 1982 Page 208, 209.

Figure: Original caption: *Marine engineers work on the extension for Liberty Road to An Hoa. The troops are laying down abutments for a pontoon ferry which will link An Hoa to Da Nang.*

There is no further mention of the Liberty Ferry in that volume leaving the reader, and the historical record, with the impression that Marines handled this obstacle on their own. I disagree.

The arrival of the first convoy at An Hoa was a cause for celebration according to *U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM: AN EXPANDING WAR 1966* by Jack Shulimson. The following photograph and text appear on page 209:

Figure: Original Caption: *The first convoy using the completed Liberty Road rolls into An Hoa on 27 August 1966. The 6x6 Marine truck, carrying C-Rations, passes an honor guard and a reviewing stand during a ceremony marking the occasion.*

And that is what the U.S. Marine Corps had to say about the opening of the Liberty Road.

Now back to my version of the history of the Liberty Road Ferry and the LCM-8 860.

We handled the crossing quickly. It was a simple matter for the crew and the boat to on-load a truck, sometimes a truck and a jeep, cross the quarter mile of water between the north and south bank, off-load the vehicles and return for another trip. I was not watching the time, nor did I count the vehicles, but nobody complained about the speed of the operation. Later that afternoon, we, the original crew and I, caught a ride back to Danang in one of the returning trucks.

When I got back to the White Elephant, I was, once again, summoned to the Ops XO's office. He wanted an update on the 860. I filled him in and waited to be dismissed. He thought for a minute, then he told me that I had done outstanding work on Operation Swanee. Now he wanted me to concentrate on the LCM-8's and the men in Danang. I was not to spend time down at the river unless it was absolutely necessary. I did an "Aye Aye Sir," and he dismissed me.

Because of that order, my future trips to the Liberty Ferry were limited to once a month. However, I got detailed reports from the men and the Ensigns who acted as OIC of the boat. I got the impression that everyone preferred (but did not necessarily enjoy) being away from Danang. There were many times I wanted to go there and hide. That is probably why I was ordered not to do so.

In 1971, Commander Frank C. Collins, Jr, our Ops XO would author an article titled *Maritime Support of the Campaign in I Corps*. He was also the officer I reported to when I returned to Danang from the 860. The article was published in the May 1971 issue of *The Naval Institute Proceedings*. The article covered several topics and events in the five-year history of the Naval Support Activity, Danang. The Commander included the LCM-8 860 in the article, It is the only historical reference to She received. The article stated:

"A lesser known, but nevertheless important, operation by NSA was the operation of the Liberty Road Ferry. This consisted of an LCM-8, which operated as a ferry across the Song Thu Bon to the south of Da Nang

keeping the important Da Nang to An Hoa overland Line of Communication (LOC) open. Getting the LCM-8-860 up the shallow Song Thu Bon from the South China Sea in mid-1966 was a hazardous and exciting transit protected by the Marines in the area. In February 1967, the Seabees completed a bridge and the ferry was no longer needed."[66]

Had I been available to review the article, I would have advised the following changes. (1.) The trip up the river had nothing to do with the ferry. We just happen to be at the right place at the right time. (2. The Seabees began work on the Liberty Bridge in February 1967. It would not be functional until 1969! During that three-year period, the LCM-8 860 was the only way across the river. (3.) I would recommend much stronger words to describe Operation Swanee other than "hazardous and exciting."

At this point, to fully understand the role and importance of Operation Swanee and the LCM-8 860, I must go into the history of the Liberty Bridge, its construction, and its failures.

[66] *Maritime Support of the Campaign in I Corps*. *The Naval Institute Proceedings* May 1971 Vol. 97/5/819 page 156-179

11. Chapter: The Ghost Boat and The Myth of the Liberty Bridge

Author's Note on Respect for the Seabees: Before I start this section, I must aver my respect for the Seabees. I have always had the highest regard for men and women who can march into combat with a job to do other than defeat the enemy. Their official motto is "We build, we fight." while unofficially they are the "Can do" crew. They bring skills, determination, and initiative to the battlefield. I do not want anything written here to be seen as a denigration of those brave souls, many of whom gave all in defense of American and freedom in Vietnam.

Now that I have cleared that point, the history of the Liberty Bridge is a history of failure and misfortune. Sadly, it does not reflect well on the service.

Liberty Road 1966: Any description of the Liberty Bridge that did not include Arizona Territory and the Liberty Road would be severely lacking in content. Earlier in this volume, I said we entered that zone the morning we came under a mortar attack. Several Marines disagree with my assessment of where Az T started and ended. According to veterans familiar with the area, Arizona Territory starts west of Liberty Road when you cross the Thu Bon River or the Quang Hue Tributary. Others say it is the area west of the Thu Bon, west of the Quang Hue and South of the Vu Gia (see map below).

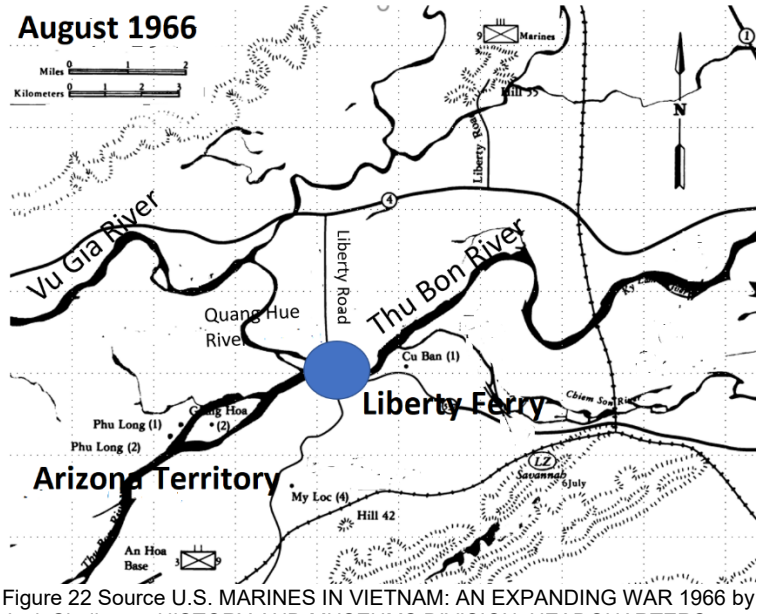

Figure 22 Source U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM: AN EXPANDING WAR 1966 by Jack Shulimson HISTORY AND MUSEUMS DIVISION, HEADQUARTERS, U.S. MARINE CORPS. WASHINGTON, D.C. 1982 Page 203 as modified by the author.

Once a Marine crossed to the south bank of the Thu Bon, he was in a "Free Fire Zone," which means he does not need permission to fire at any enemy. This area was the only such zone in Quang Nam Province. I have heard veterans refer to this area as a "nightmarish hell.

The Liberty Road was a strategic imperative for the Marines. Its construction

continued at a fast pace during the month of July because it would be the major supply route for the Marine Base at An Hoa and the developing industrial complex in that area.

“On 4 July (1966), the 3d Engineer Battalion completed the first leg of a road , appropriately named " Liberty Road, which ran from the 9th Marines CP on Hill 55 south to Route 4 , a distance of roughly 3,500 meters.” [67]

Every available resource was being employed which included the Seabees, civilian construction crews and the Marine Engineers.

“The continuation of (Operation) Macon did not disrupt the plans for the 3rd Battalion, 9th Marines. The battalion had intended to keep its command post at the An Hoa airstrip and conduct clearing operations to support the engineers who had started the extension of Liberty Road beyond the Thu Bon. In fact, at this time, the engineers were working on two extensions of the road, one leading south from Route 4 to the Thu Bon, while the other led north from An Hoa to the river.” [68]

By August 18, 1966, the Liberty Road was complete, except for an efficient ferry across the Thu Bon River.

Pick any history book on the United States Marine Corps in Vietnam and there is a high probability there will be more than just a passing reference to the Liberty Bridge. You will find accolades something like this:

“One of the outstanding Seabee jobs was to build the 2,000-foot Liberty Bridge at An Hoa, twenty-one miles southwest of Da Nang across the Thu Bon River. The order was to build a 2,000-foot timber bridge that would carry the biggest vehicles, but it would also have to be tall enough, and strong enough, to withstand the 25-foot rise in the river during the rainy winter monsoon. And the area was known to be a Viet Cong stronghold.”[69]

The article, which is part of a of a 466-page book, mentions the Liberty Bridge eight times. It also describes the arduous conditions and long hours

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[67] Source U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM: AN EXPANDING WAR 1966 by Jack Shulimson HISTORY AND MUSEUMS DIVISION, HEADQUARTERS, U.S. MARINE CORPS. WASHINGTON, D.C. 1982 Page 201.

[68] Source U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM: AN EXPANDING WAR 1966 by Jack Shulimson HISTORY AND MUSEUMS DIVISION, HEADQUARTERS, U.S. MARINE CORPS. WASHINGTON, D.C. 1982 Page 207.

[69] Southeast Asia: Building the Bases: The History of Construction in Southeast Asia by Richard Tregaskis, Page 298-9.

the construction team labored. It is all true, by the way, and I can personally testify to that fact.
Another example comes from the official USMC history: “The Seabees, however, claimed credit for the largest single bridge building feat on Liberty Road. "NMCB-4 (Navy Mobile Construction Battalion), commanded by Commander Richard M. Fluss, CEC, built the 2,040-foot-long "Liberty Bridge" across the Thu Bon River. The bridge rested on more than 800 80-foot-long piles, each one driven approximately forty feet into the riverbed. The battalion used more than five tons of 10-inch nails and 5,000 24-inch bolts in its construction. It completed the job in less than five months, from 3 April to 2 September. Enemy sappers attacked the bridge during the early morning hours of 6 September and knocked out two spans. A scant 32 hours later, the Seabees had completed repairs and traffic moved once more on "Liberty Road." [70]
Again, all true, and well-deserved praise for the Seabees. In addition to the rigors of living and working without the comforts of modern life, the sailors were receiving, sometimes daily, harassing fire and attack. On any given day, they could expect to have their work interrupted by the sounds of small arms fire, mortars and/or detonating boobytraps.

I will add that all of the difficulties and hardships experienced by the Seabees were equally imposed upon the crews of the LCM-8 860.

The actual work on the bridge did not start until February 13, 1967, when men from NMCB-4 started to survey the site. The survey work was completed on February 23, 1966. On April 3, 1967, a construction crew of twenty-two men began work. Richard Tregaskis provided a seldom-seen, colorful and human description of one of the men of NMCB-4 in his “*Southeast Asia: Building the Bases:*
“In charge of the project was CPO John P. Albright of NMCB-4, with a detail that was to vary between 25 and 50 men. The Chief, a character well known amongst Seabees of the Fourth Battalion, was in his third war as a Seabee. He was a wiry, bespectacled man still possessed of the same drive which had made the Seabees famous 25 years earlier. Not only was he a veteran of two wars before this one, but besides, he had been one of

[70]U.S Marines in Vietnam Fighting the North Vietnamese 1967, Major Gary L . Telfer, USMC, Lieutenant Colonel Lane Rogers, USMC, V. Keith Fleming, Jr; HISTORY AND MUSEUMS DIVISION, HEADQUARTERS, U .S . MARINE CORPS, WASHINGTON, D.C.1984, Page 236, 238.

the first volunteers for the Seabees in March of 1942 when they were founded. He had been a carpenter before that war."
"The An Hoa area was an important economic district to the Vietnamese. It produced phosphate, coal, cement and glass. All were needed for the factories and businesses of Da Nang, South Vietnam's second largest city, and the surrounding territory. The only way for truck traffic to get to Da Nang was to use the small ferry boat. Military convoys also had to travel by this single link across the Thu Bon River. Chief Albright said: "There were people who lived on this side who had never been across the river to An Hoa. And there were people over there who had never been down the road towards Da Nang. Their horizons, when they stood down by the river, were the banks in front and behind them, and the bends in the stream to their right and left. But now these same Vietnamese are able to stand on the Liberty Bridge, thirty-five feet above the water. These simple villagers' horizons now stretch far beyond An Hoa to the west and Da Nang to the north."[71]

The small ferry boat he was referring to was the LCM-8 860 as no other ferry was operating on the Thu Bon River.

Tregaskis goes on to say "Albright's detachment from NMCB-4 finished the bridge on schedule and it rapidly was carrying a capacity load of traffic. It had many vicissitudes-washed out by floods and burned out sometimes by Viet Cong and sometimes by accident-but it remained a monument to the persistence of Albright and his Seabees."[72]

I cannot disagree with any of the plaudits and accolades lavished upon the men who built the bridge. Everything I have cited is true. However, my research indicates that the first Liberty Bridge was only open to traffic for 35 days in 1967! Bridge traffic on that bridge never resumed. Additionally, the second Liberty Bridge did not open until March 29, 1969! This information begs the question: How did the supplies get across the Thu Bon until the second bridge was constructed?

That question will be answered later. Now, back to the Liberty Bridge construction timeline.

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[71] Southeast Asia: Building the Bases, The History of Construction in Southeast Asia; Richard Tregaskis, Page 299.
[72] Ibid. Page 302

On June 13, the construction crew was increased to forty-seven men and additional men were added on July 15. The total size of the crew is not given, but it was probably around sixty men. The bridge was being constructed from both the north and south banks of the river. On August 24, coincidently one year after the LCM-8 860 was assigned as the Liberty Ferry, the two sections were joined.

On September 2, the Liberty Bridge was opened for traffic. The event was described in one history book as follows:

“The Seabees, however, claimed credit for the largest single bridge building feat on "Liberty Road." NMCB-4, commanded by Commander Richard M. Fluss, CEC, built the 2,040-foot-long "Liberty Bridge" across the Thu Bon River. The bridge rested on more than 800 80-foot-long piles, each one driven approximately forty feet into the riverbed. The battalion used more than five tons of 10-inch nails and 5,000 24-inch bolts in its construction. It completed the job in less than five months, from 3 April to 2 September . Enemy sappers attacked the bridge during the early morning hours of 6 September and knocked out two spans. A scant 32 hours later, the Seabees had completed repairs and traffic moved once more on "Liberty Road."[73]

A 378-foot access bridge on the north bank was completed on September 15. That made the entire span over 2418 feet long, 222 feet short of one-half mile. At that time, it was the only functioning bridge across the Thu Bon River.

The official dedication ceremony was held four days later. Lieutenant General Lam, Army of the Republic of Vietnam and the Commanding General of I Corps, the guests of honor, drove the final spike. Also in attendance was Lieutenant General Cushman, Commanding General, III Marine Amphibious Force, and Rear Admiral Bartlett, Commander THIRD Naval Construction Brigade.

However, the band had not finished playing. On September 28, Rear Admiral Bartlett brought Rear Admiral Miller, Chief of Navy Information to

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[73] U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM: FIGHTING THE NORTH VIETNAMESE 1967, Major Gary L. Telfer, USMC, Lieutenant Colonel Lane Rogers, USMC And V. Keith Fleming, Jr., HISTORY AND MUSEUMS DIVISION HEADQUARTERS, U.S. MARINE CORPS, WASHINGTON, D.C. 1984, Pages 236, 238.

FIGURE 26
The 2,040' Liberty Bridge is shown here along with the smaller 378' approach bridge and access roads.

Figure 23The original caption is reproduced under the picture. Source U.S. Naval Mobile Construction Battalion Four, Danang, RVN Deployment Completion Report, Feb. 67 - Sept. 67, B page 132.

tour the bridge. Shortly after their visit, a major U.S broadcasting agencies gave the Liberty Bridge significant film coverage. Additional major coverage was delivered by Admiral John J. Hyland Jr., Commander in Chief Pacific Fleet, the highest-ranking Navy officer in the Pacific. Before NMCB 4 departed Vietnam at the end of September, Lieutenant General Cushman, Commanding General III MAF, sent the following message to them:

"It is with deep regret that I note your impending departure from Vietnam. The accomplishments of MCB FOUR during this deployment have continued the proud traditions of previous Seabee Battalions in proving that Seabees 's CAN DO.' The tasks of III MAF and every Marine in the I Corps tactical zone have been made easier through your fine support. Construction of the Liberty Bridge, maintenance of Route 1 despite floods and enemy attacks, construction support at Con Thien, and construction of ammunition storage points, are of but a few of the many testimonials to your determination, diligence and fine spirit while in Vietnam. On your journey homeward you may rest assured that you will bear with you not only my best wishes and goodwill, but also that of the thousands of Marines who have benefited from your fine efforts. Bon voyage. LT GEN CUSHMAN"!

To the best of my knowledge, the men of the LCM-8 860, who provided ferry service for more than a year on that vital supply line, received no recognition whatsoever.

All these plaudits were well deserved……at the time. On Octobers 8, 1967, a flood, caused by heavy rains during the Monsoon season, carried away a 720-foot section of the Liberty Bridge.

The LCM-8 860 was back in service as the Liberty Road Ferry.

The official reasons for the bridge collapse were:

“a) The failure was due primarily to the buildup of water-borne debris on the upstream side of the bridge.

b) The longitudinal X-bracing in alternate spans, the catwalk beneath the bridge deck, and remnants of a former upstream mine barrier were the major elements which caused the debris to accumulate.

c) the effect of scour was concluded to be minimal. (As further investigation was accomplished and as construction proceeded, however, scour was conceded to have played a much greater role in the bridge failure than previously estimated).”[74]

The Liberty Bridge had been open for 37 days, minus 2 days to repair damage from the VC attack.

With NMCB 4 back in the United States, NMCB 9 took over the job of repairing the bridge. A 15-man detail began work on October 15, 1967. Before work on the main span could begin, the 378-foot approach bridge had to be repaired. The heavy rains had destabilized the southern abutment, and the soft backfill caused some of the spans to fail. The approach bridge had to be repaired before work on the main span could begin. Unfortunately, heavy equipment could not pass over the approach bridge until repairs were complete. This repair work fit conveniently into the reconstruction schedule, as the main span work could not be completed until additional 75 and 90-foot piles were received from the States. The piles would take three months to arrive.

[74] U.S. Navy Seabees-The Vietnam Years-1968 Terry Lukanic Seller google LLC Published on Feb 15, 2017, page 174

Figure 24 Approach Bridge Fire: Source USMC Vietnam Tankers Association Newsletter, October November December 2016

Unfortunately, work on the approach bridge did not go smoothly. On November 8, 1967, a workman, using an oxyacetylene torch, accidentally set the bridge on fire. Attempts to extinguish the fire went for naught, and the entire span was destroyed by fire. Re-reconstruction of the approach bridge was completed on January 15, 1968.

The Tet Offensive of 1968 disrupted reconstruction work for several weeks. The Viet Cong attacked the southern part of the span on February 23. They burnt a large supply of timbers that were to be used for the bridge and set fire to several sections. The fires on the bridge did little damage. Work on the southern section did not resume until March 11.

Work was temporarily suspended in mid-April, due to a lack of 75-foot piles. At that time, the original 720-foot gap between the northern and southern sections had been closed to just 340-feet. The needed piles arrived in Vietnam on May 23 or 24. However, on May 25, a fire of unknown origin, but not due to enemy action, destroyed the entire 1200-foot southern section. The reconstruction of the Liberty Bridge was suspended indefinitely. The NMCB 9 Deployment Completion Report said that the most valuable result of the Liberty Bridge fiasco was of the "lessons learned."[75]

At this point, the original Liberty Bridge was abandoned. After two years of construction work, the Bridge had been open for a total of 35 days. During that two-year period, the LCM-8 860 provided most of the transportation across the Thu Bon River. Until now, She and the men who risked their lives without the security of mind of combat training have never received any recognition for their efforts.

Liberty Bridge II: The need for a bridge across the Thu Bon River was just as great in 1968 as it had been when the LCM-8 860 arrived at the ferry

[75] U.S. Navy Seabees-The Vietnam Years-1968 Terry Lukanic Seller google LLC Published on Feb 15, 2017, page 174.

crossing two years earlier. NMCB 3 took over the job of constructing the redo. It was a completely new bridge, located about one hundred yards upriver from the original. It was less than half as long as its predecessor, 825-feet by one account, 660-feet by another.

I found very little information about this bridge. Either the information does not exist, or I am not a very good researcher. Only two entries appear in the NMCB 3 Deployment Completion Report:

Under the heading “b. Details,” “(5) Detail Victor, composed of one officer and 29 enlisted personnel, was employed at Liberty Bridge, Thu Bon River, constructing a 660-foot combination timber pile and concrete beam bridge across the Thu Bon River.”

And “ 29 March 1969: NMCB THREE’s Detail Victor completed the last span of the new Liberty Bridge making the bridge passable to vehicular traffic.”[76]

And, at last, the Liberty Bridge was open. One historian summed it up as follows:

“There was a visible sign of better times in Quang Nam province when, on 30 March 1969 , the 825-foot Seabee-constructed Liberty Bridge was opened across the Thu Bon river just south of Dai Loc . The bridge replaced a 60-ton pontoon ferry which the 1st Bridge Company had been operating since October 1967 when the monsoon flood had washed away an earlier bridge. The new bridge, designed to be monsoon-proof (but lacking sufficient length during periods of high water), completed a direct highway link between Da Nang and An Hoa.”[77]
Another historical reference to the Liberty Bridge noted that “The October rains came to a climax with Typhoon Kate which caused Quang Nam to have its worst floods since 1964. From the Cau Do River south to Baldy and as far west as Thuong Duc was almost an uninterrupted lake. Most of Routes 1 and 4 were under three feet or more of water. The wooden-piling "London Bridge" just north of Dai Loc on Route 540 was badly damaged.

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[76] U.S. Naval Mobile Construction Battalion Three Completion Report, Da Nang RVN, July 1968 - March 1969 (Note: Pages not numbered, citation is on the next to the last page).

[77] Marine Corps Operations in Vietnam, 1968 May 1970, Proceedings Vol. 96/5/807, By Edwin H. Simmons, Brigadier General, U. S. Marine Corps, Page 137 Second Edition HISTORY AND MUSEUMS DIVISION. HEADQUARTERS, U. S. MARINE CORPS, WASHINGTON, D .C .1985

Liberty Bridge proved virtually monsoon-proof, but there was as much as twenty-five feet of water over its decking."[78]
One final entry about Liberty Bridge was found. In the spring of 1970, during a planning session for the withdrawal of the Marine units at An Hoa, Colonel Floyd H. Waldrop, Assistant Chief of Staff, G-3, 1st Marine Division explained the need to move quickly said "We have made a point to strive to get rid of An Hoa prior to the [fall monsoon] rains, because . . . once the monsoons start and Liberty Bridge gets about nine feet under water, nothing moves to An Hoa* except by air until the rains subside, which could be several months. So we are trying to turn over An Hoa and get our forces—at least all of the non-helicopter-transportable forces—north of the river . . . prior to the monsoon."[79]

Conclusion: Other than 37 days during September and October 1967, Liberty Bridge (I) was never a link across the Thu Bon River between the north and south sections of the Liberty Road. That feat was accomplished with the completion of Liberty Bridge (II) on March 29, 1969. During the time period between August 27, 1966, the date the Marines say the Liberty Road opened,[80] and March 29, 1969, the date Liberty Bridge II opened, transportation across the Thu Bon River was accomplished by ferry vessels. A significant portion of that time, the ferry vessel was the LCM-8 860. The men who crewed Her have never received any recognition for their efforts. Keep in mind there were men who served in a combat area without combat training. Even when there was photographic evidence that She was there, journalists and historians ignored Her existence. She was truly the Ghost Boat of the Liberty Road. Sacrifice without remembrance is wasted (Anonymous).

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[78] The Marines In Vietnam 1954-1973 An Anthology and Annotated Bibliography, Marine Corps Operations in Vietnam, 1969-1972 by Brigadier General Edwin H. Simmons, U.S. Marine Corps (Retired), Page 148.

[79] U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM VIETNAMIZATION AND REDEPLOYMENT 1970-1971 by Graham A. Cosmas and Lieutenant Colonel Terrence P. Murray, USMC Edited by Major William R . Melton, USMC and Jack Shulimson, HISTORY AND MUSEUMS DIVISION HEADQUARTERS, U.S. MARINE CORPS WASHINGTON, D.C. 1986, Page 60.

[80] Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War, 1966 by Jack Shulimson, United States Marine Corps. History and Museums Division, 1982, Page 209

12. Chapter: The LCM-8 860, the Ghost Boat on the Thu Bon River

I can state, with 100 % confidence, that the LCM-8 860 was the Liberty Ferry from August 18, 1966, until March 12, 1967, because I was in charge of Her during that time period. I can state, with 99% confidence, the LCM-8 860 continued that duty until some time in 1968. Somewhere between 1968 and 1969, the LCM-8 860 disappeared. No further evidence, photographic, eyewitness or printed, has been found. However, it appears that, just as they did with Operation Swanee, the historians could not see Her, even when She was in plain sight.

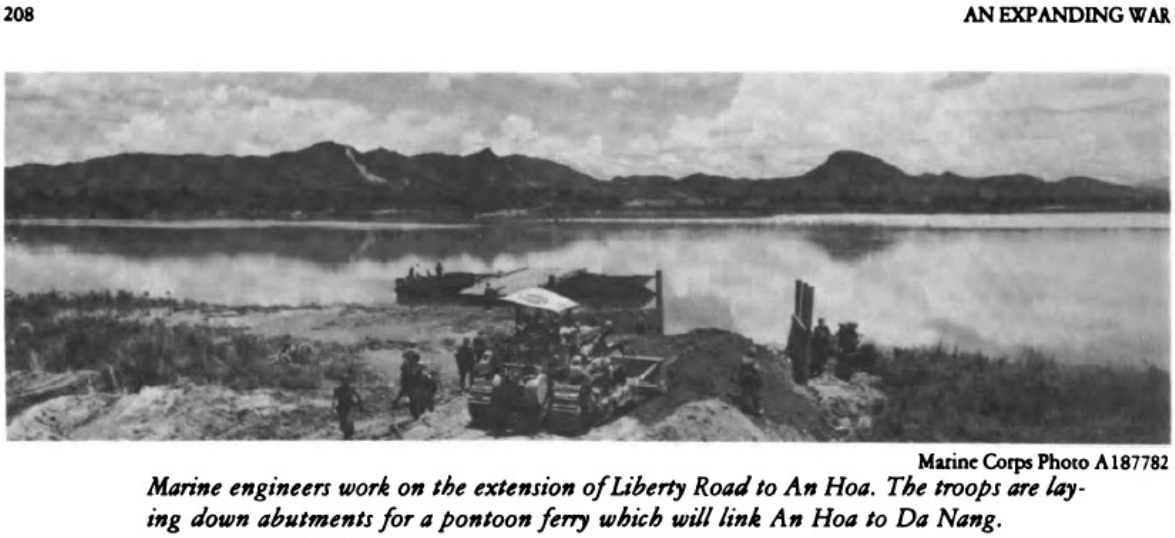

Figure 25 The original caption states that the "pontoon ferry" will be the link that finishes the An Hoa to Da Nang road. However, the pontoon ferry was scrapped in favor of the LCM-8 860.

In Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War, 1966 by Jack Shulimson, United States Marine Corps. History and Museums Division, 1982, page 208, states “a pontoon ferry… will link An Hoa to Da Nang.” However, the pontoon ferry was unstable with heavy loads, and the Marines opted to use the 860 which was in place, the right place at the right time, because of Operation Swanee.

In the same volume, the author included a picture of the first convoy of supply trucks arriving at the An Hoa base. Notice that the date is August 27, 1966, three days after Naval Support Activity assigned the 860 to ferry duty.

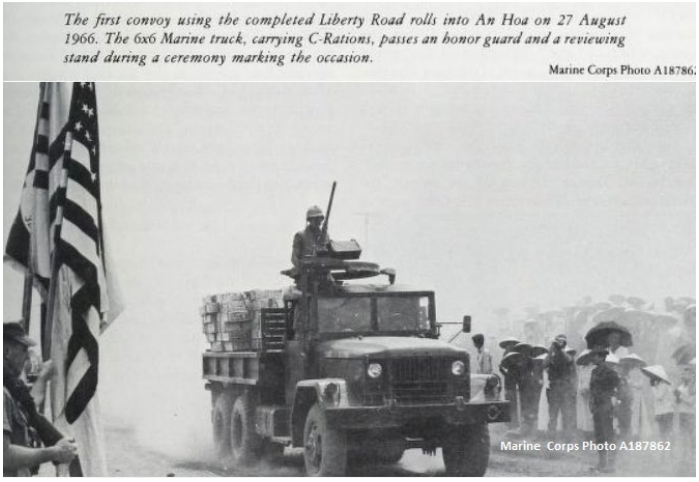

Figure 26 The first convoy of supply arrives at the An Hoa base on August 27, 1966. I was on the LCM-8 860 that day and oversaw the on-load, off-load of the trucks.

I doubt that anyone can explain why She, the LCM-8 860, was omitted from the historian's notice.

Even when she was in plain sight, the historians ignored her. In MOBILITY, SUPPORT ENDURANCE by Hooper[81], the author, referring to completed SeaBee construction projects, wrote "A bridge 2,400 feet long, the Liberty bridge, was con- structed twenty miles south of Danang. Two spans of this bridge, the longest ever built by Seabees, were dropped by the Viet Cong on 6 September 1967. It was put back in operation in thirty-two hours." The author included the following picture with the 860 in plain sight (yes, I repeated that phrase) and failed to mention Her. He also forgot to mention the Liberty Bridge would close within a few short weeks, never to open again.

[81] MOBILITY, SUPPORT ENDURANCE, A Story of Naval Operational Logistics in the Vietnam War 1965-1968 by VICE ADMIRAL EDWIN BICKFORD HOOPER, USN (Retired), NAVAL HISTORY DIVISION, DEPARTMENT OF THE NAVY, WASHINGTON, D.C., 1972 page 188.

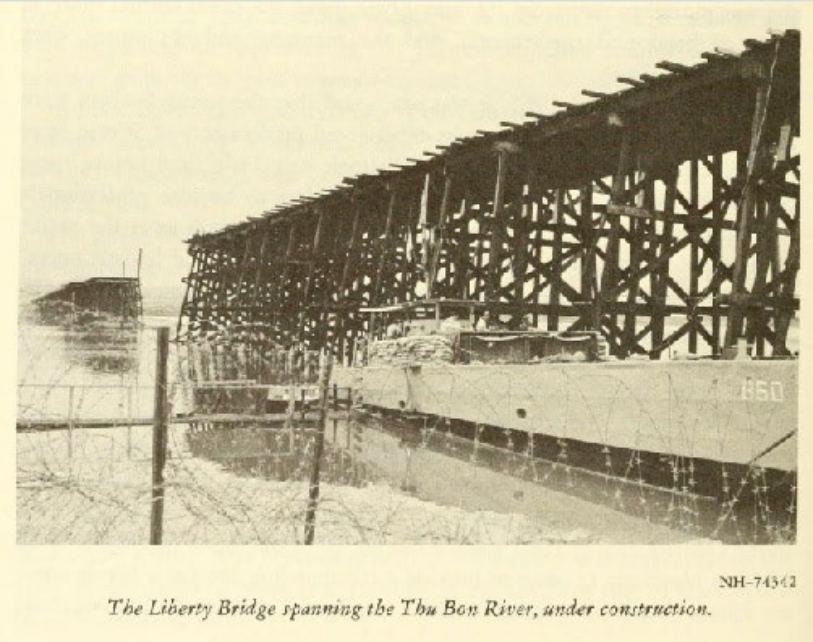

Figure 27 The 860 in "plain Sight" still fails to get an historical note. The original caption is shown.

A date does not accompany the picture in the NHHC files, however it tells me several things about when it may have been taken. Liberty Bridge is not "under construction." It is under re-construction. The absence of any equipment on the bridge indicates that the picture was taken after almost half of the bridge was carried away by Monsoon rains. Additionally, we can see both the north and south sections. This places it somewhere between when the spans fell, October 8, 1967, and when the south section of the bridge was completely destroyed by fire, May 25, 1968. This is the latest picture I can find of the 860 at the Bridge. Later pictures show a pontoon ferry in use.

Operation Swanee served the Marines well, for it placed the LCM-8 860 at the ferry location, ready to operate. She was manned by sailors who willingly placed themselves in Harm's Way. They had the skills to operate Her and keep her running. But they did so without the training and skills necessary to protect life and limb. Their sacrifices were made, and their work exemplified, the finest traditions of the United States Navy. Although most are nameless, they have earned their

place in History.

Figure 28 The LCM-8 860 at the Liberty Road Ferry site, August 19, 1966.

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