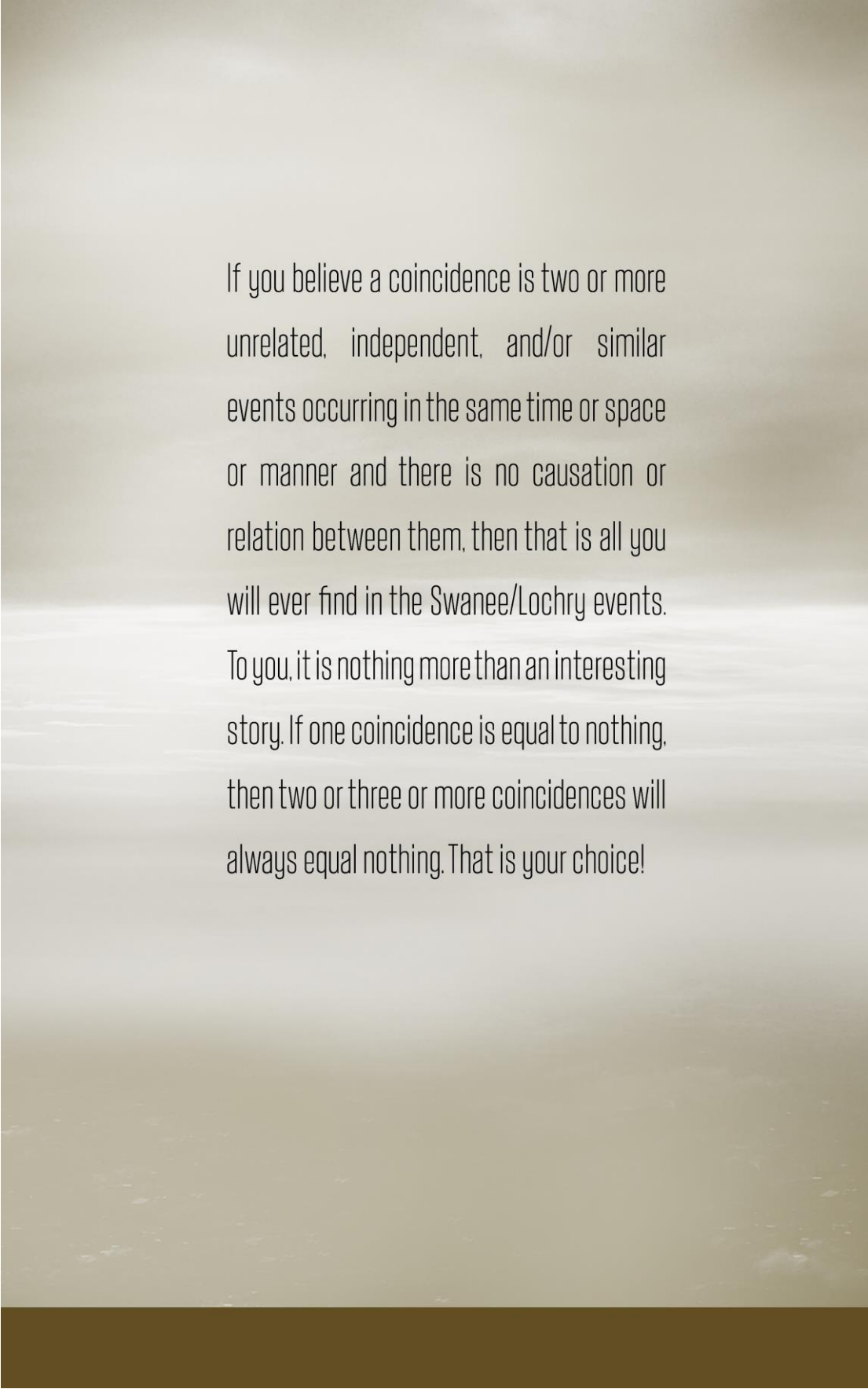


PARALLEL STREAMS

by Sid Breman



A true story of two men, connected by blood and experience, separated by 200 years.



If you believe a coincidence is two or more unrelated, independent, and/or similar events occurring in the same time or space or manner and there is no causation or relation between them, then that is all you will ever find in the Swanee/Lochry events. To you, it is nothing more than an interesting story. If one coincidence is equal to nothing, then two or three or more coincidences will always equal nothing. That is your choice!

Parallel Streams

**The true story of two men
connected by blood and experience; separated by 200 years.**

Sid Breman

Accelerate Exceed, Delray Beach, FL 2020



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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



Sid Breman served for 46 months in the United States Navy from August, 1964 until, 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 53 years. They live in Delray Beach, Fl. Sid and Pat met on the playground at Leechburg Elementary School in Leechburg, Pa., probably in 1948. Parallel Streams is his first publication.

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Preface

The first draft of the events surrounding Operation Swanee was written from memory. I had not kept a journal or any other documentation except for a handful of undated pictures given to me by the combat photographer assigned to our expedition. Fortunately, experiences like Operation Swanee are not easily forgotten and I was able to record a reasonably accurate account. However, I discovered that some of my dates were off for the period from August 13, 1966 through August 23, 1966. I do, however, have a clear memory of August 24, 1966 and August 25, 1966.

I became acutely aware that without documentation, Operation Swanee was nothing more than a fairy tale, artfully crafted to intersect with the events and actions of Lochry's Expedition. It was about as believable as any story that starts "Once upon a time".

I had little hope of finding any documentation to support my telling of the events that transpired between August 13, 1966 and August 25, 1966, but having finally committed my memories to recorded words, I wasn't going to give up without a good effort. I first turned to my sea chest to dig through old papers, some of which had not been touched for fifty years. What I found there gave a start on the independent confirmation of my participation in Operation Swanee. Next, I moved to the internet.

Like a well digger, expecting to dig very deep before getting wet, I raised my pick and bang! It only took one Google search to release a flood of Navy and Marine Corps records that detail, sometime down to the minute, the events of Operation Swanee. I had no idea that the Navy and Marines kept such detailed reports of daily Marine activity. The "Naval Forces Vietnam Monthly Summary" for August and September, 1966, the "Command Chronology"¹ for each USMC battalion that participated in Operation Swanee for August, 1966 and other official Marine reports and messages gave me the documentation and confirmation I needed to assert the authenticity of this story. At times, the reader may feel that the number of references is "over kill". That is intentional. Where I have interjected conversations, they are to the best of my recollections and may not be what was actually said. I followed a similar path with The Lochry Expedition. Rather than rewrite the available details, I have included sections from other works to avoid injecting my interpretation of those events.

I have kept Operation Swanee aligned with my memory because that is my memory, and no amount of documentation can alter it. Footnotes have been added where the independent documentation agrees with, and where it differs from, my memory. My version of Operation Swanee is no longer a fairy tale.

1. Hypothetically Speaking

Have you ever pondered what it would be like to receive a message from a person who has been dead for hundreds of years? No? Consider the following hypothetical story: One day, in your youth, you go to the mailbox and find a letter postmarked 200 years ago and it is addressed to you. Upon opening, you see that the ink is faded and many of the words are illegible, but you can discern the words “danger”, “be careful” and “fire”. One of your friends must be attempting to play a sick joke on you, and you throw the letter in the trash and forget about it. At least you think you forget about it. It does not stay forgotten for long, rather it sticks in your brain, in that zone somewhere between conscious and subconscious: “danger”, “be careful”, “fire”.

Without fully realizing the letter had any influence on your thinking, you become more aware of fire hazards in your surroundings. You check the expiration dates on fire extinguishers, look for fire exits in public buildings, examine electrical cords for wear, hold a fire drill for your family (yea, they really liked that) and other little things that can prevent fires and injury from them. Sometimes you feel like Smokey The Bear, so you keep your misgivings and fears to yourself. But you never mention the letter, and you remain vigilant, for years.

Early one morning, you wake up to the smell of smoke. Quickly you call 911 and then wake your family. Because of your vigilance, your home is equipped with several fire extinguishers. You take the one from under the sink in the kitchen and start searching the house for the source of the fire.

Smoke is pouring into the house from around the door to the garage. You open it and your car is ablaze. You begin using the extinguisher. When it is empty, you grab the one next to the garage door. The fire is under control before the firemen arrive. Your preparation saved your life and the lives of your family, not to mention your home and belongings. Now the 200-year-old letter comes screaming back to your conscience mind; “danger”, “be careful”, “fire”. Who sent that letter? You will probably never know.

Decades pass and you occasionally think about the letter. It must have been a goofy piece of junk mail, perhaps an advertisement for some fire protection products that got wet in transit, and the date and most of the words got smeared and blurry. It was just a very weird coincidence. Nothing more.

The car is replaced, the garage repaired, and the smell of smoke has dissipated. Unrelated to the fire, you discover some old family pictures and your interest in genealogy begins. You start searching your family history. The search for ancestors becomes a part-time hobby and you contact distant relatives who point you towards several unknown ancestors. One relative tells you about an ancestor who died in a fire 200 years ago.

Your research takes you to an article in a history book that describes the event. Your ancestor was awakened in the early morning hours by the smell of smoke that was traced to a barn attached to his house. He perished in the fire. Here comes the shocker. He lived just fifteen

miles from where you live, and the fire happened on the same day of the year as your house fire!

What are you now thinking about that letter you received all those years ago? Do you still think it was just a weird coincidence?

The story above is total fiction, a concoction of my mind and nothing more. You probably figured that out early in the story when you read the part about the letter from 200 years ago. A "letter from a dead person" is a plot right out of a low budget, sci-fi movie about time travel. So, let me ask you this. Would the story be any more believable if I took the "letter" part out of the story and replaced it with, let us say, your imagination? Let us say that as a child, you imagined you were killed in a fire instead of receiving a letter. Is it more believable now? Yes? No?

Let me tell you another story. But this one is all true. What follows is a narration of events that I either a.) experienced and/or confirmed through official letters, journals and reports or b.) learned about from published family trees, history books and journals.

2. Not Just A War Story

Most of the events that follow take place during two wars, the American Revolution, and the Vietnam War. All events are true, and, by an amazing twist of circumstances and fate, the events are well documented by history and battlefield reports. This is an especially important point. I doubt it would be worth reading if there was no documentation to prove its veracity.

I must emphasize that this is a true narration of actual events, not a concoction of my mind or anyone else's imagination. This is not science fiction!

So, what kind of a story is this?

The portion that takes place during the Vietnam War is an autobiographical account of one of my experiences in that conflict. The portion extracted from the American Revolution is a retelling of previously recorded events of that war. I have used creative license to describe some actions, activities, thoughts and, in some cases, conversations of the individuals involved, solely to enhance the understanding and readability of the material. However, where I used this license, I have footnoted the source from which I drew the information. This is all history.

However, I would like to say that I do not consider this to be a War Story. Calling this history a "War Story" diminishes the message. Let me explain with the following analogy. Consider your favorite T shirt that is made of cotton. Cotton is the essence of the shirt, but the shirt is not about cotton. It is all about something else. It may be a shirt you purchased at your favorite vacation spot or to celebrate your winning football team. Maybe it expresses your life philosophy, your attitude, your humor or any of the hundreds and thousands of ideas silkscreened onto cotton cloth. But, in no way is the shirt *about* "COTTON".

And so, it is here. This is not about War.

August 17th, 1966 just past midnight – 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. (How does a person end up in combat without knowing what to do? More on that later.) Adding to the noise were three 50 caliber machine guns returning fire. ²

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. The first light 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”.³

Summer, 2019 – I certainly never wanted to be in combat. I had been haunted by the specter of death in combat since I was a child, believing that I would die in hand-to-hand combat because I did not know how to fight. This was not an image that haunted me daily. It was one that came up on my mind occasionally, and I would dismiss it. I decided that I would never go into combat where hand-to-hand fighting was a possibility. Even as I child, I knew there were alternatives. More on this subject later.

In the intervening 50+ years since the night of the mortar attack, I have often asked myself several questions: How does someone, like me, whose intention was to stay out of combat end up in the thick of it? How did someone, me again, end up in combat with virtually no training? How many improbable events and apparent coincidences occurred along the way to put me on a boat going up a river through real estate that belonged to the enemy? If I had gone left instead of right, would I still have ended up in that pile of life jackets? Was I somehow predestined to be in combat? And why didn’t I, as my inner most fear told me, die in combat? (I certainly had plenty of chances.) What was the source of this vision? Or was it just a coincidence that I imagined being in combat and totally unprepared for the circumstances and situation? How was it that I could do everything possible (insert the Serenity prayer here) to avoid combat and still end up ducking mortar shells and gunfire? But now I am way ahead of the story. Time to back up and I will, I hope, shed some light on the answers to the questions, especially “Where did this vision originate?”

While I am backing up, this is a good place to pause and talk about forks in the road, improbabilities, and apparent coincidences. When I speak of forks in the road, I am referring to decisions I made when there were choices to be made. Good or bad, my choices set the direction my life would take. I will never claim to be a good decision maker since some of my

choices almost got me killed (and scared the Hell out of me). On the other hand, I am still alive today, so they were not all bad.

I have already referred to “improbable events” and I want to be clear that when I say improbable events, I am talking about events that have an incredibly low probability of ever happening, like winning the lottery. It is an improbable event because the chance of any individual winning is, as an approximation let us say, 1 in 14,000,000. Viewed from another perspective, improbable events are going to happen. What is the probability that *someone* will win the lottery? That probability is remarkably high, above 95% on any drawing. Meanwhile, the individual who won the lottery is saying, “WOW!” The probability YOU will win the Lottery is extremely low. The probability that SOMEONE will win the Lottery is extremely high.

Among the types of improbable events we all experience (an assumption on my part....I hope no one has a life so routine that they do not encounter these) is an apparent coincidence. Several years ago, I traveled to a city I rarely visited. I parked my car in a garage that I thought was next to the offices where my meeting was to be held, however I was off by a full block. As I made my way down a street on which I had never walked and had my directions been better, I would not have been in the spot where I was, I ran smack into one my college roommates. He too was in town on business for a meeting. What are the chances of something like that happening? Extremely low, but it did. What a coincidence, we both thought, that our paths should cross in a most unlikely manner.

Improbable events and coincidences happen all the time and scientists explain them away with Probability Theory, like winning the Lottery. “Nothing special” they say, “someone was going to win it”. “There are tens of millions of college roommates walking the streets of strange cities. There is a high probability that two of them will meet.” However, keep in mind that it is a theory. A theory is a group of ideas put together to explain behavior, a framework to explain observations. Theories are based on assumptions and assumptions leave the door open for other interpretations and possibilities.

I choose to believe that the Presence of a Higher Power is a possibility when we choose the right or left fork in the road. There is a Divine Presence when improbable events and apparent coincidences happen. For me, the “apparent” is implied in the definition of these concepts. Independent decisions are really “apparent” independent decisions. Improbable events are “apparent” improbable events and, a coincidence is an “apparent” coincidence. Some people choose to believe these are independent events because there is a lack of evidence of dependence. Faith makes the difference.

3. Origins: Message from The Past

November, 1940 – I was born a little over a year before the United States entered World War II which explains why some of my earliest memories are of that war. It is hard to pinpoint when some memories were formed, but I was aware that a war existed. For me, it was just a part of the normal world.

I remember rationing. The War created rationing of several goods for the civilian population. Some historians have speculated that the rationing was unnecessary and was imposed on the civilians to keep them in touch with the war. Rationed items included gasoline, steel, tin, and rubber. Sugar and meat were rationed food items. Silk was diverted from consumer use to make parachutes, which meant no silk stockings for women. Food Coupons and tokens were issued to each person in a family. My Mother kept ours in a small change purse, and I remember her taking them out when paying for purchases. I knew these papers and tokens were as valuable as money. These rationings had zero impact on my life as I did not know anything different. They are just part of the memory. The list is much longer, but many of my memories are tied to these rationed items.

The schools held metal drives and students were encouraged to bring tin cans, to school for recycling. Paper labels were removed. The can was washed inside and out. The top and bottom were cut out and placed inside the can. The can was then flattened. I remember my brother stepping on the cans and putting them in a cardboard box to carry them to school.

There was no butter, at least not in our home. Margarine was purchased in white blobs that looked a lot like Crisco lard. A package of coloring came with the blob, and my Mother would mix it in a large green mixing bowl. I remember being permitted the pleasure of opening the coloring package and dumping it on the blob.

Kix cereal boxes had cutout, fighter airplanes. Too complicated for my age, or so I was told, but not so for my brother who was three years older. I got to watch him put them together, but they were off limits for me. I had to wait for him to be in school before I got my chance.

All my toys were wooden because the metal was diverted to the war effort and plastics were not, yet, used as a material for toys. There was one tricycle in our neighborhood, and it was occasionally available for short circuits around the yard.

I often watched my Mother cut pieces out of the paper and paste them into a scrapbook. Once I asked her who the soldiers were. She told me they were men who died in the war. Decades later, my younger brother and I reviewed the entries and were amazed and saddened by the number of young men from our small town, pop. 5000, who gave their lives in combat.

“Japs” (yes, that is how everyone referred to them) and Germans were the enemies and, of course, were the bad guys in the movies. They were the ones who started the war. Hollywood was cranking out many movies, and America always won. It was difficult for someone my age not to have some graphic images of modern warfare. Most of the images I have of the war came from movies, but not all. I have one particular image that has stuck with me throughout my life, and I can see it clearly today. It is the image of an Asian man charging at me with a

bayoneted rifle. When this image first came into my mind's eye, I knew that he was going to kill me because I did not know how to fight back. The image was like a photograph, frozen in time. I cannot say when this image first came to me, but it was solidly recorded in my mind when I was 5 years old.

Sometime during my childhood, I asked my mother about wars and why they happened. I can still hear her telling me that she did not know why wars started, but it seemed that every twenty years there was a war. I was old enough to understand that in twenty years I would be twenty-five so this conversation must have happened in 1946 or 47 because prior to that time I could not add or subtract.

The war ended, but I am not sure when I became aware of that fact. I knew that we had defeated the Japs and Nazi Germans, but I am not sure I understood that the war was over (Of course it was not, and the seeds for my war were sown.) But I do remember that we dropped an ATOMIC bomb that was more powerful than anything that had ever existed and we, the USA, were the only ones to have it. My Mother helped me send in a cereal box top for an Atomic Bomb ring. It was a ring with a small bomb on top and a viewing lens on the end. In the right light you could look inside and see a photo of the mushroom cloud. I understood that this was the bomb that defeated the Japs.

So, what does a four or five-year-old do with the image of death at the hands of an Asian enemy? Over a period of time (who knows? maybe two or three years) I was able to craft a solution in my mind, and the answer was simple. I will join the Navy where there is no hand to hand combat.

In all the years I have held this image, I have never discussed this vision with anyone. Initially, I felt that it was an indication that I was a coward. In later years I chalked it up to childhood fantasy/nightmares, but the vividness of the image always puzzled me. Still it was and is a part of my childhood memories of the War.

1950's – My preference for the Navy never left me. If I had to serve, I would serve in the Navy. These were my thoughts except for one brief period in my teenage years. Jack Webb starred in "The DI", a movie about life in Paris Island USMC Boot Camp. For teenage boys, it was the testosterone fuel that made you believe that if you were a Marine, you could kick anyone's ass, something that 15-year-old boys enjoyed thinking about. There were five of us that saw the movie together and we agreed that upon graduation, we would become marines. We were also all football players.

During my senior year in high school, in February, I came home from school to change clothes and go to work when my Father surprised me by being at home. This was a "never happens" moment. Dad did not come home early from work, ever, so I knew something was up.

I had told my Mother, a couple of times, that I was going to join the Marines when I graduated. I did not expect much discussion about it, and there was not. It was my understanding that it was my life, and I was old enough to make my own decisions. In my mind, the decision had been made. I cannot remember if it was my Father or Mother who said, "Sit down, Son, we

would like to talk to you". Maybe they both said it in unison. In either case, my instincts told me to sit down and shut up.

"What are you planning to do next year?" In my mind's eye, they said this in unison.

"I am going to join the Marine Corps" I said.

There was a pause. My parents looked at each other, and then at me.

What followed was more of a monologue than a conversation as I was either nodding my head or making sounds that indicated I understood what they were saying. Again, in my mind's eye (and ear) it was my Father or Mother or both that spoke. (I probably see them speaking in unison because they were united in their stand. I was confronted by two parents who were acting as one.)

"We would like to make you an offer. We will send you to Kiski Prep School for a post-graduate year so that you can decide if you want to get an education. You would be studying under similar conditions that you would find in college and it would let you decide if education was something you wanted to pursue. If you do not like it, then you can join the Marines. If you like education and want to pursue it, then you can go to college."

I had been ambushed, caught totally by surprise and totally unprepared. I was speechless. Finally, I nodded and mumbled something like "I'll think about it", changed clothes and went to work. I had given no consideration to higher education. Neither Mum nor Dad had graduated from high school, and my older brother had an associate degree. My aspiration was never in education. My high school course work had been in the Academic pipeline because that was what my brother told me to do. But I never considered anything beyond high school. I finally concluded that the Marine Corps was a four-year commitment and the offer from my parents was a one-year (nine months really) commitment. The shorter commitment was the way to go. I went to Kiski Prep. The first fork in the road had been taken.

College 1959-1964 – My generation knew that military service would be a part of our lives because the Draft was almost a certainty for most of us. Unless you qualified for one of the exceptions, you were going to serve. The biggest exception was enlisting in one of the services. Once you were a veteran, you were no longer subject to conscription and you had your choice of service and sometimes the training you received and the work you did. The hook here was you served 3 or 4 years instead of two when drafted.

You could also get married (until 1966). The downside? If you had a good marriage, there was no downside. If you did not, you probably would wish you had been drafted.

You could develop a critical skill. Critical skills were, and still are, occupations that were deemed to be critical to national security and therefore exempt from the draft, and, in time of a war or other national emergency, men with these skills were exempt and excluded from joining the military service. The most popular of these was public school teacher or certain engineers. Downsides? Some people took jobs for which they were not suited.

Then there was the 4F classification, a deferment/exemption for medical reasons. Many men qualified however those who were not obviously handicapped were always looked upon

suspiciously. Were they really 4F or just faking it? The exceptions were athletes who earned their 4F status in the arena.

And then there was the 2S Educational Deferment. This one protected you from the Draft if you were making “satisfactory progress” towards graduation. This meant that you had to carry enough credits to be considered “full-time” and have a 2.0 GPA or better. Those were the days when the “Gentleman’s C” was respectable and acceptable. There are many men who graduated in the 1950’s 60’s and 70’s holding degrees of all levels, BAs through PhDs, only because the Draft gave them the motivation to finish. I am probably one of those.

As for me, I had my 2S deferment and knew that when it was done, I was Draft bait. I was not interested in teaching school, and I knew I was not developing any critical skills and getting married was not even on my scope. Also, I was healthy as a horse. The up and down side of being a mediocre athlete in high school football and college soccer (a coach once said “Breman, you’re small but you’re slow”) is that I never had an injury serious enough to make me 4F like most of the other athletes I knew.

During Christmas vacation 1963, I drove to the Armstrong County Seat in Kittanning, Pennsylvania to visit my Draft Board. I had a simple question. If I graduated on June 5, 1964, how much time would I have before I was drafted? I can still remember the middle-aged woman looking my name up and saying, “If you graduate on June 5, expect to spend July 4th in boot camp.

I was not surprised because I had held me 2S classification for almost 5 years. (I managed to cram 4 years of education into 5 years of concentrated study, and I was number one on my county’s Draft Board list.) I left the Draft Board and drove straight to Pittsburgh to the Navy Recruiting office and picked up my enlistment papers for OCS, Officer’s Candidate School. I had arrived at another fork in the road. As I took this step, I would shortly regret it because during that vacation, I started dating my “wife-to-be”. My active duty with the U.S. Navy began on August 22, 1964 in Newport, R.I.

I had spent a lot of time thinking about joining the Navy. As I mentioned earlier, as a child I saw the Navy as a safe alternative to hand-to-hand combat. When you are 5 or 6 years old, you can ignore the fact that ships sink. However, as I matured, so did my view of life at sea. As a teenager, I thought about how much fun I would have on shore leave. Finally, in college, I began to consider the career opportunities that would be available as an officer while still thinking about how much fun I would have on shore leave. When I began my active duty, a Navy career was definitely a possibility. And I was looking for excitement. I would shortly learn that excitement was not always fun.

4. See the World

August, 1964 - February, 1966 – Remember the Navy recruiting campaign that simply said, “Join the Navy and see the world”? When you read the fine print, it says “75% of the world is ocean, and it looks the same all over”. In all my musing about the Navy, I rarely thought about what one actually did in the Navy. What was the job? What were the living conditions, the pay, promotions and would the family I hoped to have some day like the Navy?

My first assignment was as a top-secret crypto officer on Seventh Fleet staff. As cool as that may sound, it translates to “messenger boy” who carried top secret messages from one office to another aboard a ship that was steaming in big circles in the South China Sea. Not quite the excitement I was seeking. Nor did I develop any of the normal and necessary skills a junior officer needs to make a career in the Navy, skills like driving the ship and managing people. It was not a career enhancing position. But I was not discouraged. I believed I could still make a career in the Navy. I applied to Flight School and was accepted. And another fork was taken.

At Pensacola Naval Air Station my career path was looking better, until the accident. Something went wrong in a pressure chamber, and I ended up in sickbay. A week later I was out of the flight program and waiting for orders. The orders came through for the Naval Support Activity, Danang, Vietnam. I arrived there in early April, 1966. I was still an Ensign and the most junior officer assigned to NSA, Danang when I arrived and probably the most inexperienced.

May, 1966 – Within six weeks, I was the LCM8 Division officer. I was responsible for the management of 250 men, who crewed thirty-two, 60 ton, LCM8 landing craft. We moved thousands of tons of cargo of every possible description every month. We were the solution to a port that had no “deep water” piers to off-load cargo, a vital link in the supply chain.

So how did I manage that assignment?

You must understand that the US Navy will sometimes take a person with no understanding of how to do a job and anoint them as being capable and competent. This happens during a war when unusual jobs are created out of necessity. Jobs like build a new base on the other side of the world.

I am a perfect example. When I reported aboard at the Naval Support Activity, Danang on April 5, 1966, I did not know what an LCM8 was. Nor did I know what Lighterage was, and I had no experience managing men. It was amazing that within two months I was not only the LCM8 Division Officer, but I was also considered THE EXPERT of same. I should also add that I had no idea what a division officer was supposed to do.

Some people might ask “Didn’t they teach you that in OCS?” Not exactly. In OCS, an officer candidate is taught what to expect as a division officer on a destroyer or other ship where you might, after a year as the assistant division officer, be in-charge of 15 to 30 men. You would have a chief petty officer (or two) who does the actual management of these men while you learn things like “where is the head” and other interesting and useful bits of information. If you keep your wits about you, maybe in 6 months or so, the Chief will let you do some actual division officer work.

So how did it happen that I was ascended to the division officer level after six weeks as the assistant division officer? I was responsible for a critical link in the military supply chain, managing 250 men using \$60,000,000 of equipment, and I had zero qualifications to even be in charge of one of my boats. Here comes an apparent improbable event.

Before I expand on that promotion, I should tell you how the Navy makes assignments on the junior officer level. For those of you who play bingo, you are familiar with the Plexiglas box filled with numbered ping pong balls. The box has a powerful air fan in the bottom that scatters the balls in every direction. When another ball is needed, the person calling the numbers opens a valve and a random ball enters the pipeline awaiting the person to remove it from the box. The ball is then placed into a board where the numbers on the ball match the numbers on the board.

In the Navy's process of assigning junior officers out of OCS back in 1966 (it probably was different for Academy grads) the ping pong balls are the people available to be assigned, but they have no numbers, just names. The board represents the billets that must be filled, arranged by priority. The detailer places a randomly selected ball and places it in an open billet and the assignment is made. The assumption is that everyone is qualified for the assigned position. This process is, of course, different for new officers with special qualification such as engineers, lawyers, and doctors.

To an outside observer, the only filter in the process is the breathing test. If the person is breathing, they will fill the position. Please understand that this process works very well for assignments to ships where, as I outlined above, there are redundant checks in the system to correct any deficiency in education, training, or ability the officer may have. The junior officer is surrounded by other officers and NCOs who are constantly monitoring his/her performance. Any deadwood is identified quickly and moved to a job where they cannot do any damage. In extreme cases, they are transferred to an established shore facility where they can be neutralized and finish their tour without doing harm to themselves or the Navy.

The process does not work quite as well in an operation like NSA Danang which was a wartime base that had to perform and grow at the same time. All the checks and balances necessary to develop and maintain an operating organization were ignored in favor of output. Any flaws or losses were considered a cost of waging war.

I have often been amazed when history recalls, during World War II, the speed with which the United States shifted from a lingering depression economy to a full blown war machine supplying the Allies with the equipment and training to make war. Complete bases were staffed, equipped, and made operational in months, sometimes weeks, instead of years. Examples abound and I need not divert our attention here. I will let the reader seek out their own examples.

NSA Danang was such a base. When I arrived on April 5, 1966, it was still in Phase I of its gestation. The base had been established in October, 1965. Phase I is where the supplies are dumped on the beach along with people and the people distribute the supplies and at the same time build lean-tos for shelter. Nobody really knows (although some profess to) what is going on because the normal communications channels do not exist, and no one is actively trying to

establish them. Nor do normal processes and systems exist to make the organization produce. However, somehow, someday, it works. You make-do with what you have and if the piece does not fit, force it, if you do not have it, make it. And everyone had to work under those conditions.⁴

So here is where I found myself, untrained and inexperienced for the job I was performing and not much worse off than the other junior officers with whom I was working. The emphasis here is on the three words “for the job”. This became abundantly clear in May, 1966.

The Lighterage Division was a massive department. By my estimate it consisted of almost 100 boats (LCM6s, LCM8s, LCUs), one diver’s vessel and a scattering of other small things that float. The number of personnel assigned to operate these vessels was somewhere between 800 and 1000. On the management side of this department were 10 commissioned officers ranging in rank from Ensign to Lieutenant and 50 NCOs with rates of First-Class Petty Officer or Chief Petty Officer. Most of the NCOs were assigned to the LCUs which had crews of 12 to 16 men. My rank as an Ensign, however, placed me at the tail end of the officers.

I felt like I had walked into the middle of a bad movie when I was assigned to Lighterage. The “boss” was a Mustang Lieutenant (Mustangs came up through the ranks as opposed to most officers who were commissioned after college) who hated “college boys” (surprising since all of his officers were “college boys”). It was obvious he was in charge. He was loud, arrogant, and physically large. At least that was the way he appeared to me. The rest of the officers seemed to look at him as their fearless leader and would gather round his desk to listen to his words of wisdom. Given that I was not, yet, accepted into the “in” group, I remained an outsider.

So, let me review my position in mid-May, 1966. I was the lowest ranking, commissioned officer with the least experience and training for my position in a division where being a “college boy” was a handicap. I had only been on the job for 5 weeks and was probably more concerned with not getting shot than my job performance. I was the “new guy” who was automatically labeled “Dilbert” (long before the comic strip, the Navy had a Dilbert) and judged to be wrong or at fault no matter what happened. Within a week, I would become the LCM8 Division Officer and the “go to” guy for information in the Lighterage Department. I had a whole new supply of “Respect” and with it a load of responsibility. (In the Navy, responsibility comes from above. Authority comes from below. An officer only has as much Authority and his men give him.)

If I had been a horse in a race, I would been the long shot (like 1000 to 1 or better). In a boxing match, the decided underdog with no chance of pulling it off. I would love to go back and calculate the probability that I would have the reversal of fortune (or misfortune) that I experienced. Keep in mind that for me to “ascend” to my new status, every commissioned officer in my department had to be removed. So how did that improbable event come to pass?

In the Navy, there are an endless number of operations or processes that must be functioning 24 hours a day and 7 days a week. Steering the ship when you are at sea is one that comes to mind. These are called “watches”. For a ship to operate properly, there are several positions that must be manned. The person occupying that position is “standing the watch” or he is “on watch”. Generally, a “watch” will last 4 hours. Standing a watch is boring work and a long time ago, someone determined that most humans lose efficiency after 4 hours performing a boring

task and decided to rotate the people to maintain efficiency. To this day, some ships practice ringing a bell every half hour, once for each half hour that has passed since the beginning of the watch, so that the people standing watch know how long it will be before they are relieved. It also lets other crew members know how long they have before they must assume the watch. Eight bells is the end of the watch.

No such luck in the Lighterage Department. We had the harbor watch, called the Lima watch. (No significance there, just the radio call sign assigned to the watch). It was 12 hours long, and the primary duty was to patrol the harbor and identify the location of each boat or barge beside a cargo ship. The purpose was to ensure that every ship being unloaded had a vessel into which to offload cargo. The assumption here was that the coxswains of the boats could not be relied upon to efficiently self-assign themselves to a ship. (This assumption was correct and proven thousands of times. Yes, it would have been nice if each boat had a radio, but they did not.)

To perform these duties, the officer on watch would travel from ship to ship and any other pier or docking site a boat may have wandered to and record their location or reassign them to another location. For transport, the officer rode an LCM6 boat, none of which had any creature comforts, including seats. Communication with headquarters, referred to as Mortuary (because sometimes it looked like one), was accomplished through a handheld radio about the size of a lunch pail. To receive and broadcast messages the "squelch" had to be minimized which produced constant, loud static. Add to that the ear-splitting noise produced by two un-muffled diesel engines, located directly below the deck and exhausting about 8 feet from the only good place to stand, and you have a perfectly designed Navy watch, one that everyone hates to stand. There were seven of us that shared this watch which meant that we stood watch every three and a half days.

I came off the Lima Watch on Wednesday morning at 7a.m. and found that I was scheduled for watch again on Friday evening. When I asked the watch officer why, all I got was a "tough shit, the rotation has changed". I pursued a better answer and was told that there was a big "wetting down" party Friday night (16 supply Ensigns were making Lieutenant Junior Grade) and since I was junior to everyone else, I had to take the watch because the regularly scheduled person wanted to go to the party. This is just one of the disadvantages of being the bottom feeder.

Friday afternoon, around 5 p.m., I was getting ready to eat dinner when the person standing the watch came in and handed me the radio and clip board and told me I had the watch. I was not due to take over till 7 p.m., but that did not matter. He was gone, and I was on watch. I took my time eating dinner.

Most of the Lima watches were just boring and uncomfortable and this one started out that way. However, around 2300 the environment changed. I was located about 100 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 do so. However, I did not mind being a spectator, so we cut our engines and drifted closer.

There was no outdoor lighting anywhere in the harbor, but the night was clear and must have been moonlit because I could see the outline of the docks and some boats. At about a distance of 200 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 as much disinformation. In the morning, as the 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 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 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 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.

Just a short side trip here, because the astute Navy veterans and some non-Navy types are wondering how I arrived at the Naval Support Activity with 16 months in grade and no experience to do my assigned tasks. Was I one of those Ensigns who got assigned to inventory yards and docks? No, it was just the luck of the draw.

In OCS, the Navy gives you two choices which they do not guarantee due to the “needs of the service”. You get to choose ocean, Atlantic or Pacific, and size of ship, large or small combatant. My personal preference had always been Atlantic, small combatant. A nice destroyer out of Newport or Norfolk please. But on the day, I was filling out the form something made me change my mind and I asked for Pacific, large. I have no idea why, but I did (another fork). And I got Pacific, large combatant, sort of. After two months of Communication School, I was

assigned to Seventh Fleet Staff as a Top-Secret Crypto Officer. Sounded good to me, but the reality, as I noted elsewhere, was quite different.

My assignment meant that I would spend my first three years doing nothing, but communications work and I would not have acquired any of the ship handling skills necessary for a career path. Even more devastating, I would not have any of those “seafaring” experiences I had dreamed about through four years of college.

After four months as a communicator (at least I had some good reading material), I discovered that I could apply for flight school, and four months later my assignment came through. I headed for Pensacola, Florida. Unfortunately, I only lasted until early February when an accident sidelined me for two weeks. It also led to my withdrawal from flight school.

The counseling I received after the accident was along these lines “If we lose an airplane, it will take us six months and a two-foot stack of paperwork. If we lose you, we can replace you in two weeks. Which one would you pick?”

In the words of one counselor, “You are an accident looking for a place to happen. Go happen somewhere else”. According to the rules/traditions of flight school, they will not wash you out. You must “drop on request”. After the counseling, I dropped.

This time I asked for East Coast Shore Duty and my orders came through for Naval Support Activity, Danang. I called the assignment officer, known in the Navy as a detailer, to see if I could possibly get a change of orders. He said “You asked for East Coast Shore Duty and I gave it to you. You didn’t specify which East Coast.” There is a special place in Hell for detailers.

I have always looked at this series of duty assignments and played the “what if” game. If I had not asked for Pacific, Large Combatant, would I have ended up in the same pattern of assignments. Somehow, I feel, I do not think, that the same pattern would have occurred. More on this sequence of events later.

I spent 2 weeks in SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape) training before reporting to NSA, Danang, which gave the barest minimum training to stay alive in Vietnam. I think it qualified me to accidentally shoot myself in an emergency. (I knew four guys who did just that.)

Back to the Lima watch in Danang harbor, the Grapevine had shaken off any rumors and was passing only good skinny (information). The Lighterage Division Officer, the Mustang, 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 in strange places, wondering how they got there. Not so the entire officer corps of the Lighterage Division, minus me of course. When the party broke up around 2130, our Fearless Leader suggested 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 50 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 60 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 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. 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 in the Navy. I was considered The Expert and I was still junior to all of them.

It works like this: In the Navy, if you are seen carrying a duck, you are recognized as the Duck Expert, regardless of how much you actually know about ducks. And to those who people who have never seen a duck or read anything about ducks, the Duck Expert title is well deserved. And this is where I found myself. I went from stable mucker to shining knight. At the end of the day, I had briefed everyone and became 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 pipe that would make my new assignment 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 an apparent improbable event, the magnitude of which goes beyond my imagination.

5. Surprise!

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 sailors, generally the young ones on their first enlistment. The base was in the building stages and the top brass may have known where we were going, but the details of getting there were left to the bottom brass who had to guess where we were going. 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.

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 looked so much like the hills on the banks of the Allegheny River. I saw many places in Vietnam that reminded me of home.

On the personal side, I decided to ask my girlfriend, the one I started dating in late December back in 1963 (a popular song was written with that title, but I claimed it first) 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.

Additionally, much smaller in the grand scheme of things, I was promoted to Lieutenant Junior Grade and our Wetting Down party was good, 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 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. Remember that I said the habitual screw-ups got assigned to inventorying yards and docks 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 50'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 LCM8s. 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 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 50 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 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 said, "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 said, "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. The waterway is located about 18 kilometers (for some reason the Marines used kilometers instead of miles) south of Danang. It flows northeast at its origins and then turns east for about 25 kilometers and terminates in the South China Sea. It is a swift river, flowing at approximately 8 knots. The area surrounding the river was held almost exclusively by the Viet Cong and had been nicknamed "The Arizona Territory". The Marines expected stiff resistance to this operation. This was all highly informative, but I just wanted to know where and when to bring the boat. The operation was tentatively scheduled for mid-August.

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 ask a question that would probably be answered at the next meeting.

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 mixed 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."

"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 30 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 a lead element (translates to target) of the operation. My vision of being bayoneted by an Asian soldier came back to me strongly. I had made choices that, under normal circumstances, would have kept me miles at sea. But I also made choices that made me a prime candidate for the position where I found myself. The improbability of my situation did not escape my attention.

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 on 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 50 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).

I have been eternally grateful that this error of omission by the Command structure did not produce any fatalities or injuries (at least 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.

6. “Theirs Is Not To Reason Why”⁵

Most of my time during the month preceding the start of Operation Swanee, scheduled for August 13, was consumed by planning, and equipping the boat. 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. We started gathering supplies, tools, spare parts, and 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. I am eternally grateful that we had an abundance of everything. 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 LCM8 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) shows up at my boat. They also brought along a 14-foot runabout complete with 40 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, but we were running out of people space. And, fortunately, he doubled my order. With all these people showing up, we used a 20’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 best jury riggers in the world and our tent looked like it had been made for the LCM8.

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 phrase today, but in 1966, I did not know that I did not know it.) And, when someone points out the 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?

My vision from my youth was in my mind almost daily now. I wondered if, somehow, it had been a premonition, an omen, of what was to come, that I was predestined to die on a battlefield at the hands of an Asian man.

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 Headquarters, 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, which was NSA Headquarters 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.

"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. And then I saw the image of the Asian man charging at me with a bayoneted rifle and, for the first time in my life, I noticed that I was unarmed. The vision was clearer than it had ever been.

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. And 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 from him or anyone else on the subject.

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 to the rendezvous with the Marine landing force of approximately 200 men and four Amtracks (officially LVPT5, armored, amphibious tanks weighing about 8 tons). The Marines would land 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.

August 14th, 1966 – The Marines were unopposed when they landed which surprised everyone. We all expected to meet some resistance, but no resistance started the day off on a positive note. Once the Marines were settled and ready to move west, we were summoned to the North bank of the river for a meeting. At this point, I could have done without having three Lt. Commanders on board. With one, we all would have known who was in charge. With three, we were never sure. However, my job was to run the boat. I had my hands full with that task.

The Marine Major, who had operational control, was not happy with the existing security of 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. As soon as the team showed up, we could get underway.

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 12 meals, and gave him the whole case. 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.

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 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 0900H hours and “guide on” the Command Amtrack which the Corporal identified for us. We would observe their progress and when they were 1000 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 1000 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 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.

“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 after 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. One had refused to give up and was trying to get away. A tank took him out with one round.⁶

The Marines lost one man during the fighting. He got shot when he went behind a tree to take a dump in privacy. They found him. He had been hit by machine gun fire several times. I made a mental note to make sure I stayed within sight of people when answering nature’s call.⁷

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. The coxswain 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 LCM8 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.⁸

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 was 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.

Our coxswain slept in the conning tower 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 60 of them. Of course, we always had one man awake and on watch.

August 15th, 1966 – When I awoke, the five-foot steel wall that had surrounded us at last light yesterday had been reduced to a foot that morning. We had totally forgotten about the effect of the tide while we were still close to the South China Sea.⁹ 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 1000 feet and we would move up. I was still nervous about being hit by “Charlie” (the nickname for the Viet Cong) 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 they 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.

Between the Amtracks getting stuck in the mud and our attempts to find the best channel, we were once again unable to make forward progress. The tidal effect was still very much with us. I am not sure we made a full 1000 feet that afternoon.

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 LCM8 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.

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.



Figure 1 - Children find us entertaining. Standing room only.

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.¹⁰

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.

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.

August 16th, 1966 – 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. And then we encountered another obstacle that slowed us even further. The Amtracks were (are) a great weapon, 20 tons of amphibious tank that carried people inside and 50 caliber machine guns or a cannon outside. However, there was one flaw.

From top to bottom, the Amtrack measured about 10 feet high, but when afloat, only had about 2 feet of freeboard. This meant that it needed 8 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.

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 took over a half hour and the second an hour.

My Coxswain asked, “How long are you going to let these guys screw around?” We both knew that the LCM8, at 60 tons and 1000 horsepower could jerk an Amtrack out of a mud hole with ease.

When the third mud-hole incident occurred, my Coxswain and I nosed in and waved off the other Amtracks from coming in. We passed a one inch, nylon line over to the crew of the stranded Amtrack and waited until they had secured it to the Amtrack. We paid out about 30 feet and secured our end of the line to our port bow cleat. The Coxswain eased the LCM8

backwards until the line was taut, then slowly rotated the boat so that the bow swung to port, keeping the line taut all the time, until the line was almost parallel to our bow. The Coxswain then swung the boat back to starboard at full power, keeping the line taut all the time.

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.

Before the beginning of the operation, I was told that we, the LCM8, 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 8 knots and the LCM8 had a top speed of 11 knots, which meant that we could only progress at a speed of 3 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 LCM8 would not come in last. Seeing the Amtrack stuck in the mud gave 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.¹¹

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.

In mid-afternoon we stopped moving and 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 was that close.¹²

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.

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.¹³

As I had the previous days, I sat watch in the conning tower 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 con (driver’s seat of the boat) 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 now convinced that the vision I had as a child, the vision of being bayoneted by an Asian soldier, was a premonition. Here on this night, all the conditions were ripe for me to die at the hands of an Asian soldier. 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 LCM8 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. ¹⁴

August 17th, 1966 – I have already described what happened next in the opening paragraphs of this story. 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. I have no way of knowing for sure, but I think they put about 20 rounds inside our encampment. (See previous footnote.)

Before we got underway, the old Lt. Cdr. 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. But the mood had changed. 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. There was a subtle change. Perhaps there was less chatter, less banter. Perhaps it was the realization that we were operating in "Arizona Territory".

Around Noon, the Corporal told me that they were going ashore. We were leaving their battalion's tactical area of responsibility (TAOR). 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 guys to have on board.

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 Coxswain.

He looked and agreed with me. He reversed his starboard engine 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 10 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 Amtracks, our force now had four tanks. Again, we had about 100 Marines on either bank of the river and our procedure for moving forward was the same. Marines advance 1000 feet. We wait until notified and then move forward 1000 feet. 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. They seemed to fit right in.



Figure 2 - Dropping off the Marine security squad.

I had jury rigged a map table in the con 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 them the entire trip.) I told the Corporal we were doing fine. Speed was not a problem for us.

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. ¹⁵

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 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 not moving away from the craft. Rather, the diesel fumes were hanging in the air and 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 con, which would quickly fill. 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 had to be 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.

"800 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.

The Coxswain 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 Con 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 3 - 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. We bivouacked on the North bank of the river, close to the Command Vehicle.

That evening 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.

We bivouacked earlier than anyone wanted to, just east of a railroad bridge that had several spans dropped in the water. The damage was old enough that we could not tell if the destruction was done during the French War or the current one. It could have been done in WWII. The bridge was an obstacle and we hoped we would have more favorable water in the morning.

The night passed without incident.

August 18th, 1966 – 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 charge.) 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 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. ¹⁶ Endnote provides a detailed report on the 3bt. 9th Marines actions for August 17 – 20, 1966.

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 LCM8 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 LCM8 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 8 knots and we had not seen anything close to that since leaving the delta region. Right now, we were seeing 4 knots, tops, in midstream. If we moved towards either bank, it would be less. Besides, the specs on the LCM8 said speed of 11 knots, but we knew that wide open she would do a lot more. I did not think the Marine vehicles could do more than 10 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.



Figure 4 - Picking our way under a downed span of the bridge, August 18, 1966.

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 10 clicks 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. We, the LCM8 860 and crew, were the biggest and best targets on the river and the Coxswain and I were the most exposed individuals.

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". The Coxswain and I had stopped ducking as much as we did the first day. 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. The Coxswain and I agreed that 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 50 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 3 feet. We had no way of knowing how much water was in front of us.

The Coxswain opened the throttles and I yelled (actually 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 Coxswain 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.

The Coxswain 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 and retreat to the water. But the design was for sand or mud. We hit a gravel bar. And the sound we heard during our movement over the gravel bar was the sound of 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 the Coxswain 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, the Coxswain 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.

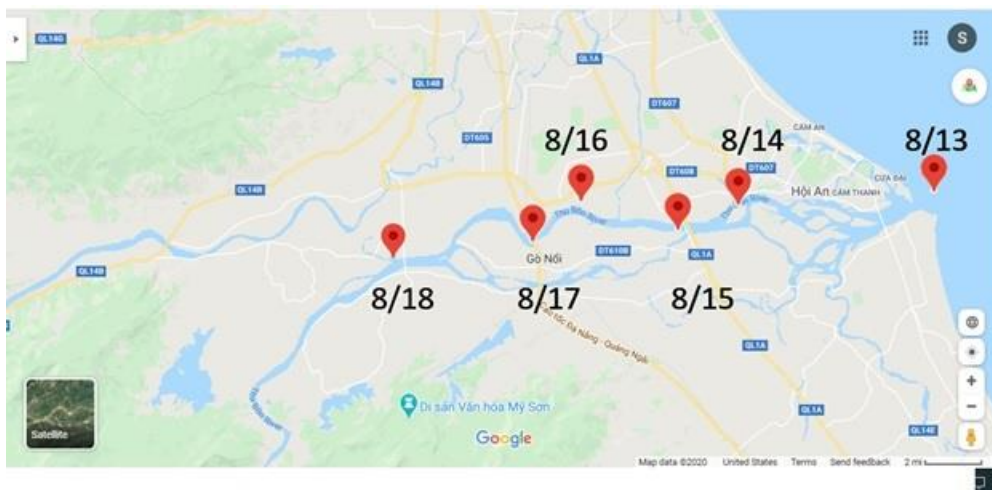


Figure 5 - Operation Swanee end of day locations on the Thu Bon River. Google Maps © 2020

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 eliminated. 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. Cdr. 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 6 - Transporting Marines and POWs across the Thu Bon. I was not aware that there would be a group of POWs with the Marines. It gave me chills to see the enemy alive and up-close.

August 19th, 1966 – The LCM8 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 up river, 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. Cmdr.'s 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. Cdr. 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. Cdr. who had been sick the entire trip also left.

7. Terminus

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. "Do you need anything?"

"We could do with some beer," I said, half joking.

"You'll have to pay for it. How much do you want?" he said.

We all went through our pockets and came up with \$30 bucks. (That was 15 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. Our Engineer came up with a hand full of wrenches, screwdrivers, and pliers for engine repairs. Our

two Coxswains found some line in the lazarette and we put out life preservers. When the Team returned, they said the engine was running rough and our Engineer started working on it. I had nothing to do but be a spectator and decided to take a nap.

The Engineer 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 con. I was relaxed and just watched the sky turn from blue to black. Our two Coxswains joined me in the Con 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.

August 20th, 1966 – 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".¹⁷



Figure 7 - Marines disembark from LCM 8 860 on The North Bank of the Thu Bon, just west of Liberty Ferry site, the morning of August 20, 1966. ¹⁸

Several minutes later we watched as the Marines disembarked and disappeared into the vegetation.

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.

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. I also knew I smelled like a goat.

I took a gallon of water to the rear of the stern sheet, behind the Con 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 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,"¹⁹ 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 north side of the river ran into a large force of, they thought, a battalion of North Vietnamese regulars, about twice as large as our Marine force. They were forced back to the river and were able to get all the Marines across only by using the runabout. The Marines put their packs in the boat and held on the sides²⁰ The Lt. J.G. made several trips that way. 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.²¹

August 21st, 1966 – It was not fully light when I woke up and, after taking care of life's necessities, followed the smell of the hobo coffee one of the crew was brewing. We were exchanging "Good Mornings" when we heard explosions off in the distance, East North East 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 400. 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 as well as my vision of the Asian soldier charging at me with a bayonet.

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 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.

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 one-o-five 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. 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 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 in 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. And so, it has been these 53 years.



Figure 8 - My Fiancé's Engagement Party, August 23, 1966, held at the Holiday House, Monroeville, Pennsylvania. She is seated on the left side of the table between her grandfather and my younger brother. On the other side of the table, from left to right, my father and mother, my future in-laws, and my older brother



Figure 9 - My Engagement Party. The LCM 8 860 on the north bank of the Song Thu Bon, August 24, 1966. I am sitting on the port gunwale, amidships, 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. ²²

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, but I would find out when I got back to Danang.

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 rice paddies. 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 that 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. In any case, Operation Swanee was over.

The LCM8 860 remained at the Liberty Bridge Ferry site until long after the Bridge was completed. Our arrival was a serendipitous solution to a big problem the Marines had been wrestling with for some months. They needed to open a dependable supply line to the base at An Hoa asap and they could not wait for the bridge to be completed. They had constructed a pontoon ferry that worked some of the time with smaller vehicles. Contrary to statements in other histories, the pontoon ferry did not work for large vehicles. The LCM8 heavy hauling capacity, 60 tons, was the answer to the question, "Why was a Marine Colonel so glad to see us and was willing to deliver beer to keep us happy?" He should have been able to conclude that we were not going anywhere without a large Marine escort.

The 860 and her crews provided the final link in the supply line to An Hoa.²³ She, the 860, was a significant part of the war effort. The first convoy of supply trucks to An Hoa arrived on August 27, 1966, just 3 days after we started providing ferry services.²⁴ The Navy continued to provide ferry services across the Thu Bon for several years. Even after the Liberty Bridge was finished, it was often out of commission because of a VC attack. Talk to any Marine who served in An Hoa, or Google "Liberty Bridge", and they will be able to tell you about the Liberty Bridge and the Liberty Bridge Ferry. .^{25 26}

Photo 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. Marine Corps Photo A187862. Shulimson, Jack;

"U.S. Marines in Vietnam: an expanding war, 1966 United States Marine Corps. "History and Museums Division, 1982, Page 208,209

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.

Marine Corps Photo A187862



Figure 10 - Without the 860, it would not have happened.

For my part in Operation Swanee, Officer in Charge of the LCM 8 860, I received the Navy Commendation Medal with Combat V. The Award was made in May, 1967 while I was serving at the First Naval District in Boston, MA. The Citation is reproduced in the Figure below. For clarity, the Citation reads as follows:

UNITED STATES PACIFIC FLEET
HEADQUARTERS OF THE COMMANDER IN CHIEF
SAN FRANCISCO 96610

In the name of the Secretary of the Navy, the Commander in Chief U.S. Pacific Fleet takes pleasure in awarding the Navy Commendation Medal to

Lieutenant (junior grade) Sidney Daniel BREMAN
United States Naval Reserve
for service as set forth in the following
CITATION

"For meritorious service while serving as Officer-in-Charge of the river Reconnaissance team embarked on the LCM8-860 within enemy Viet Cong territory, Republic of Vietnam, from 13 August to 21 August 1966. Exhibiting great courage, resourcefulness and dedication to duty, Lieutenant (junior grade) BREMAN carried out a vital river reconnaissance survey Despite hostile fire. He made a significant contribution to the successful completion of this phase of Operation SWANEE, a Marine Corps search and destroy mission. By his leadership, courage, professional skill and outstanding devotion to duty, Lieutenant (junior grade) BREMAN upheld the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service."
Lieutenant (junior grade) BREMAN is authorized to wear the Combat "V".

Roy L. Johnson

Admiral, U.S. Navy

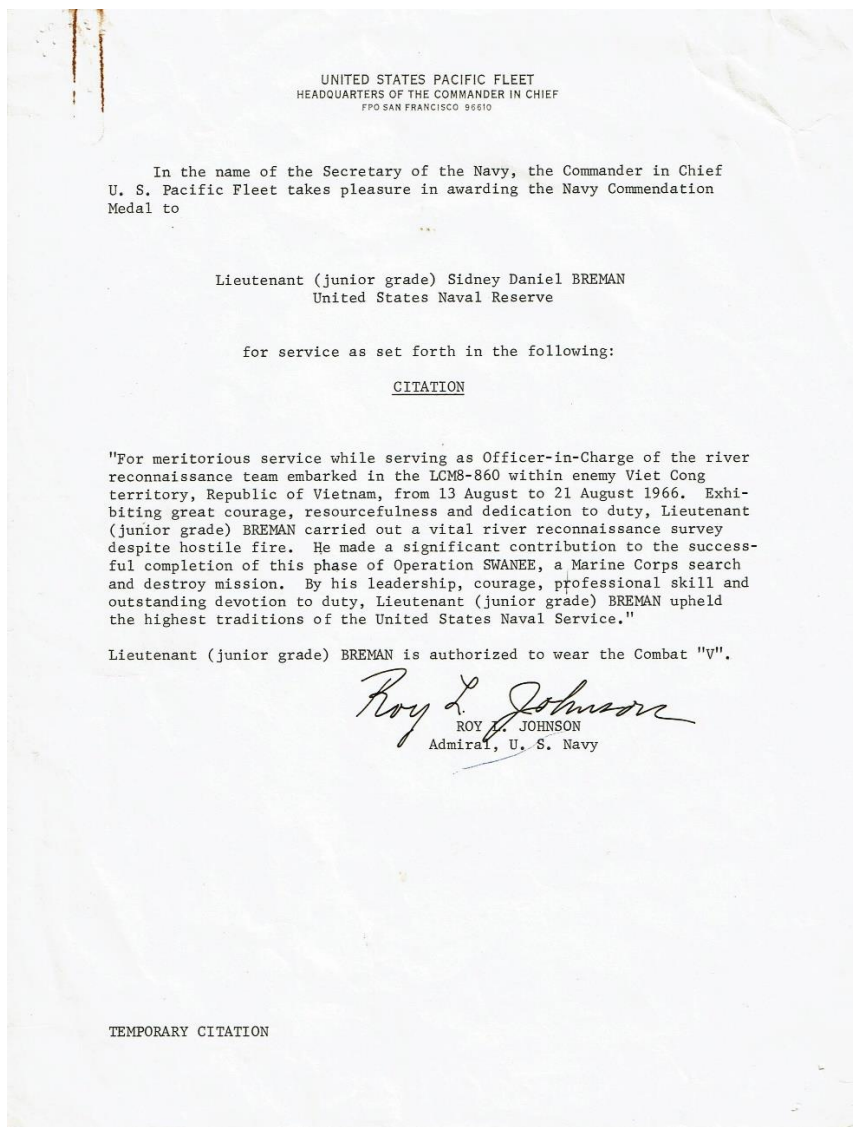


Figure 11 - Citation for the Navy Commendation Medal with "Combat" V.



Figure 12 - I had no idea this Award was in the pipeline. It came as a shock and a surprise.

8. I Was Not Alone

Post-Vietnam: The rest of my experience in Vietnam is not germane to this story so I will pass over it. Perhaps another time, another discourse. Suffice it to say that the time from September, 1966 to March, 1967 was no less eventful, dangerous, and threatening than my experience on the Thu Bon River. Like most Vietnam Veterans, I adjusted and moved on. Like most Vietnam Veterans, that was not always easy.

Over the years, my thoughts often returned to the whole experience surrounding Operation Swanee (and the rest of the Vietnam experience for that matter). And as I gained a deeper understanding of probability and statistics (I taught Statistics for 10 years at The Pennsylvania State University), I would often mentally calculate the probabilities involved in getting me from OCS to the Liberty Bridge Ferry. I was never able to come up with a definitive number, but I knew the number would have had a zero followed by a decimal point and several zeros before a number, other than zero, showed up. I often considered writing a history or a story about Operation Swanee and the 860, like many other thoughts not committed to writing, but I never got around to it.

Of course, the river trip always came up when we celebrated the anniversary of our engagement and we would tell the story of how my wife's date was August 23rd and mine was August 24th because I was west of the International Date Line. Vietnam slowly slipped into history.

Spring, 2005 – A heart problem helped me to decide to retire. It was not a hard decision. When I woke up in the recovery room, work was no longer on my radar screen and I started by taking a year off with a promise to return to the classroom the next spring. However, I realized there were still a lot of items on my "Someday" list and "Someday" had just arrived. I know that a lot of people have "Bucket Lists", but that list contemplates doing something before you die. I opt for the "Someday List" as in "Someday I will do it". I retired that Fall after the doctor told me I was 100% and had no restrictions on my physical activities.

Among the many items on my list was to research my family's genealogy. No one on either side of my family knew anything about our ancestors' homelands and or backgrounds. On my Father's side, there was some notion that our Grandfather came from Lithuania, but no one had any proof, just theory and guesses.

No one in my Mother's family had any recollection of when our ancestors came to the States or from where they came. The family joke was that they bought their land from the Indians. We had no idea other than my Mother's statement that we were Scotch-Irish, and some relatives came to Western Pennsylvania from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. I would, "Someday", get to this task.

Winter, 2008 – I was cleaning out boxes of books that had been packed for several years and came across my maternal Grandmother's Bible. She had recorded the birth, death, and marriage information of her ancestors back to one set of her great grandparents and several other relatives. This was a start on my family genealogy and my "Someday" for the genealogy

project had arrived. I did not have much hope, but I took my first steps by visiting a local Mormon Church.

The Librarian at the Mormon Family Center was extremely helpful. She explained how to search and understand the U.S. Census reports and assisted me with my first searches. She also told me that my best source of information could be found on Ancestry.com. Given that most records were now digitized, discovering your family tree was now much easier. She was right.

Within a short time, I was finding my ancestors. On my Father's side, I found my Great-grand parents and one of my great, great-grandparents. The trail ended there, but I am still working on it.

My Mother's side was a little different. My ancestors started arriving in North America in 1623 at Plymouth Colony. Wow! Was that a shocker! I am still working on the last arrival date for them, but right now it looks as if they were all here prior to 1740. Most of them were farmers, of course, but there were some other professions and many interesting facts.

One ancestor had been a Judge in Salem, Massachusetts, but it was a few decades after the famous Witch Trials.

A farmer in Pennsylvania was killed when a barn door fell on him. Not necessarily real interesting at first until I remembered that I was almost killed by a falling barn door when I was eleven. That made it interesting and spooky.

A family legend said that one member of the family came up out of the South after the Civil War to evade some unknown legal problem. However, I discovered that he came from the South into the North before the Civil War, sometime between 1850 and 1860.

One of my Grandfather's Uncles was wounded in the Civil War and returned home to recuperate. He died of his wounds in 1872.

Then I found three Revolutionary War veterans. Here was a genuine surprise. Two had returned home and led full lives. The third had been Killed in Action. That was sobering and I made a note to do further research.

My pursuit of my Family Tree became a nice hobby, one that was pursued sporadically. Sometimes I would spend several hours in a week and other times weeks would go by and nothing would be done.

Summer, 2010 – I started researching my ancestor who died in the Revolutionary War. His name was James Black, born December 10, 1740, in Lewes, Delaware, 200 years all but six weeks before me. He was my great, great, great, great, great grandfather. His Mother and Father either came to America directly from Scotland or by way of Ireland. The records are unclear on this point, but everyone generally agrees that the roots are in Scotland.

I quickly discovered other descendants of James Black online. One of them told me that our ancestor served in the French and Indian War, but I have yet to confirm that fact. I also speculate that he was already a veteran of the American Revolutionary Army prior to becoming a sergeant in the Westmoreland Militia, as he may have acquired his farm in Unity Pennsylvania through a Bounty Land Warrant. He and his family were living on that farm in August, 1781.

He was married to Ruth Scutter, also born in 1740 in Lewes, Delaware. They had five children: Eleanor (1765), Elizabeth (1767), Polly (1772), Peggy (1774) and David Arthur (1779). David had eight children, seven boys and a girl. I have not even tried to calculate how many children his sisters had. However, if they were anywhere near as fertile as David, James Black probably had between 25 and 50 grandchildren. It would be interesting to know how many descendants of James Black exist today. There are probably thousands. I have counted over 400 family trees on Ancestry.com that list James Black as a member.

James Black voluntarily enlisted in the Westmoreland County Militia, known at that time as the Westmoreland Association, and was appointed to the rank of sergeant, adding some weight to my theory that he had prior military experience. He was part of what became known as The Lochry Expedition which was ambushed by Indians fighting on behalf of the British in the American Revolution. He died on August 24, 1781. There was a date that got my attention. As I noted earlier, two significant events occurred on August 24, 1966. First, I was engaged to my wife-to-be, by proxy because I was in Vietnam on that day. Secondly, I witnessed the end of an eleven-day engagement with the Vietcong that could have easily taken my life. Aware of this connection to my ancestor, I began searching for more information. Eventually I found several history books that provided the information I needed to retrace my ancestor's unfortunate end and the end of Lochry's Expedition.

Before I began this research, I was unaware of the amount and intensity of the Revolutionary War action that took place on the Western Frontier of our Nation between 1775 and 1782. I was acquainted with the general timeline of the War, the major battles, victories, and defeats in the Eastern Theater, but somehow the War in the West had fallen through the cracks of my education. This may not sound like a big deal, except for the fact that I was born and raised on the very ground where a lot of the action took place.

Westmoreland County was a large territory in 1776. It was later broken up into what is, today, Westmoreland, Washington, Fayette, Allegheny, Armstrong, and Indiana Counties. As it turned out, many of the descendants of James Black did not stray far from his homestead. Scores of us lived, and many continue to live, in Westmoreland and the surrounding counties. My home, until 1997, was no more than a one-hour drive from James Black's farm. I am still surprised that this information was not part of my education (Pennsylvania History was a required course in my high school) or my family's legends and lore.

July, 1781 – In the East, General Washington's Armies had engaged the British enemy in mostly traditional military tactics. Additionally, the bulk of the supplies and equipment available to the colonies, went to the efforts in the East and those supplies generally fell short of the need. The War was far from over.

In the West, the British were successful in enlisting some of the Native American tribes to pursue guerilla tactics (the term guerrilla war would not even be coined for 30 more years²⁷) against the American settlers. Their strategy was a simple one. Harass the farmers so that they (1) could not provide supplies to the armies in the East and (2) force Washington to divert resources to the frontier. The Native Americans were extremely successful in their efforts, as the settlers were living on short rations and were constantly in fear of being attacked. It is

noteworthy that the relationship between the Native Americans and the settlers in Westmoreland County had never been completely peaceful. Additionally, Fort Pitt, located in what is now Pittsburgh, Pa., defined the geographical end of civilization in Pennsylvania. ²⁸

The supply situation in the West was no better than in the East. Add to those conditions, the rivers were unusually shallow due to drought conditions that time of year, August 1781, in western Pennsylvania and Virginia were uncomfortably hot; and the mosquitoes were hungry.

The military commanders in the West had become convinced that the only solution for their continued existence would be to take the war to the Native Americans and their British cohorts. To accomplish this, General George Rogers Clark led an expedition of 300 to 400 hundred men deep into the Ohio territory during the late Summer and Fall of 1781. His original goal was to mount an attack on the British stronghold, Fort Detroit, and along the way to search and destroy Native American sanctuaries and food supplies. He did not make it to Fort Detroit, but he did engage the Native warriors several times and deny them the use of many food stores. ²⁹

Colonel Archibald Lochry's Company of 107 men were all residents of Westmoreland County and all volunteers. They were supposed to be a part of General Clark's Expedition, but that link-up did not happen. Sargent James Black was a member of Lochry's Company.

The following account of Lochry's Defeat is taken from "Conquest of the Country Northwest of the River Ohio 1778 – 1783 and Life of Gen. George Rogers Clark" by William Hayden English, Volume II. Indianapolis, IND., and Kansas City, MO. The Bowen-Merrill Company, 1896. Pages 722 – 727.

Lochry's Defeat: Part of the troops which General Clark expected would join him at Wheeling, Virginia, where there was then a fort, called Fort Henry, were recruited largely in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, by Colonel Archibald Lochry, the county lieutenant of that county. In the command of Colonel Lochry were a company of volunteer riflemen raised by Captain Robert Orr, two companies of rangers under Captains Samuel Shannon and Thomas Stockley, and a company of horse under command of Captain William Campbell; but these companies could not have been full, as there were but one hundred and seven men in the party when they passed down the Ohio river.

Colonel Lochry started with his command from Carnahan's blockhouse, eleven miles west of Hannastown, Pennsylvania, late in July or early in August, 1781, to join General Clark's forces. It is pretty certain that the date of departure from Carnahan's was not earlier than the 24th of July, or later than the 3d of August, and all accounts agree that the party reached Wheeling on the 8th of the latter month, coming by land as far as Pittsburgh, and from thence by water.

There had, apparently, been unexpected and unavoidable delay, which proved to be most unfortunate, as will be seen in the sequel. General Clark waited at Wheeling five days longer than was intended, and, finding further delay dangerous, as his troops were restless and many deserting, he left Wheeling the day before the arrival of Colonel Lochry's party, hearing nothing from them, and dropped down the river about twelve hours, leaving provisions and boats for their use, with directions to follow him.

But here was another serious delay, for they did not arrive at the place below, to which Clark had gone, until ten days later, having been detained, mainly, by preparation of additional boats for the transportation of men and horses. Again they were one day too late, as General Clark had departed the day before for the mouth of the Kanawha river (sic), where he expected to await their arrival, and he left Lieutenant Creacraft and some men, with a boat, but, unfortunately, did not leave ammunition and provisions, of which the Lochry party were now in great need, although that fact was probably not known by General Clark.

Misfortunes were still pursuing them. So much dissatisfaction had developed among the troops with General Clark that there was danger of the force being greatly reduced by desertions, a party of nineteen having already deserted, and therefore he decided not to remain at the mouth of the Kanawha, for the Lochry party to come up, as he had intended. He left a letter, suspended from a pole, directing the party to come down the river. But the river was low, and none of the Lochry party seemed familiar with the channel, and their supplies having run short they now felt themselves in such bad condition that they lost hope of overtaking Clark with their whole force, but decided to send Captain Shannon, with seven men in a swift moving boat, to overtake him, if possible, and inform him of the situation.

This, under ordinary circumstances, was a wise determination, and would doubtless have been successful but for an overwhelming and unexpected disaster which occurred to Captain Shannon and most of his men. They were captured by the Indians, and with them a letter to Clark, disclosing the situation of Lochry's party, which before was unknown to the Indians and their British leaders, who supposed that Clark and Lochry's forces were coming down the river together.

This capture was the greatest misfortune that had yet befallen the Americans. Their weak and divided condition was now definitely made known to the enemy, who promptly decided to take advantage of the opportunity. They had long been advised of the intended expedition against Detroit, and were watching Clark's voyage down the river, but overestimated both his force and the number of his cannon, and, thus far, had made no attack. Now they were better informed, and determined when the right time came, to attack Lochry's party.

They watched their opportunity, and finally collected, about eleven miles below the mouth of the Great Miami river, three hundred strong, under able leaders. The celebrated chief, Brant, is said to have been one of them, but this is not entirely certain.

The Indians, with their usual cunning forced and persuaded Shannon's party, under promise of release, to station themselves at a prominent place on the north side of the river to hail the Lochry party as they descended and induce them to surrender, on the ground that resistance against such an overwhelming force would result in certain destruction, whereas if they surrendered their lives would be spared. It is said the prisoners (of course with guards near enough to prevent escape) were stationed at the head of an island about three miles below a creek flowing into the Ohio, now the dividing line between Dearborn and Ohio counties, in the state of Indiana, and called Lochry, as is also the island, after the unfortunate commander of this division of the expedition.

The Indians, however, attacked the Lochry party before reaching this point, probably at or near the mouth of the creek before referred to, there being some dispute as to the exact spot where the attack was made. The fighting appears to have been brought on earlier and a little higher up than the Indians intended, because of the Americans having stopped their boats here to take the horses on the shore to graze, feed for them on the boats being exhausted.

Lieutenant Isaac Anderson, who had command of Captain Shannon's company, and was taken prisoner, kept a journal of the campaign, from which the following extracts are taken:

August 8th, 1781 – Arrived at Wheeling fort, and found Clark was settled down the river about twelve hours.

August 9th – Colonel Lochry sent a quartermaster and officer of the horse after him, which overtook him at Middle island and returned; then started all our foot troops on seven boats and our horses by land to Grave creek.

August 13th – Moved down to Fishing creek; we took Lieutenant Baker and sixteen men, deserting from General Clark, and went that day to middle of Long Reach, where we staid that night.

August 15th – To the Three islands, where we found Major Creacroft waiting on us with a horse-boat. He, with his guard, six men, started that night after General Clark.

The men of Westmoreland had more than a little trouble with the horse boat. It had to be a large, and therefore heavy, craft to hold 32 horses and with the Ohio River unusually shallow that year to a dry summer, the boat was frequently hanging up on mud bars and underwater obstacles like trees. When they ran aground, the men had to enter the water and physically push and pull the boat into deeper water. ³⁰

August 16th – Colonel Lochry detailed Captain Shannon with seven men and letter after General Clark, and moved that day to the Little Kanawha with all our horses on board the boats.

August 17th – Two men went out to hunt who never returned to us. We moved that day to Buffalo island.

August 18th – To Catfish island.

August 19th – To Bare Banks.

August 20th – We met with two of Shannon's men, who told us they had put to shore to cook, below the mouth of the Siatha (Scioto), where Shannon sent them and a sergeant out to hunt. When they got about half a mile in the woods they heard a number of guns fire, which they supposed to be Indians firing on the rest of the party, and they immediately took up the river to meet us; but, unfortunately, the sergeant's knife dropped on the ground and it ran directly through his foot, and he died of the wound in a few minutes. We sailed that night. **August 21st** – We moved to Two islands.

August 22nd – To the Sassafras bottom.

August 23rd – Went all day and all night.

August 24th – Colonel Lochry ordered the boats to land on the Indiana shore, about ten miles below the mouth of the Great Meyamee (Miami) river, to cook provisions and cut grass for the horses, when we were fired on by a party of Indians from the bank. We took to our boats, expecting to cross the river, and were fired on by another party in a number of canoes, and soon we became a prey to them. They killed the colonel and a number more after they were prisoners. The number of our killed was about forty. They marched us that night about eight miles up the river and encamped.

James Black and thirty-nine other men were killed in that ambush.

9. So What?

Parallel Streams of Sequential Conjunctive Events

In August, 1966, I was part of a military operation traveling up a river. We stopped at the mouth of a tributary, that entered the main river from our starboard side, and later encountered a large force of the enemy. On the 24th of August we finally defeated that enemy. Fortunately, I survived that encounter.

In August, 1781, my great (x5) grandfather was part of a military expedition traveling down a river. On the 24th of August, they stopped at the mouth of a tributary, that entered the main river from their starboard side, and were ambushed by a large force of the enemy. My great grandfather was killed in that encounter.

Just those facts were enough to stun me, but as I dug deeper, I found even more parallels and, not surprising, exact opposites.

Already mentioned is the date, August 24th. We can add to that the time of day, morning. Both actions took place shortly after daylight. The date and time were forever stamped in my mind because 12,000³¹ miles away, my girlfriend became my fiancé. In truth, I could have forgotten the date, but not the event, had it not been for my engagement.

Both operations stopped at the mouth of tributaries and proceeded no further. The operations ceased to exist at those points.

Both operations had defined objectives (as opposed to general military duties).

Both operations fell short of their primary objective. Operation Swanee's primary objective was to map the river from Hoi An to An Hoa, but only got halfway. Lochry was to join up with Clark and attack Detroit. They were stopped about halfway to Detroit.

Both operations had unintended beneficial consequences. LCM8 860 remained at the Liberty Bridge site and provided a vital link in the supply chain to An Hoa until the bridge could be built. Liberty Road was built to re-supply the base at An Hoa. There is no doubt that the engineers would have eventually been able to construct a ferry capable of handling the traffic on Liberty Road, but it would have taken several months to accomplish that task. The Clark Expedition was a major step towards opening the Ohio River and the Mississippi River to commercial and civilian traffic.

The duration of both operations was approximately the same and occurred during the exact same time of the year. Swanee left Danang on the evening of August 13th, 1966 and joined the Marines on the morning of the 14th. Lochry's Expedition started down the Ohio River on August 13th, 1781. Swanee officially ended on August 20th, 1966. But in my mind, it ended when I received orders to return to Danang on August 24th, 1966. Lochry's expedition ended when he and his men, including my great (x5) grandfather, James Black, were killed on August 24th, 1781.

Both operations were moving into unknown "Indian" territory. Swanee was mapping the area nicknamed "Arizona Territory". Lochry entered Ohio Territory.

The history of both operations is frequently misspelled. In the Marine Command Chronicles, Swanee shows up as Suwanee and Swanee. The tributary that enters the Ohio River at the point where the Lochry Expedition was ambushed was named after Colonel Lochry, but his name was misspelled and exists today as “Laughery Creek” and “Laughery Island”. Colonel Lochry’s name is also spelled “Laugherry” in Clark’s biography by English ³².

Various Spellings of Swanee:

Naval Forces Vietnam, Monthly Historical Summary, September, 1966,

has Swanee.

CC 1 bt, 1 mc Has Suwanee

CC 1 bt, 9 mc Has Swanee

CC 2 bt, 1 mc Has Swanee

CC 3 bt, 9 mc Has Swanee

Both operations were opposed by an enemy who was indigenous to the area and knew it well.

Both operations had little information about the land and water they were traversing.³³

Both operations are heavily documented.

Lieutenant Isaac Anderson’s Journal makes note of only one injury, an unusual one at that. A sergeant drops his knife and steps on it. He later dies of his injuries. During Operation Swanee, a Marine stepped on a punji stake, not unusual in Vietnam, and was med-evaced. The unusual part of these events is that the injury happened and was noted in Anderson’s Journal.

The progress of Swanee was hampered when the Marine Amtracks (part of the modern-day cavalry) became stuck in the mud. Lochry’s progress was hampered by the horse boats. Chris McHenry, author of “The Best Men of Westmoreland”, describes how the large and heavy horse boat was frequently running aground or getting hung up on tree snags. The crew would then have to manually pull it off. ³⁴

James Black and I shared unusual, if not unique, emotions. Traveling by boat, through uncharted territory, and living with the most rudimentary creature comforts (especially personal hygiene) are rare experiences. Now add the emotions one feels when watching the riverbanks slide past you, knowing that there are men you cannot see trying to kill you. You never get used to it, but you do learn to do your job because your life depends on it.

Non-Parallel and Opposites Events

Swanee was going up a river. Lochry was going down a river.

Swanee progressed up stream at the approximate rate of 4.5 miles per day. Lochry was able to cover almost ten times that amount of water going downstream.

If the Lochry Expedition left Pittsburgh by boat, they started at the origin of the Ohio River. Operation Swanee started at the terminus of the Thu Bon River.

Swanee was, if anything, oversupplied. Lochry was undersupplied.

Swanee was blessed with near perfect communications. Lochry was cursed by an almost complete lack of same.

I survived. My ancestor did not, killed in hand to hand combat, similar to my childhood vision.

Special Notes, The Ohio River and Thu Bon River:

There is truly little, the same or opposite, to compare between these two rivers. They flow in different directions, but not even close to being reasonably opposite. Using a straight line between the origin and terminus of each river, the Ohio River flows South West by West at approximately 240 degrees. The Thu Bon flows North-North East at approximately 20 degrees.

The Ohio is 981 miles long and the Thu Bon is 127.

The Ohio flows into the Mississippi River at mid-continent and the Thu Bon flows into the South China Sea at the end of a continent.

So, nothing to see here.

Before giving up, I decided to look at other characteristics, physical and historical, of the rivers. I started by taking screen shots on Google Maps of the rivers from beginning to end. At first, nothing stuck out as being worthy of notice, until I focused on the area just south of the termination point of Swanee and an area south of Aurora, IN that included the Lochry Massacre.

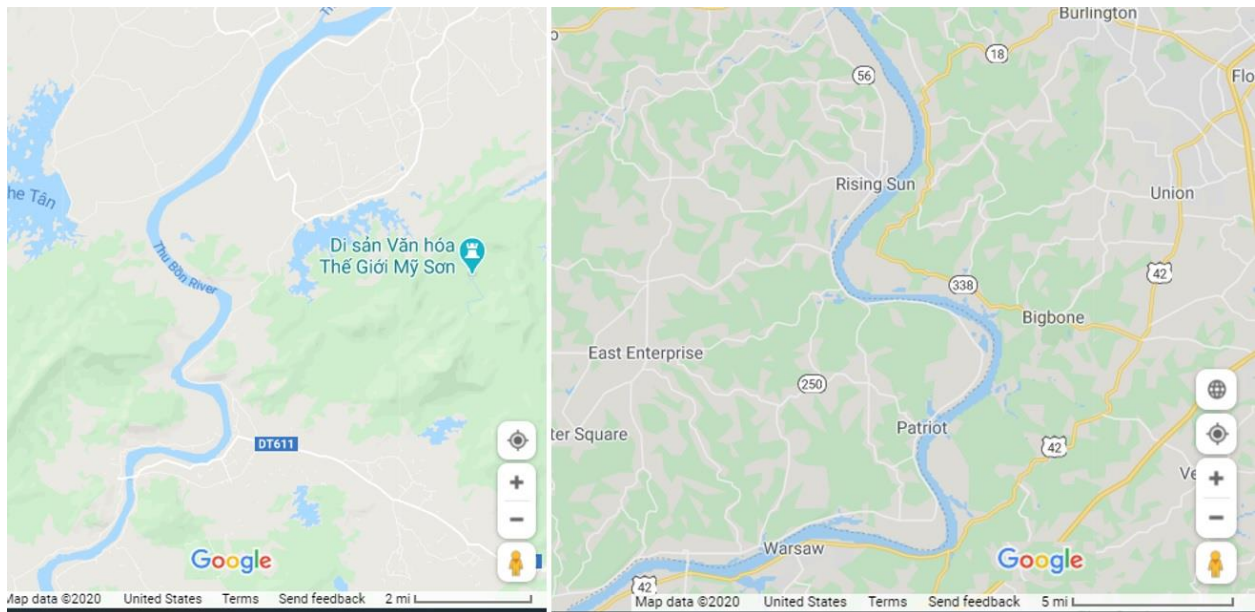


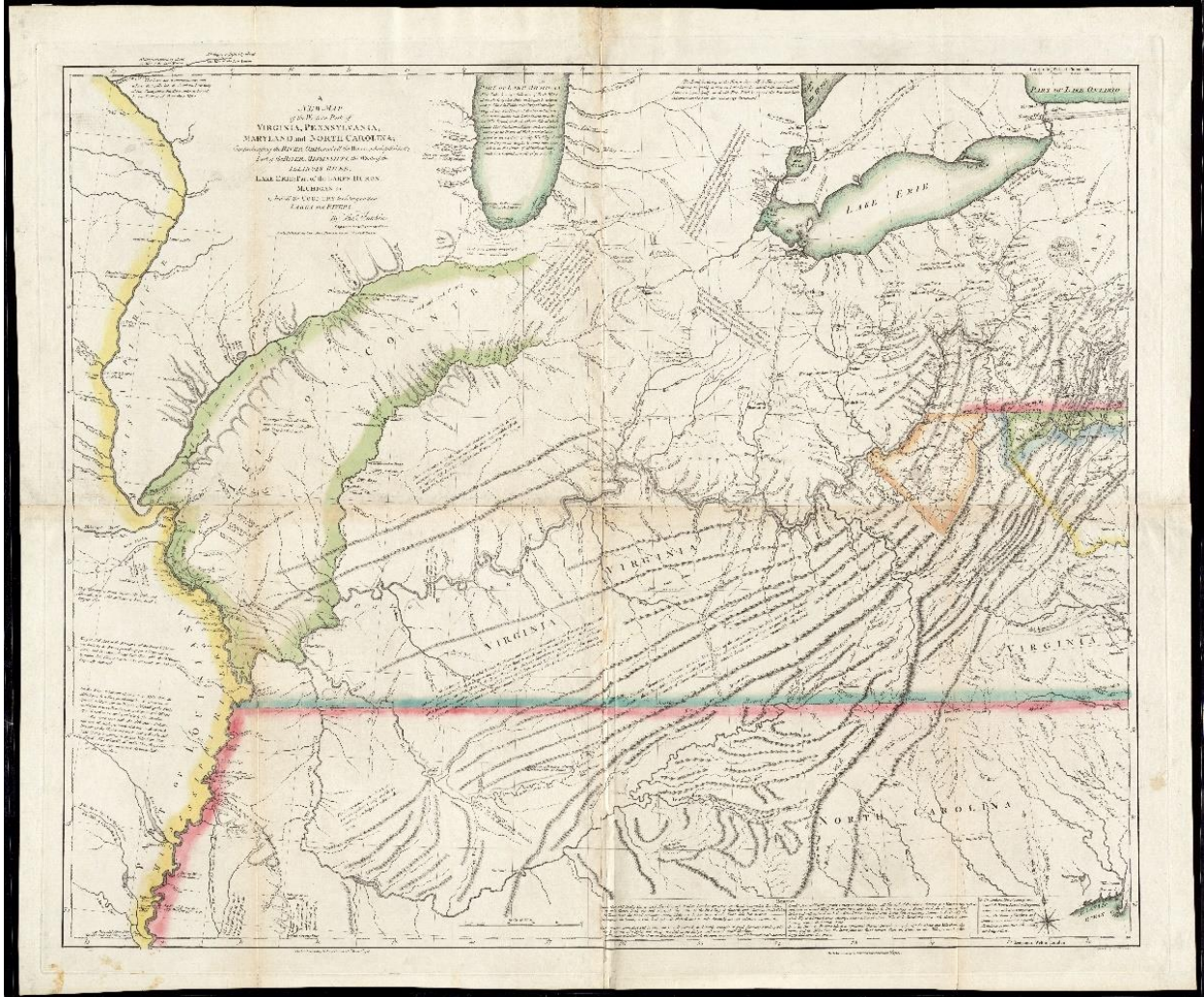
Figure 13 - Comparison of a detailed section of the Thu Bon and Ohio Rivers south of the termination points of Operation Swanee and the Lochry Expedition. Google Maps 2020

However, after staring at the two maps for an extended period of time, side by side, I decided the two sections of the rivers were not similar and perhaps I was reaching too far. I filed the maps away and moved on to other aspects of the rivers.

I had identified the locations where Operation Swanee had bivouacked at the end of each day using the Military Grid Reference System points in the daily Marine Corps situation reports.

However, I was having trouble doing the same thing using Lieutenant Isaac Anderson’s journal of the Lochry Expedition (see above). Anderson marked their daily progress using the names of islands, banks and bottoms that no longer existed. I decided to look for an old map that may have the locations referenced in his journal.

I found a map created by Thomas Hutchins in 1778 titled “A new map of the western parts of Virginia, Pennsylvania, Maryland and North Carolina : comprehending the river Ohio, and all the rivers, which fall into it; part of the river Mississippi, the whole of the Illinois River, Lake Erie; part of the lakes Huron, Michigan &c. and all the country bordering on these lakes and rivers”.³⁵



My surprise came when I examined the area south of the Lochry Massacre. To my eyes, the 1778 Ohio map was strikingly similar to the 2020 Thu Bon map! And that is the origin of the phrase “Parallel Streams”.



Figure 14 -Comparison of the Thu Bon River, 2020 and the Ohio River, 1778. Both panels show a section of the rivers south of the end of both journeys. Left panel Google Maps © 2020. Right panel “Map reproduction courtesy of the Norman B. Leventhal Map & Education Center at the Boston Public Library” Title: A new map of the western parts of Virginia, Pennsylvania, Maryland and North Carolina: comprehending the river Ohio, and all the rivers, which fall into it; part of the river Mississippi, the whole of the Illinois River, Lake Erie; part of the lakes Huron, Michigan &c. and all the country bordering on these lakes and rivers

Earlier I referred to the Swanee/Lochry events as Parallel Streams of Events. I am expanding that phrase to Parallel Streams of Sequential Conjunctive Events. This is new terminology, but certainly not a new concept. Streams occur when one series of events foretell, predict or prophesy, overtly or covertly, future events without any apparent causation between the first and second series.

The most notable Streams come to us from the Holy Bible. Here is a short list:

Moses and the Ten Plagues on Egypt: Moses foretold the coming of a plague, series one, and then the plague would happen, series two. This sequence of events continued nine more times and Pharaoh could not see a connection between Moses’s prophesy, God’s Hand, and the events until the last plague which was the death of the firstborn in every Egyptian household (Exodus, Chapter 7).

Of course, you can ignore what Pharaoh thought. Critics have doubted for thousands of years that any connection existed between Moses and the Plagues. Scientists have examined the evidence and concluded that all the plagues are naturally occurring phenomena in Egypt. Some scientists and a lot of people have concluded that since there is a natural and scientific explanation for the Plagues, God had no part in it. I am guessing they figure Moses just got lucky, like a Lotto winner.

Joseph in Egypt: Joseph predicted seven years of abundant harvests and seven years of poor harvests, Genesis, Chapter 41. Pharaoh was wise to believe this one because Joseph was right. Again, there is no connection between Joseph and the harvests that came afterwards except God’s Hand.

The coming of Jesus Christ: Biblical scholars disagree about how many prophecies were fulfilled with the coming of Jesus Christ. Even cursory research yields from 44 to 300 individual Old Testament prophecies fulfilled by the Immaculate Birth, Life and Death of Jesus.

But not all famous Streams are Biblical. Nostradamus (1503 – 1566) the French astrologer and physician, issued prophecies that reached out over 2000 years.³⁶ Unfortunately, he disguised his predictions in poetic verses to avoid persecution by the Church. This has made it difficult for scholars to reasonably interpret his works.

More recently, the events surrounding the deaths of President Lincoln and Kennedy are Streams. A detailed listing of the sequential conjunctive events can be found by researching “Lincoln Kennedy Coincidences”. When these coincidences were first revealed, the Nation and the World were shocked. But time has dulled the effect of these Streams and now they are just a curiosity, a strange footnote in history.

When I started this project, I believed that putting everything down on paper would help me understand the source and meaning behind the Swanee/Lochry Streams. Unfortunately, it did not. Instead I have ended up with more questions and doubts than I had when I started. This has not discouraged me. Rather it has taken me to a whole new field of inquiry which I will pursue until I find more answers. I have no doubt I will first find more questions.

My part of this story is coming to an end. I say “my part” because the story is not finished. Someone else will add to it and someone else will have to finish it when we have a better understanding of how and why these events happen.

Conclusions:

It took a while, years, for all of this to sink in. My great (x5) grandfather died in a military expedition that was strikingly like one of my experiences in Vietnam. Here was a near duplicate event that took my ancestor’s life, killed in hand to hand combat, in the manner of death I feared most and one that I envisioned from early childhood. I am very aware that I am only a witness to the events that took place during Operation Swanee. I am not an expert regarding the origin, source or meaning of these events. That said, here are my conclusions.

- If you believe a coincidence is two or more unrelated, independent, and/or similar events occurring in the same time or space or manner and there is no causation or relation between them, then that is all you will ever find in the Swanee/Lochry events. To you, it is nothing more than an interesting story. If one coincidence is equal to nothing, then two or three or more coincidences will always equal nothing. That is your choice.
- I believe that the intersections of Operation Swanee and the Lochry Expedition constitutes Parallel Streams of Sequential Conjunctive Events (Streams) and that they are far from unusual. I suspect, they are almost commonplace. We just do not know about them because few are ever recorded. The most unusual aspect of the Swanee/Lochry Streams is the fact that both are heavily documented by independent sources.
- Parallel Streams is not a new concept, just another way to describe these types of events. Streams are a type of Synchronicity as described by C. G. Jung. It is the occurrence of events

which appear significantly related but have no discernible causal connection, *“An Acausal Connecting Principle”*³⁷

- We receive messages from our ancestors. Scientifically, there is no dispute on this point. One need only to research “genetic memory” to find a wealth of information on that topic. But I am referring to something beyond genetic transfers. In my case the message alerted me to a future danger. I believe that message saved my life.
- We are free to choose what we believe. I am going with the existence of a Higher Power named God.
- God is working in my life. I may not see His Works and when I do, I may not understand them. Nonetheless, He is there.

10. Appendix I: Command Chronologies

Command Chronologies as defined by The National Archives, Web Site: Home >Research>Our Records > Military Records > Marine Corps Records > Command Chronologies: Vietnam War <https://www.archives.gov/research/military/marine-corps>

"On 14 July 1965, the Commandant of the Marine Corps issued Marine Corps Order 5750.2 (MCO 5750.2), which established the reporting requirements for command chronologies. The order defined a command chronology as "a documented report to the Commandant of the Marine Corps of the significant events of designated Marine Corps organizations," providing "a periodic summation of its experiences useful in future planning and orientation of new personnel."

A full citation would be as follows:

Command Chronology, #st Battalion, #st Marines, #st Marine Division (REIN)* FMF**, Month.

*REIN: reinforcement or additional support and combat units have been added beyond normal table of organization. **FMF: Fleet Marine Force

The following Command Chronologies are referenced in Parallel Streams:

Command Chronology, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, 1st Marine Division (REIN) FMF, *August, 1966*

Command Chronology, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, 3rd Marine Division (REIN) FMF, *August, 1966, September, 1966*

Command Chronology, 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines, 1st Marine Division (REIN) FMF, *August, 1966*

Command Chronology, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, 1st Marine Division (REIN) FMF, *August, 1966*

Command Chronology, 3rd Battalion, 9th Marines, 1st Marine Division (REIN) FMF, *August, 1966*

11. Appendix II: Operation Swanee Sitrep

Operation Swanee, Sitrep Messages, August 1966. Excerpts relating to Operation Swanee [OP FILE]

Item Number: 1201064010

Vietnam Center and Archive Operation Swanee [OP FILE]

Credit: Courtesy the Marine Corps History Division

Declassified by the USMC History Division

Author's Note: A Sitrep, as opposed to Command Chronology, is a report issued at the end of a short time period, sometimes hours long or the end of a day, designed to keep individuals not in the field informed as to the status of an operation. Due to the poor quality of the reproductions used here, a "?" has been inserted where the letters and word were illegible.

August 14, 1966

"OP Swanee, 1/1st MAR initiated S&S OP in conjunction (sic) with hydro survey in Song Tho Bon River (sic) complex. At 140615H CO A/1/1 PLAT VIC (BT 180561) CECD SA fire and 1 GREN from 2 VC, PLAT\ pursued and killed VC, 2 VC KIA (conf). At 141030H CO A VIC (BT 1?6554 OBS 5 VC running, AO marked area with smoke and CO A reinf ????? ????? swept area, Apprehended (sic) 1 VCC, FWD to 1/1/ rear CP, SUM CAS: USMC: None; Enemy: 5 KIA, 4 KIA (PROB)"

August 15, 1966

"D. OP Swanee, 1st Marines continue survey OP in Quant (sic) Nam PROV with light contact. At 151145H CO G/21 SQD PTL VIC (BT 992545), RTND SA fire and called in 81MM, 1 VC KIA (PROB). At 151135H CO H/2/1 SQD PLAT VIC (AT 931529) OBS 2 VC VIC (AT 931528), fired SA, 1 VC KIA (CONF), 1 RUSS Mauser CPTRD. AT 151702H 2/1? relieved 1/1 of SCTY force responsibilities. (sic) SUM CAS: USMC: ?one; Enemy: 6 KIA (CONF), 5 KIA (PROB), 2 VCC, and 3 WPNS."

August 16

"(4.) OP Swanee. 1st Marines continued survey OP in Quang Nam PROV with light contact. CAS For PD 160001H to 162400H were: USMC: None; Enemy: NoneWWO

Author's Note: No date on this report.

(3) In Operation SUWANee, southwest of Danang, the Second Battalion, First Marines have relieved the First Battalion, First Marines of responsibility for security of the Hydro Survey being accomplished on the Song Thu Bong River Complex. No Marine casualties have been incurred; 6 VC have been confirmed KIL."

Author's Note: No date on this report.

"D. OP Swanee. 1st Marine continued survey of Quang Nam PROV with light contact, SUM CAS: USMC None, Enemy 6 KIA (CONF), 5 KIA (PROB), 2 VCC, and 3 WPNS."

August 17

“(?) OP Swanee, 1st Marines continued survey OP in Quang Nam PROV with light contact. At 171200H 1/9 continued SCTU of OP relieving 2/1. At 171710H an AO Qes 4 VC VIC (AT 980537), called in aRTY, OBS 60 additional VC, CO C/1/9 REINF with 3 TKS was dispatched to area, A/S were called in, 37 VV KIA (CONF) (20 KIA, 17 PROB): carbine CPTRD. CAS for PD 171001H to 172400H were ?? USMC: : Enemy: 37 VC KIA (CONF), 1 WPN.

Along the Song Thu Bon South of Danang, Marines on Operation Suwannee accounted for another sizable number of kills, At 171710H an AO sighted 4 VC along the south bank of the river (AT 900537) and called artillery mission on them. 60 more VC were then observed and CO C, 1st BN, 9th MAR reinforced with 3 tanks was dispatched to the area. Combined Marine air and ground fires killed 37 VC in this action with no loss to Marine life.”

August 18

“(?) Suwannee At 180700H 9th Marines assumed OPVCN of Suwannee and continued survey of in Quang Nam PROV with light contact. AT 171000H {this has to be a typo, should read 181000H} CO C/1/0 PTL VIC (AT 941544) OBS 2 VC VIC (AT 943539), fired SA, 1 VC KIA (CONF), 1 VC (AT 990538) OBS 10 VC with WPNS VIC (AT 993539), fore M{SA amd 90MM, 3 VC KIA (CONF). AT 18110?H CO A/1/9 RECD 10 RDS SA fire, called in 3S RDS 81MM, searched area, DEST 200 LVS rice and 200 LBS corn, apprehended 2 VCS. From 181700H to 181830H CO I/3/9 PTL OBS 3 VC VIC (AT 978555) and 5 VC VIC (AT 973537), fired SA, 3 VC KIA (CONF). AT 181915H CO A/1/? DEST Tunnel, large secondary E8?9 ???744\$, 1 USMC KIA (MED EVAC) ??? For PD 18?201H to 182400H were: USMC: 2 KIA Enemy: 14 KIA (CONF).”

August 21-22

“(4) OP Suwannee, 9th Marines continued survey OP in Quang Nam PROV with moderate contact. At 200600H CO C/?/? chopped OPCON to 3/9 and at 20??05H 3/9 assumed responsibility for SCTY of OP. At 202000H 3/9 responsibility for security terminated At 201215H CO I/3/9 PLAT PTL VIC (AT 882305) DET booby tram, 2USMC WIA (MED EVAC). At 201400H to 20 1500H ??? ???/3/9 VIC (AT ??????) ??? ??ber heavy SA fire from ?? ?? VC KIA (CONF). CAS from 200001H to 202400H were: USMC 5 KIA, 7 WIA.

OP Suwannee. 9th Marines terminated Hydro Survey OP in Quang Nam Prov at 212000H with no contact during period. Cum CAS: USMC 7 KIA, 14 WIA; Enemy: 63 KIA (CONF), 3 KIA (PROB), 2 VCC and 3 WPNS.”

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13. Endnotes:

Where “Pdf” # appears, the reference is to the Pdf page number of the document to the online version of the report. Pdf # is used for clarity as the report numbering system is not consistent throughout the Command Chronologies. Where letters or words were illegible in the original report, a “?” has been inserted.

¹ See Bibliography: Command Chronologies

² *Command Chronology, 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines, 1st Marine Division (REIN) FMF, August, 1966* Pdf 20 | Page IV-8 | Mortar attack.

“(17) 17 August – At 0110H F Company at Bt 037555 and BT 046556 received approximately 12 rounds of suspected 60 mm mortar; muzzle flashes were seen in the vic BT 030155. Company returned fire with approximately 200 rounds of .50 Cal machine gun fire; mortaring ceased and VC broke contact in an unknown direction. At 0140H a listening post on H&S lines at BT 015627 reported hearing someone cough and movement in the vic BT 016630. An 81 mm illumination mission was fired. Results were negative. At 0635H one Marine at Bn CP listening post vic BT 012627 sighted 1 unidentified person carrying a rifle at BT 012630; sentry fired 3 rounds of automatic fire at suspected VC, who jumped into bushes. H&S Company dispatched a fire team to sweep the area. Team returned at 0730H and reported locating only fresh footprints.

³ Shulimson, Jack; *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: an expanding war, 1966* United States. Marine Corps. History and Museums Division, 1982, Page 208

“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 River – the so-called “Arizona Territory” where Operation Mallard had taken place earlier”

⁴ Naval Forces Vietnam, Monthly Historical Summary, June, 1966

“STRUCTURE OF U.S. NAVAL SUPPORT ACTIVITY, DANANG AND HISTORY THROUGH 31 DECEMBER 1965

Summary report of activities covering the period through 31 December 1965.

The youngest and one of the largest of the U.S. Navy’s overseas commands is headquartered in DaNang, second largest city in the Republic of Vietnam. Its official title is Commander U.S. Naval Support Activity, DaNang. The mission of this command is the support of the more than 50,000 United States troops who operate in the I Corps Tactical Zone. It also supports various United States government agencies in Vietnam and military units from “third country” allied nations assisting Vietnam in its fight against the Viet Cong.

Drawn from various units operation under Commander Amphibious Logistic Support Group (CTG 76.4), the command was commissioned on 15 October 1965. The former Commander, Task Group 76.4, CAPT K.P. HUFF, USNR, assumed command of the U.S. Naval Support Activity.

When commissioned, U.S. Naval Support Activity, DaNang numbered 1,412 officers and enlisted men. As operations expanded to Quang Tri, Hue/Phu Bai, Chu Lai and Quang Ngai, NAVUPPPACT, DANANG expanded. By 31 December 1965, there were 2,596 officers and men assigned.”

⁵ Tennyson, Alfred Lord. “The Charge of the Light Brigade”

⁶ *Command Chronology, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, 1st Marine Division (REIN) FMF, August, 1966*
Page 1-8

“14. 14 August.

a. At 0700H, Operation Suwanee commenced (See Enclure (12))

b. , At ?????, two tanks from Company C, 1st Tank Battalion, Attached to Company were returning from a resupply run. At (BT 127606), a VC was seen attempting to escape tanks by boat at (BT 130636). Warning shots were fired in front of the craft. The VC continued to paddle away from Marines. Tank killed VC with one round 90mm HE.”

⁷ *Command Chronology, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, 1st Marine Division (REIN) FMF, August, 1966*
Intelligence Summary,
Pdf 71 No page number.

f. 141015H LVT’s attached to Company “D” at (BT 051640) suffered a KIA. A crew member of the LVT left the vehicle and entered brush to make a head call, about (40) meters from the vehicle. About (10) minutes after he entered the brush, (3) to (4) shots were heard in the area where he had gone, LVT personnel immediately checked the area, but could not find the Marine. He was reported MIA. Units from Company “D” and ARVN began an intensive search of the area where the man was last seen and surrounding area. The Marine’s body was found in a house a short distance away. The body was resting against a wall and had (13) bullet holes, from groin to head. The KIA had an M-14 semi-automatic rifle with him. The rifle was not recovered.

g. 141200H – Company “D”, 3rd platoon with ARVN apprehended (1) female VCS about (20) years old at (BT 053638). VCS did not have an identification card. ARVs stated that the VCS probably had information concerning the Marine MIA, later found killed by VC. (1) VCS to ITT.

⁸ *Command Chronology, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, 1st Marine Division (REIN) FMF, August, 1966*
After Action Report

Pdf 163, 164.,No page number, para 1

“???????? ?????????? Sitrep 2 (Period 241200H to 241600H) lists ???? ????? North Bank: 1 ?? 1 Co B vic BT 100555 to BT 105350. South Bank: Elements Co A vic BT 108553 to BT 117551. Survey boat: vic BT 109550 (Stuck in mud) C? LVP: Stuck in sand bar BT 155556.

All forward progress halted for remainder of night. Expect LVT and LCM to float free at high tide 150515H. Security forces placed around all vehicles.

⁹ *Command Chronology, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, 1st Marine Division (REIN) FMF, August, 1966*
After Action Report

Pdf 162 No page number, para 7

“b. Terrain. Area of operations characterized by flat delta and numerous rice paddies. River has many sand bars and mangrove swamps along south bank. River also has a tidal variance of 7 ft. Route 14 parallels the river.

¹⁰ *Command Chronology, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, 1st Marine Division (REIN) FMF, August, 1966*
Intelligence Report

Pdf page 162, Page number blank

7. Intelligence

a. Enemy. The estimated strength of the VC in the area of operation is 5??00. The ?-12 L?? 1 Force company is also ?????? as operating in the area south of the river.(1) VC contacts consisted of sniper fire from 1 to 3 VC. Contact is extremely brief with the VC firing a few rounds then breaking contact.

¹¹ *Command Chronology, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, 1st Marine Division (REIN) FMF, August, 1966*
Intelligence Report

Pdf page 162, page number blank

b. The LVT's proved unreliable for operations in the Song Thu Bon River. Because of the numerous sand bars and wide variances in water depth, the LVT's were continually bogging down. Each time a tractor became stuck all forward progress was halted and either the LCM-8 or other tractors had to pull it free. Some mechanical difficulties were also experienced, which slowed progress.”

¹² *Command Chronology, 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines, 1st Marine Division (REIN) FMF, August, 1966*

Pdf 20 Page IV-8 Marine steps on punji stake.

“At 1740H one Marine from F Company stepped on a punji trap at vic AT 999546, Marine was med-evaced to C-Med at DA NANG at 1830H. At 1850H med0evac helo received enemy fire from vic BT 024579, helo returned fire with M-60 machine gun.”

¹³ *Command Chronology, 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines, 1st Marine Division (REIN) FMF, August, 1966*

Pdf 20 Page IV-8 Duty sniper leaves bloody trail.

“At 1945H F/3 patrol located in vic BT 041549 sighted one VC in tree line and opened fire, area was searched and patrol found 1 shower shoe with blood on it; no body was located. Results: 1 VC WIA.”

¹⁴ *Command Chronology, 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines, 1st Marine Division (REIN) FMF, August, 1966*

Author's Note: August 16, 1966 was the heaviest day of action we had seen so far. According to the CC for that day, skirmishes started at 0755H and continued throughout the day. Forward progress stopped about 0300H and defensive positions were taken. At one point the tanks engaged the enemy, firing 11 rounds of 90 mm HE. I have included the entire days action as reported.

Pdf 20 Page IV-7,

(16) 16 August – At 0724H F Company commenced movement to rendezvous with LCM in order to commence refueling of the LVT's. At 0755H C Company CP security position (vic BT 015627) sighted approximately 4 unidentified persons running from rock to rock in vicinity BT 015627. Sentry fired one warning round in the air, then fired 2 rounds of small arms directly at persons who appeared to be hiding in rocks. Unidentified persons fled into the tree line and disappeared. Due to LVT's stuck on sand bars, mechanical problems with LVT's and 1 remaining hour of favorable water conditions for LCM, it was decided to remain in positions for the night and organize to move out at first light. At 1515H a tank from 3rd Plat, Co B 3rd TK Bn approaching the main security gate (BT 016627) received 6 rounds of sniper fire from an unknown direction; fire was not returned because the location of the sniper could not be determined. At 1610H Comm wire team working on lines from CP area to HA DONG Bridge, received one sniper round. Fire came from an unknown direction. No Casualties. At 1915H H/2 with tanks attached (vic BT 025538) observed 50 VC wearing mixed uniforms and helmets moving at BT 025558. Tanks fired 11-90mm rounds with good coverage of target. A sweep of the area was not conducted due to the distance from location and security mission assigned. At 1954H F/3 patrol located in vic BT 041549 sighted one VC in tree line and open fire; area was searched, and patrol found 1 shower shoe with blood on it; no body was located. Results: 1 VC KIA (probable). At 2100H H/2 patrol located at BT 025558 received 10-12 carbine sniper rounds in their position from vic BT 021562, attached tanks returned fire with .30 Cal automatic fire; sniper fire ceased. At 2130H Company located BT 032575 received numerous sniper rounds from unknown directions; H Company returned fire with small arms and 10-60mm mortar rounds; sniper fire ceased.

¹⁵ *Command Chronology, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, 3rd Marine Division (REIN) FMF, August, 1966*

Pdf page 5 page 1

On 3 August, Company "A" conducted a population sweep in Company "A" area of responsibility which resulted in the collection of 2000 Vietnamese, and the capture of 3 VCC females.

¹⁶ *Command Chronologies 3rd Battalion, 9th Marines. Pdf 9, Page number inconsistent.*

"9. Concept of Operations:

3d Battalion was to provide security for the survey party from the Liberty Bridge to the furthest point of advance in the area of (AT 836454), and for the return trip to Liberty Bridge site, the concept was altered prior to execution of Phase III so that the operation would terminate upon reaching the furthest point of advance. Four reinforced companies were to provide security required for Phase III. Three companies were to be along the west band of the Song Thu Bon on the peninsula formed by the Song Thu Bon and Song Vu Gia, two attacking

and securing the river bank and one in reserve. One company was to secure the east bank of the Song Thu Bon. At the termination of the operation the 3d Battalion troop units and command group were to cross the Song Thu Bon by boat and return to the An Hoa operation base, and the reserve, Co. "C" 1st Battalion, 9th Marines was to assume OPCON of the armor elements on the west bank and recross the Song Vu Gia at which time OPCON of that company and the accompanying armor would be relinquished by this command.

10. Execution: 9th Marines Operation Order 120-66H August 1966 received on 16 August 1966 directed the execution of Operation Swanee. Phase II of the operation terminated on the afternoon of 18 August and the commencement of Phase III was scheduled for 20 August. On the afternoon of 19 August companies "L" and "M" and the battalion command group occupied positions in the vicinity of the splash point at (AT 902547)..AT about 200630H they were joined by Co. "C" 1st Battalion, 9th Marines and elements of Co. "B" 3d Tk. Bn. And Co. "B" 1st Amtrac Bn. Co. "I" reinforced was in position to secure dominating terrain features on the east bank. At the same time Co."M" engaged an estimated 40 VC near AT 973525 resulting in io enemy KIA confirmed and an additional 20 KIA probable. Friendly casualties were 5 KIA and 5 WIA. Four VC unite broke contact to the northwest and west, however, sporadic enemy contact continued until about 1?30H. At about 201300H the CIC of the survey party reported that sufficient data for completion of the survey had been completed and at about 1530H a decision to terminate the operation was made. During the afternoon Co. "?" and light enemy contact receiving fire from too opposite banks of the Song Tru Bon and returning S/A and 60mm fire with undetermined results. Co. "I" experienced two mine incidents resulting in ? USMC WIA's. Commencing at about 201700H 3d Battalion, 9th Marines troop units west of the Son Thu Bon crossed the river by foot in the vicinity of AT 867514, completing the crossing at about 1900H. At 1730 Co. "C" 1st Battalion, 9th Marines was dispatched with 2nd platoon Co. "B" 3d Tk. Bn. To the crossing point at AT 902547 with the instructions that OPCON would be chopped to parent unit upon crossing the Song Vu Gia. Co. "C" reported crossing the 53 grid line at about 1825H and then without being chopped from OPCOM of 3d Battalion, 9th Marines apparently secured from 3d Battalion, 9th Marines battalion tactical net. Phase III of Operation Swanee terminated at 202000H."

¹⁷ Command Chronologies 3rd Battalion, 9th Marines. Pdf. 3

"(1) Situation:

(a). Enemy activity and sightings during the month of August were comparable with July. On August 20 contact was made with an estimated company reinforced from a main force battalion believed to be operating in the area. Mining and booby trap activity has increased particularly in the vicinity of Liberty Road. Harassing and sniper fire has increased with an upsurge of ambush activity in the vicinity of the vicinity of Liberty Road. 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. Liaison with Duc Duc District and ARVN forces has improved and is fairly reliable. Information from local intelligence sources indicates the presence of two battalion size units in the TAOR."

¹⁸ Command Chronologies 3rd Battalion, 9th Marines Pdf. 9

“At about 200730H Co. “M” commenced crossing the Song Vu Gia (AT 902547) and secured the crossing area, and was followed by a heavy section of tanks from Co. “S”.

¹⁹ Silver Star Recipient. <https://valor.militarytimes.com/hero/39717> This award demonstrates the intensity of the fighting on August 20, 1966.

CITATION:

The President of the United States of America takes pleasure in presenting the Silver Star to Staff Sergeant (name deleted, see web site for more details) 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.

²⁰ *Command Chronology, 3rd Battalion, 9th Marines, 3rd Marine Division (REIN) FMF, August, 1966. Pdf 3,*

Additional testimony to the intensity of the Combat on August 20, 1966.

“Enemy activity and sightings during the month of August were comparable with July. On August 200 contact was made with an estimated company reinforced from a main force battalion believed to be operating in the area. Mining and booby trap activity has increased particularly (sic) in vicinity of Liberty Road. Harrassing and sniper fire has increased with an upsurge of ambush activity in the vicinity of Liberty Road. Accuracy at long ranges and percentage of hits indicate a marked improvement in marksmanship and use of scope mounted rifles by VC in this area. Liaison with Duc. Duc District and ARVN forces has improved and is

fairly reliable. Information from local intelligence sources indicate the presence of two battalion size units in this TAOR.”

PDF 10

At the same time Co “?” engaged an estimated 40 VC near AT 973525, resulting in 10 enemy KIA confirmed and an additional 20 KIA probable. Friendly casualties were 5 KIA and 5 WIA. For? VC units broke contact to the northwest and west, however sporadic enemy contact continued until about 1730. At about 201300 the CIC of the survey party reported that sufficient data for completion of the survey had been accumulated and at 1530 a decision to terminate the operation was made. During the afternoon Co. I had light enemy contact receiving fire from the opposite bank of the Song Tru Bon and returning S/A and 60mm fire with undetermined results. Co. “I” experienced two mine encounters resulting in ? USMC WIA’s. Commencing at about 201700H 3d Battalion, 9th Marines troop units west of the of the Song Thu Bon **crossed the river by foot in the** vicinity of AT 867514, completing the crossing at about 1900H. Author’s Note: The highlighted section fails to mention the Navy’s participation in this crossing.

²¹ Shulimson, Jack; *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: an expanding war, 1966*

United States. Marine Corps. History and Museums Division, 1982, Page 208,209 Referring to 20 August: “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 16 wounded while killing at least 10 of the enemy. Most of the Marine casualties were a result of enemy mines. With the completion of the survey, the 3d Battalion returned to its An Hoa base that evening.”

²² Command Chronologies 3rd Battalion, 9th Marines, August, 1966. Pdf. 10, 11

13. Commanders Evaluation: The enemy located west of the Song 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.

14. Recommendation: 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 if not impossible.

²³ The following citation is partly inaccurate in that the LCM 8 860 remained at the Liberty bridge site for several years after the bridge was completed. It was still an essential element in the supply chain when the bridge was out of commission after various VC attacks and flood related damage. It also contains the grossest understatement I have ever encountered where he refers to the trip up the Thu Bon as “a hazardous and exciting transit”. He also leaves the impression that the LCM 8 860 was purposely placed at the Liberty Bridge site to act as ferry.

However, Operation Swanee had nothing to do with the Bridge. The 860 just happened to be at the right place at the right time; a demonstration of pure serendipity.

The Marines in Vietnam, 1954-1973: An Anthology and Annotated Bibliography, Page 328: U. S. Naval Institute Proceedings, Naval Review, 1971, Page 328

“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.”

²⁴ Naval Forces Vietnam, Monthly Historical Summary, September, 1966, pdf 64, page III-10 (2) LCM-8” The basic function and mission of the LCM-8 section of Lighterage Division, the handling of cargo in DaNang, remained nearly the same during this period. However, LCM-8 860 was assigned to assist in a river survey in Operation Swanee with the Marines at Thu Bon River south of DaNang. Later, LCM-8 860 was assigned to the Liberty Road Ferry site in the same river to assist in transporting troops and vehicles across the river. An effective preventive maintenance and repair program has resulted in a down-rate of only 6.4%.” Author’s Note: The highlighted section is evidence that the 860 remained at the Liberty Bridge site to act as ferry to keep the supply convoys running, a fact that was ignored by most USMC histories.

²⁵ An excellent site for comments on The Liberty Bridge and the Liberty Bridge Ferry see: “DENNIS LATHAM: LIFE, FICTION, AND THE PURSUIT OF MADNESS, My fiction, life in general, and war, with some pics from my Marine days in Vietnam. The Liberty Bridge” <http://dennislathamfiction.blogspot.com/2006/08/vietnam-liberty-bridge.html>

²⁶ Shulimson, Jack; *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: an expanding war, 1966*, United States. Marine Corps. History and Museums Division, 1982, Page 209

²⁷ Laqueur, Walter :“The Origins of Guerrilla Doctrine”. *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (Jul., 1975), pp. 341-382

²⁸ Boucher, John N. “*The History of Westmoreland County Pennsylvania*”, Illustrated Volume I, , New York, Chicago, The Lewis Publishing Company, page 148.

“The Indian troubles had thus been going on from bad to worse since the beginning of the Revolution, and in February and March, 1781, a plan of defense was suggested by General George Rogers Clark, and concurred in by Broadhead and Lochry.”

²⁹ VIRGINIA SERIES, VOLUME III, GEORGE ROGERS CLARK PAPERS 1771-1781, *Virginia Series, Volume III, George Rogers Clark Papers 1771-1781*, Edited with Introduction and Notes by James Alton James, Northwestern University, Published by the Trustees of the Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield, Illinois, 1912, page 552.

“But I have not yet lost sight of Detroit, nothing seem to threaten us but the want of men, But Even should we be able to cut our way thro’ our force may be much less than proposed which was two thousand as defeating the Indians with inconsiderable loss on our side would almost Ensure us success.”

³⁰ In all probability, this would have been a flatboat. A keel boat would have had to much draft for the shallow waters.

³¹ My wife and I always thought of the distance as 12,000 miles. It is approximately 8600 miles via a great circle. However, the Point in Pittsburgh, Pa. is on Longitude 80 degrees West and Danang is on 108 degrees East which put us at just 8 degrees of longitude away from being exactly on opposite side of the earth. I’m still going with 12,000 miles.

³² English, William Hayden, *Conquest of the Country Northwest of the River Ohio 1778-1783 and life of George Rogers Clark, Volume II*, Indianapolis and Kansas City, The Bowen-Merrill Company, 1896. Page 732.

³³ McHenry, Chris “*The Best Men of Westmoreland, An Historical Account of the Lochry Expedition*”, , Lawrenceburg, Indiana, 1981. Page 62.

“No one with Lochry had any real knowledge of the Ohio’s channels and even if they had, the depth of the water was so low after a summer of drought that in places there was no usable channel.

³⁴ McHenry, Chris “*The Best Men of Westmoreland, An Historical Account of the Lochry Expedition*”, Lawrenceburg, Indiana, 1981. Page 62

“Although the horse boat had made it possible to avoid the thorns of briars and locust trees along the overgrown bank, it had posed an even more tortuous problem. The troops could travel only short distances before the heavy barge would become entangled in submerged trees and roots, or aground on yet another mud bar. Every time this happened, it was necessary for the men to wade into the water, and with curses and shouts, forcibly shove it free. The weather as it can be only in the Ohio Valley was punishingly hot, and the sweat rolled in dirty rivulets down their backs as they strained against the forces of nature which impeded their progress. Each day seemed to be more difficult than the last.”

³⁵ “Map reproduction courtesy of the Norman B. Leventhal Map & Education Center at the Boston Public Library”

³⁶ Nostredame, Michel de (Nostredamus) *Les Prophéties* (The Prophecies)

³⁷ Jung, C.G. *SYNCHRONICITY An Acausal Connecting Principle With a new foreword by Sonu Shamdasani Translated by R.F.C. Hull*. Bollingen Series Princeton University Press Princeton and Oxford