

Where the Action Is

By David Aiken

The Navy PBR patrol boat glides slowly and silently along the *clong*, barely making way, yawing slowly from one bank of the narrow waterway to the other. The ominous silence is broken only by the gentle splash of muddy water against the bow, the muted, low rumble of the twin diesel engines, and the occasional screeching of a tropical bird in the treetops. My muscles are taut, every nerve on edge, and my fatigues are soaked with sweat. I wait and watch and listen. The jungle canopy closes in over our heads like a malevolent, green shroud. I crouch low behind the gunwale and ready my weapon, flipping the selector lever from safe to full automatic.

This is enemy territory, Charlie country. No one talks, and the smoking lamp is out. The sound of a voice, the smell of burning tobacco, even a cough, could give away our presence and spoil the element of surprise. The Viet Cong is in charge here, night and day. Charlie owns this jungle, not us. “Victor Charlie,” the military phonetic slang for VC – Viet Cong. Charlie is our enemy, and Charlie could be anyone, any man, any woman, even any child. Anyone who is Vietnamese, that is. No Vietnamese national can be completely trusted, regardless of age or gender or position. The old man who cleans up our headquarters, the Vietnamese Army lieutenant who works alongside me, the little boy who comes by my *hooch* begging for candy. Any of them could be Viet Cong. And any one of them could put a knife between my ribs, or slit my throat, or plant a bomb in my quarters. There are no front lines here, as there were in other wars. Charlie is everywhere, in the cities, in the small villages and farms, and definitely out here in the boonies. But some places are a lot more dangerous than others. This narrow waterway through the jungle is one of those places.

Where the Action Is

After an hour of moving slowly up the *clong* with no action, the radioman taps the chief on the arm and hands him the headphones. The chief listens a moment, keys the microphone and quietly voices a short reply. He nods to the coxswain. The young sailor at the helm spins the wheel hard to port. There is no need for stealth now, and we make no attempts to conceal our presence. The wake generated by the PBR causes waves to spread out in a large “V” behind the boat. The waves crash hard against both banks as we race by. An old woman stands on the shore beside her hut, watching us. I can see the hatred she holds for us in her eyes. A hatred that comes not because our wake has just capsized her small fishing boat and destroyed her rickety dock, but because we are the enemy, foreign invaders in her land.

We quickly exit the narrow *clong* and pull out into a side channel of the Song Hau River. The coxswain pushes the throttles to full. The PBR lurches forward and its bow rises high out of the water as we speed upriver. “What's happening, Chief?” I shout above the roar of the engines. “Is someone under attack?”

“We got a request to pick up wounded a few ‘clicks’ back up the river,” replies the chief.

Our boat suddenly slows, the bow drops back into the murky water, and we turn out of the main channel and into another *clong*, making our way more cautiously now. Sailors jump to man the twin fifty-caliber machine guns mounted fore and aft, their eyes searching the jungle on both sides for any signs of the enemy. The chief tosses me an M-79.

“It will be a lot easier to hit something with this than with that M-16,” he shouts. I lie down on the deck, resting the barrel of the grenade launcher against the gunwale, intently watching the impenetrable jungle. I can now hear the soft pop-pop-popping of small arms fire and the thud of mortars and grenades, their sounds muffled by the thick stand of vegetation.

The chief takes the helm himself now, skillfully steering the PBR along the maze of

Where the Action Is

vegetation and mangrove roots that clog both banks of the waterway. The chief boatswain's mate knows all of the twists and turns of this river, all of the *clongs* and all of the villages along them. His knowledge of where the water runs deep and where the shallows will reach up and grab the thirty-two foot boat as it maneuvers can mean the difference between life and death for the chief and his crew. And, for me as well.

“There it is!” calls the forward lookout as we round another bend. Red smoke from a signal grenade wafts out across the water from somewhere in the jungle. As we draw closer, I can make out three men standing on the shoreline. They are Vietnamese, all wearing black pajamas, their faces streaked green and black with camouflage greasepaint. They have the hardened appearance of seasoned fighters. Vietnamese Rangers. The only way we can tell they are friendlies and not VC is that they are not shooting at us. The coxswain reduces power and the boat slows as it approaches the shoreline. As the boat reaches the bank, the coxswain reverses the thrust of the water jets. We glide into the bank, jerking to a sudden stop as the bow digs deeply into the mud. One of the Rangers shouts something in Vietnamese into the green wall of vegetation behind him and two more men suddenly appear from the cover of the jungle. One of them is a “snake eater,” an American, a Green Beret sergeant. He is the Special Forces adviser to these Vietnamese Rangers. He is dressed exactly as the Rangers he advises. His face also is streaked with green and black. He is recognizable as an American only by his Caucasian features and his height, over six feet.

The Green Beret sergeant is carrying a young boy. He is unconscious, and his arms, and legs and head flop down like those of a rag doll. Without saying a word, the Special Forces soldier passes the kid up to the Navy crewmen standing on the foredeck. They lay him on the deck, face up. The coxswain slowly backs the boat away from the riverbank. The American

Where the Action Is

advisor and his small group of Rangers instantly melt back into the jungle.

I kneel down beside the wounded boy. He is young, too young to be a soldier, even in the armies of this forgotten corner of hell. Twelve or thirteen. Maybe fourteen at most. He is dressed only in a pair of bloody, black shorts. A filthy field dressing covers the bullet wound in his abdomen. The medical corpsman, himself not much older than his patient, shoves a needle into one of the boy's thin arms and hands the IV line to me. I quickly connect a bag of sterile saline to the line. Opening the stopcock, I hold the bag high above my head, allowing the solution to drip into the boy's vein, replacing the blood that has leaked away from the hole in his belly. The Navy corpsman inserts another IV into the boy's other arm and connects it to another bag of saline. "GO!" he shouts to the coxswain.

The PBR leaps ahead again. I grab the low gunwale to keep from sliding off into the water as we make full speed upriver, rapidly closing the distance between ourselves and the docks at Can Tho City. Dark clouds have started building up to the west.

"Who is this kid, Chief?" I ask. "Dunno," comes the reply. "Too young to be a Ranger. Could be VC, could be a friendly who just got caught in the cross fire."

The boy's pulse is thready, an indication that his blood pressure is dangerously low. He has lost too much blood, has been too long in getting help. He has gone into shock. His organs are beginning to shut down, a prelude to death.

The Navy docks at Can Tho come into sight. A field ambulance is standing by to meet us, alerted to our approach by radio. Rain has already started to fall. We pull alongside the pier and gently lift the boy up to the waiting arms of the Vietnamese medics. The corpsman hands one IV to a medic, and I climb up after him, still holding the other. They put the wounded boy onto a stretcher and shove him into the rear of the vehicle. Siren wailing, the ambulance slowly leaves

Where the Action Is

the dock, squeezing through the noisy crowd of bicycles, pedestrians, young couples on smoking mopeds, and children at play.

This is where I get off. I thank the chief for the ride. “Anytime,” he shouts above the noise, as he hands my M-16 up to me. “Next time, we’ll take you out to where the action is.”