

A Lightning 'STAB' Initiates an Ambush

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Fifth in a series

East of Phuoc Xuyen on the Grand Canal, Vietnam — it was a lovely spring evening — the flowers were fragrant, the girls beautiful, the natives friendly.

This was the second night of my trip and my stomach was full from the dinner the Vietnamese sailors had prepared from C rations and rice they had just bought.

I was on ambush with two of the fenceposts of the Barrier Reef — a STAB (strike assault boat) and ALPHA (assault support boat). The two boats were together because the STAB needed the protection of the heavily armed and armored ALPHA. The STAB was there because of its incredible speed — the result of two 325 h.p. engines in a boat not much bigger than a ski barge, according to Lt.

Cmdr. Kirk Ferguson, commander of the STAB Sq.

Then danger came racing over the air waves. Down the canal west of our position a STAB requested permission to fire on 15 people they spotted moving across the canal from the north side to the south side.

"Permission granted," went out over the airwaves from Lt. Dale McMullen on the command and control boat somewhere near Phuoc Xuyen on the canal. McMullen commands a section of the Barrier Reef.

Shortly afterward the STAB captain excitedly reported through chattering of M60s that he was making firing runs and receiving AK47 fire. When a STAB is making a firing run he is on step — doing over 45 m.p.h.

Only its quickness and speed will save it and its crew from destruction.

"We're being mortared,"

cried the boat captain and the whoosh of the projectiles could be heard over the radio. "Those are B40s," corrected McMullen.

About a week before, a STAB sitting still in ambush, caught three B40s which killed three men and wounded one but did not touch the boat captain, who was able to drive the boat out of the kill zone. Those were the first STAB casualties. The boats have been operating in Vietnam about a month.

The STAB reported people fleeing into the woodline 200 meters behind some houses on the left side of the bank. Before the people crossed he said he had seen lights blinking in one of the houses but it quickly went out when the firing started.

Two big heavies came up and began supporting the STAB with 20mm cannon fire and M79 grenades. Black Ponys and Seawolves, Navy planes and heli-

copters, were on the scene within minutes, and the opposition faded.

However, the planes and copters were allowed to fire only on the north bank, because the My An district chief would not clear the south bank because of the inhabitants. He feared for their safety, said the district adviser.

But the Navy officer was having none of his excuses. "Our people wonder when something like this happens, when the boats are fired upon and then can't fire back even if they are in a woodline away from the houses."

The district adviser said he understood but there was nothing he could do.

Then firing started up east of us on the canal and the Black Ponys and Seawolves again put on their magnificent fire display.

But soon everything quieted

down — the crickets began to chirp, the villagers to sleep. Lights swung in front of the darkened hooches, and the sailors on watch amused themselves by watching the natives slip out to answer nature's call.

They could be VC trying to cross — that was a chilling thought. In the quiet, pleasant hamlet death and destruction could come flying from any direction at any time.

"Didi Mau (leave)," a pretty maiden had called softly from the river where she was bathing as we pulled up at our ambush site at dusk. It was easy to understand her wish.

I fell asleep on top of the STAB's engines too tired to stay awake all night. Tomorrow I would be going down the canal to continue my trip.

Pacific Stars & Stripes 7
Friday, April 24, 1970