

Brown Water Adventure

River Rats Roam Mekong



Navymen churn their way down a canal on a trip to Phuoc Xuyen in the Mekong Delta. They

are part of the operation designed to hinder VC movement in the area. (S&S)

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Fourth in a series

PHUOC XUYEN, Vietnam — Riding on a minesweeping drone is like riding on a water ski behind a boat with a 250HP engine.

One gets the same feeling of exhilaration and when the drone hits a wave, just as drenched. The drone was taking me from the Basak River to the Mekong River via a connection branch.

One moment we were flying by the lush farms on the banks of the Mekong River, the sun sparkling on the rippled water. The next moment we were sitting ignominiously in the middle of the Mekong, drifting slowly by the farms, and trying to halt the backward progress of the boat by grasping at a fisherman's banana stalk buoy.

The propeller shaft had frozen, rendering the engine impotent.

"Oh, is Cornelius going to love this," said Seaman Cody S. Emanuel. Cornelius is a chief petty officer in charge of the maintenance of the drones at the Benewah, a supply and barrack ship moored in the Mekong.

Maintenance and supply people aren't appreciated until something breaks down or runs out.

In about 45 minutes a boat arrived to tow us to the Benewah. It was good to see them. One M16 and a radio doesn't seem like much protection when you are marooned in the vast expanse of the Mekong, especially when the big river barges begin bearing down upon your tiny craft.

Cornelius shook his head when he saw what had happened. The needed parts are scarce and sometimes take up to a year to arrive from the states. And he had just used his last spare part on another boat the day before. So goes the life of a maintenance man.

The fighting sailors, or River Rats, as they call themselves, face the daily hazards of flying bullets or shell fragments, C-rations, and sores from muddy water. The men on the Benewah face different hazards — tedium and regulated harassment. Most of the river rats, who wear jungle fatigues, and the Benewah sailors, who wear blue dungarees, agree that they prefer bullets to boredom.

The Benewah has air conditioning, hot meals, and comfortable beds. A good life for someone passing through.

And some of the supply people are not adverse to making a little profit on the side. A coke cost me and the river rats with me 25 cents, and while we drank them the sailor selling the cokes regaled us with tales of the good old days when he was on troop ships and made a good living off the soldiers.

Not all the supply people live in air-conditioned comfort. Some of the river boats are used as supply boats, and River Rats run them. I caught a ride on Romeo 1, a converted landing craft, which was making its daily supply run down the Grand Canal to Phuoc Xuyen in the Plain of Reeds.

The Grand Canal is the middle section of the barrier that runs across the Delta. The operation is called Barrier Reef. Phuoc Xuyen is in the middle of the reef and is a point on the canal that the boats tie up for the day. At night they scatter to their various ambush sites. The Romeo brings in their water, fuel, C-rations mail and occasional hot meals.

The tide was just coming in when we entered the canal. There were points where the boat scraped bottom and has to slow down. The Tangos, or heavies, are the slowest of the riverboats, and the Vietnamese were continually passing us in their little sampans.

Occasionally, a sampan foolishly moored to a tuft of

grass would break loose and race along with us for about a hundred yards before crashing to a stop into the bank. Tractors cultivated fields as far as the eye could see, and rarely were the houses more than 50 yards apart. This part of the barrier was inhabited and prosperous.

There were watermelons in abundance — on the banks, in the sampans going to market and in the hands of little boys who tried to hit us with them — most of them falling short, to our hungry dismay. The day before though, boat captain P.O. 2C Joseph Odette, said the boat was hit by seven watermelons right across the bow — "a significant contact."

Finally the Romeo arrived at the long line of boats near Phuoc Xuyen and began disgorging its cargo. Sailors lined up to buy refreshments, and mamasans in their omnipresent sampans crowded around to sell ice and other favors.

The Romeo soon headed back to the Benewah for the night so it could begin another day of supply. The rest of us prepared to leave for ambush sites where bullets and shrapnel could be found.