



DEATH OF THE 43

Between the hours of 1800-1900, 12 April 1969, at a well-camouflaged sector along the narrow Duong Keo, southernmost in South Vietnam's vast system of navigable waterways, U.S. Navy PCF's ("swiftboats") then supporting Vietnamese Marine river operations under the aegis of SEALORDS incurred their most devastating and demoralizing setback to date. A well-planned and perfectly executed Viet Cong heavy weapons ambush inflicted heavy material damage to every swiftboat unit involved in the action and accounted for thirty-nine wounded in action, many seriously and requiring immediate medical evacuation. Vietnamese Marine casualties were of equal severity.

One of the eight boats involved, PCF 43, was totally destroyed during the encounter. Its mangled, blackened carcass still rests on the ambush site, a somewhat grotesque testament and sepulcher to the forlorn events of that bitter hour. Of her seventeen embarked Navymen, including ten members of Underwater Demolition Team THIRTEEN Detachment GOLF and one SEALORDS staff officer, two were killed: LTJG Don Droz, the boat OIC, and HMC Robert Worthington, the UDT corpsman. Only three of the remaining fifteen

escaped unscathed. UDT wounded in action include SM3 Art Ruiz, Seaman Michael Sandlin, SM3 Robert Lowry, Seaman William Piper, GMG3 Ricky Hinson, and LTJG Peter Upton.

LTJG Upton's story revolves around the thoughts and actions of those fifteen and is intended to stand as a tribute to their raw courage, a reflection of their brute will to survive.

Vietnamese mornings are singularly beautiful and manifest a stark antithesis to the rather brutal fact that the country is pervaded by deprivation and the ravagings of war. The morning of 12 April was true to that idyllic form: a typical golden-hued glimmer emanating from the pastelled East suffusing into the mellow radiance of the silvery West as the sun and moon exchanged benign glances, then gracefully parted. However, this morning elegance passed quickly, blending into the searing heat of early afternoon, when word was passed to UDT promulgating the modus operandi and logistics requirements for the upcoming three-day SEALORDS operation. Lusty grunting supplemented the detachments more basic four-letter vocabulary as personal gear, weapons, "C" rations and over eight hundred pounds of high explosives were then transferred from the tank stowage deck of the WESCHESTER COUNTY, LST 1167, onto the fantail of the PCF 43, assigned to support UDT for the day. It was about 1630 hours when UDT personnel scampered down the sagging cargo net, consummating the already bulking load.

Rendezvous with the PCF units involved in the mission took place approximately one hour later, one thousand meters outside the gaping mouth of the Duong Keo, the watery path which would lead to the day's assigned sweep area. Forty-three informed the command boat of her special cargo, then took her assigned station as the rear element of a stately file of eight units. Flak gear was donned and battle stations manned on the fantail as the boats proceeded to enter the foreboding jaws of this river, infamous for its demonstrated hostility to allied units who dared venture into her inner reaches.

On this day a Viet Cong heavy weapons company, consisting of approximately seventy-five hard-core guerrillas, was located in the area of the Duong Keo when they received warning through an elaborately contrived signal system that a swiftboat incursion was underway. A well fortified sector, up the river about five kilometers, interlaced with freshly built bunker, trench, and spider-hole emplacements and permeated with thick mangrove vegetation provided excellent cover for their weapons positions. Almost guaranteed of success, the enemy set up and waited. . .

. . . Discipline was perfect: the Viet Cong patiently awaited the greatest possible number of boats to be encompassed in their kill zone, then triggered the ambush with a claymore mine aimed at the lead boat. All hell broke loose as a murderous fusillade of rocket, recoilless rifle, machine gun, and small arms fire ensued. Every boat in the file received immediate hits and personnel casualties, but each roared back with her full arsenal of heavy .50 caliber machine guns. One by one the boats maneuvered upstream, out of enemy range. seeking open ground on which to set up an emergency medical evacuation station.

PCF 43 never made it. Her position as last unit in the file, aggravated by her heavy load, combined to seal her doom. For, as

the lead boats were exiting the kill zone and scrambling to safety upstream, the 43 was just arriving; as the first seven boats churned and leapt forward in violent reaction, throttles to the wall, the 43 succumbed to her bulk, falling farther and farther behind until she was relatively alone, hopelessly alienated in the center of the kill zone.

Viet Cong gunners then focused on the hapless intruder. Singled out for the kill, the 43 was ripped asunder, inexorably, and with lightning-like quickness: cascading water spouts signaled the near misses, though gunners at point-blank range will miss but once. One B-40 rocket found the fantail, instantly killing Doc Worthington. Hinson and Piper received frag wounds from the blast, Piper's helmet perforated and blown off by a piece of shrapnel. AK-47 rounds raked the deck, one piercing Sandlin's left leg, leaving a clean, though gaping wound. Another rocket exploded in the pilot house, mortally wounding the OIC and knocking the coxswain unconscious for precious seconds. Naked, without a guiding hand, 43 gesticulated wildly and careened into the north bank of the river, coming to her final, alien rest, high and dry amidst the mangrove foliage directly in front of the Viet Cong emplacements.

The bewildering, awesome reality of the situation was beclouded by momentary shock. The enemy, probably in a similar state of amazement, did not organize directly and afforded the 43's survivors invaluable minutes in which to orient themselves. Lt. Lomas scurried into the pilot house and aided the wounded there. Sandlin's pain was eased by a quick shot of morphine and a battle dressing. The sporadic shrapnel wounds of a minor nature were of no immediate concern. Survival, and survival only, was paramount, and to live, the survivors knew they had to fight. To this end, a hasty defense perimeter was formed. Campbell, with Piper and Broderick on the fantail, maintained constant M-79 grenade fire into the north bank. Luckily, the 43 boat canted toward the river and provided some natural cover for them. Crew members, discarding the .50 caliber weapons as useless, grabbed M-16 rifles and set up firing positions covering the south bank, thereby providing the stricken unit with a 360 degree perimeter.

Simultaneous with these actions, Ruiz and Lowry found the detachment's M-60 machine gun, and, using the 43's hull for cover, slid past the bow in order to set up a firing position in a natural emplacement ten meters away. Sandlin, ready to go, was given a rifle and carried to this frontal position thereby supplying additional firepower.

Concussion grenades were also used to supplement these basic weapons in the forty minute effort to ward off any attempts of an enemy assault. The foliage proved indeed provident, absorbing much of the enemy fire while precluding his use of rockets and heavy rounds altogether. Though continuous, the resulting incoming fire was relatively ineffective. Only Ruiz was seriously wounded in the ground action as a Chinese hand grenade exploded next to his M-60 firing position. Heroic acts became well-nigh routine as 43 was transformed into a blazing bunker: some fired while Hinson passed ammunition and loaded M-16 magazines; weapons jammed and were replaced; hand grenades were exchanged with the enemy but twenty

meters away, a diabolical chess game, one Viet Cong spider hole checkmated by Lowry's accurate throw. As a result of this aggressive perimeter action, the necessary volume of fire was sustained and the enemy never risked a frontal onslaught.

Thoughts gravitated toward rescue: where in almighty hell were the other boats? 43's radio was destroyed beyond repair and the backup PRC-25 unit set up by Lt. Lomas and the SEALORDS staff officer lacked the transmission power to break into the net already froth with urgent traffic. PCF 38, seventh boat in the file, was just heading out of 43's sight when she realized her trailing sister was missing. Brazenly, she attempted to implement rescue by reentering the ambush site. Thirty-eight's bravery was thwarted by a rocket round which slammed into her pilot house, severely wounding the OIC and rendering her steering useless. The coxswain's skillful manipulation of the twin screw throttles enabled the boat to limp out of the kill zone without suffering further damage.

Upon reaching the medevac area, 38 passed the word of distress, thereby galvanizing the command boat, PCF 31, and a cohort, PCF 5, into swift action. Both boats entered the kill zone with guns roaring and arrived intact at the scene of battle. Thirty-one maneuvered into a position adjacent to the wreckage while 5 poured out covering fire. Long prayed-for extraction became a euphoric reality as dead and wounded persons were passed up, and finally, the perimeter was withdrawn, exhausted and unbelieving. The evacuation completed, 31 and 5 raced to the medevac perimeter where the dazed men of 43 joined the somber procession, ferrying the wounded to the dustoff helicopters, vainly trying to collect and convey their thoughts of the past hour. The air was heavy with a pungent haze of disbelief.

Meanwhile, only twenty minutes after her crew and UDT had been evacuated, 43's fate was sealed as over a thousand pounds of high explosives and mortar rounds concocted an eruption of cataclysmic intensity, hurling a spuming vortex of flame, smoke, and twisting metal over five hundred feet into the air—her twin diesels could not be halted during the fight, had overheated and ignited fuel, thus starting the irrevocable chain which ended in her ultimate destruction.

Wisely, the boats refused to risk a night transit and bivouacked in the river, tethering to mangrove stumps within the reinforced defense perimeter. Few of the 43 boat's survivors could muster the strength to close their eyes; frozen to the decks of their new homes, they gazed into the starry firmament, wondering, reckoning...

. . . First light of 13 April manifested typical magnificence; lacking, however, were contemplative spirits necessary for the breathing in of such grandeur. Following the sumptuousness of mawkish tomato juice and canned scrambled eggs, orders were barked and the perimeter troops reembarked in order to proceed with the days schedule of sweeps. The buzzing activity provided a well-needed elixir, forcing wretched visions of the previous day's ambush into realms of temporary obscurity. Towards nightfall the sweeps terminated and the Marines formed protective enclaves for the night's rest. The swiftboats, released from support duty, then

formed the classic file and headed to sea and safety, retracing the path of the tragic twelfth.

Short minutes after getting underway the boats passed the still-life remains of the 43, an aesthetic aberration suspended on the north bank of the Duong Keo, simply out of joint with her surroundings. Looking at her bow, bending towards the azure heavens in a searching gesture, one could almost feel motion, a groping for the malignancy which was the cause of her agonizing death. The uninitiated might further try to recreate the essence of the once pulsating holocaust which presently stood calmly before them. The vibrant sensations of that enormity—the anguish, the torments, the frustrations, and the ecstasy—however, will forever remain an esoteric fact, privy to the surviving fifteen: no effort of meditation could possibly reveal those secrets.

By LTJG Peter N. Upton
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