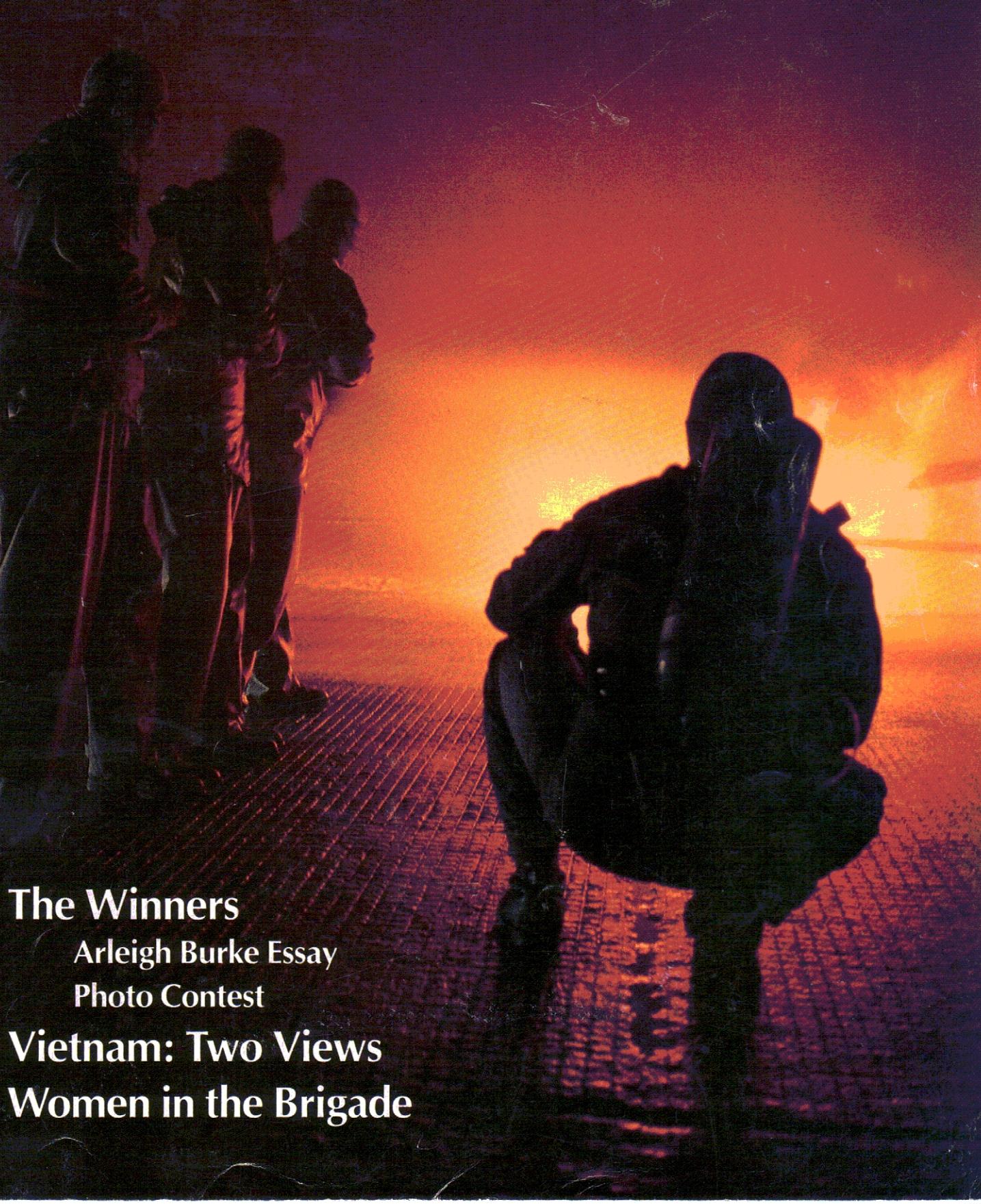


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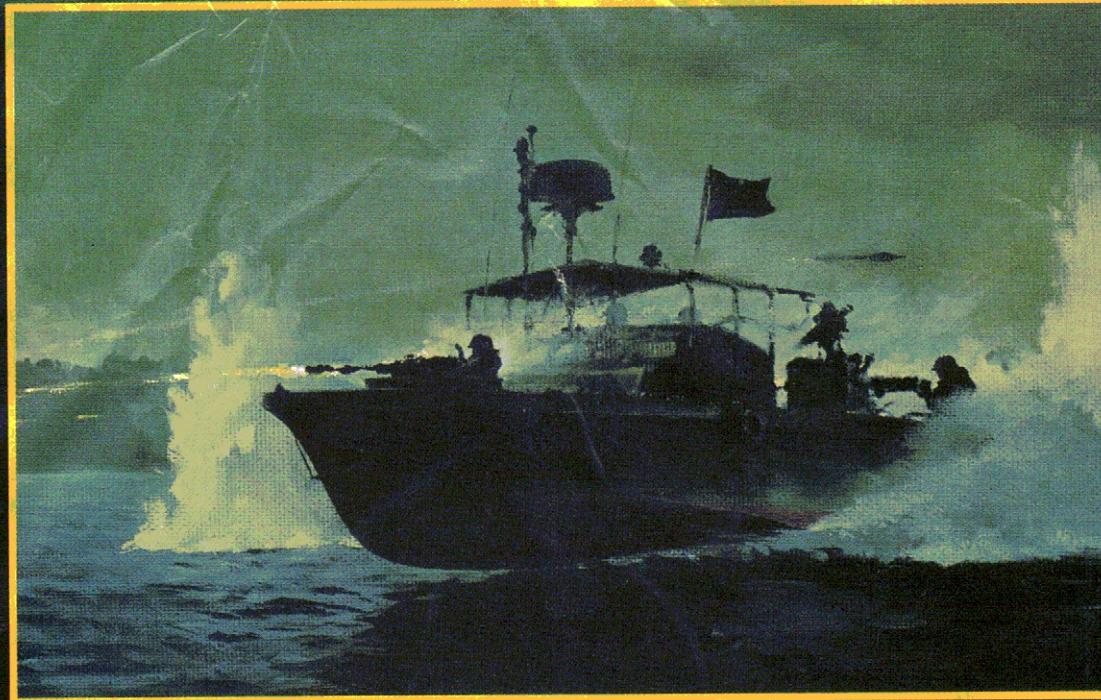
Photo Contest

Vietnam: Two Views

Women in the Brigade

Vietnam: Two Views

Vietnam's Mekong Delta was a dangerous place in 1968-69. The enemy was as unforgiving as the soggy climate and swampy terrain. U. S. Navy waterborne, air, and land forces all had the same objective, but each had a different perspective on the war in the Delta. Two such personal views follow: those of a river patrol boat skipper patrolling the Bassac River in 1968, and a crew member in the Navy's OV-10 Bronco Black Ponies squadron in 1969.



God Be Here

By Lieutenant Commander Thomas J. Cutler, U. S. Navy

The lieutenant pulled off his black beret and threw it down on top of the PBR's grenade locker. The black loop of ribbon at the back of the beret had been cut into two pennants—among PBR sailors this signified that he had made his first contact with the enemy—and the ends of each pennant were notched with a V to represent his first enemy kill. Both ceremonial cuts had been made a long time ago. The lieutenant had tallied several hundred patrols since joining River Section 511, and he had engaged the enemy in more than 60 firefights. Back in his locker in Binh Thuy, under a pile of neatly folded olive-drab undershirts, was a Purple Heart he had earned last November when a piece of shrapnel lodged in his jaw. He had had a PBR shot out from under him as well, and he and his crew had been raked by intense small-arms fire at close range while they swam for their lives. . . .

Despite all the action that the lieutenant had seen, the enlisted men in River Section 511 liked to have him along as patrol officer on their patrols. He was a "cool head" in combat, and as a "mustang"—an enlisted man who had worked his way up through the ranks—he knew what enlisted men were all about and how to look out for them. There was another reason they liked having him as patrol officer. Sailors are by nature superstitious, and men in combat are often more religious than they were back home. So the sailors liked having the lieutenant along because his name was Dick Godbehere, pronounced exactly as spelled: God-be-here! It was not uncommon to hear someone say, in a play on words that had a measure of seriousness, "I'd rather have Godbehere than anyone else."

The year was 1968, two days before the start of the Vietnamese holiday called Tet. Lieutenant Godbehere's patrol had been assigned a psychological operations mission, one designed to get information to villagers about the government and the war effort. The PBRs were good vehicles for these missions because they could get close to the people in the delta by traveling the rivers and canals. Godbehere's PBR was rigged with a tape recorder and large speakers to broadcast their message, an appeal for the South Vietnamese Government's *Chieu Hoi* (open arms) program—the amnesty program that promised protection, money, clothes, and food for any VC who wished to change sides. A sign on each side of the PBR said in Vietnamese, "This is a *Chieu Hoi* Rally Point. You will be welcomed here." Godbehere looked at the sign and wondered if any ralliers (called *Hoi Chanh*s) would turn themselves in to him that day. That had happened to other PBRs on patrol, but so far never to Godbehere. He had read a report somewhere that said 28,000 *Hoi Chanh*s had

rallied in the previous year. He had also read that the estimated cost of the *Chieu Hoi* program was about \$150 per *Hoi Chanh*—compared to the unofficial estimate of \$9,000 worth of ammunition expended per enemy killed.

The two-boat patrol got under way and headed down the Bassac River toward the major delta city of Can Tho. Godbehere disliked psychological operations patrols because the PBRs had to move slowly in order to allow the messages to be heard, which made them very vulnerable to attack, and because listening to the taped messages over and over challenged his sanity.

After about 20 minutes, the tape recorder was switched on and the crew settled in for what promised to be a boring patrol. The pre-mission brief had predicted a quiet run. Just a few weeks back, General William Desobry, U. S. Army, upon being relieved as U. S. military advisory chief in the delta region, told reporters that the Viet Cong were "poorly motivated, poorly trained" and that the South Vietnamese Army "has the upper hand completely." The area around Can Tho was considered relatively friendly.

But as they plodded along, Godbehere had been scanning the banks, and the hair at the back of his neck was beginning to prickle. He had seen the grass-covered huts along the banks with chickens clucking and strutting in front. Tools rested against thatched walls and fishnets were piled or strewn about. An occasional water buffalo would swing its massive horned head in their direction to detect the source of noise as they passed, and the grunting of pigs could sometimes be heard over the rumble of the engines. Rice baskets swayed on hooks in the breeze and hints of incense tickled the nostrils every now and then. It was a pastoral scene except for one element: not a single human being had been in sight for the last several miles. Godbehere had been around long enough to know that this usually spelled trouble.

"I don't like the looks of this, Boats," he said to the boat captain.

"I know, sir. Too quiet," came the reply. The boat captain had one hand resting lightly on the reined-in throttles. "Gunner, get your helmet on," he called forward to the third-class petty officer lounging in the gun tub.

The rest of the crew fastened their flak jackets and warily watched the banks.

Godbehere said to no one in particular, "Charlie's out there. I can feel him."

Seconds crept into minutes as perspiration flowed down tense brows into anxious eyes. The minutes grew into hours that seemed like days as they droned along, the taped Vietnamese voice appealing to unseen ears. Twenty-



COURTESY OF D. GODBEHERE

eight miles passed and nothing happened, yet the tension remained. Something was unquestionably wrong.

As they turned about for the return trip, the boat captain said, "Maybe it's got something to do with this Tet holiday thing. Maybe that's why nobody's around."

"Maybe," Godbehere said, not believing it.

The return trip was more of the same. Everything looked normal in the villages except for the absence of the people. The Americans passed from hamlet to hamlet feeling as if they were the only humans left in the world. Only the infrequent passage of a plane or the distant *whop-whop* of helicopter blades occasionally dispelled this sensation. Godbehere couldn't shake the feeling of being watched, of believing that at any moment all hell would break loose.

But it never did. The patrol ended at last, and Godbehere and the others returned to base trying to work the knots of tension out of their muscles. They were exhausted.

That night after Godbehere had filed his patrol report and turned in, he lay under his green mosquito net watching the geckos patrolling the walls of his hootch in search of insect prey. He wondered what the strange day meant. The signs were there for trouble—the situation had "ambush" written all over it. And the PBRs were so vulnerable at the low speed required by the mission—Charlie could have hit them if it had in fact been an ambush. But he didn't. Why? Maybe the boat captain was right: maybe it had something to do with Tet. Maybe the villagers had all gone to their temples or something. . . . No, the animals wouldn't have been left to wander and the tools would have been put away. There were people nearby; he was sure of it. . . . But why were they hiding? If Charlie was there, why hadn't he ambushed the PBRs? . . .

Godbehere mulled over these possibilities for a long time before he was able to go to sleep.

Two days later, Dick Godbehere had his answers. The enemy had chosen the Tet holiday of 1968 to launch a coordinated, country-wide offensive within South Vietnam. Thirty-six of the 44 provincial capitals, five of the

Brown water sailors liked having Lieutenant Godbehere along as patrol officer when they worked their way along the Delta's Cong-rich canals. He was a mustang with 60 firefights under his belt and a piece of shrapnel in his jaw, and the men figured his name would shield them like a St. Christopher's medal.

six major cities, and many district capitals and hamlets were attacked by communist forces. In the Mekong Delta, the attacks involved 13 of the 16 provincial capitals, including Can Tho, the city near which Godbehere's patrol had been. Four days before Tet, the enemy troops had moved into the hamlets around Can Tho in preparation for the assault. Godbehere had been right: Charlie was there when the PBRs had come through. He had apparently refrained from attacking the small game of two PBRs in order not to reveal his presence before the large-scale attack on Can Tho scheduled to begin in unison with the other attacks throughout the country on the first day of Tet.

The battles of the Tet Offensive raged for 77 days. Game Warden units played a significant role in reversing the tide of battle in the delta. By chance, some units happened to be in the vicinity of the city of Chau Doc, involved in a planned interdiction operation called "Bold Dragon I," when the Tet Offensive began. These few Game Warden sailors and the SEALs on the operation with them played a major role in the defense of the city. The VC battalions assigned to capture Chau Doc, told that they would be met with waving banners and open arms, were quite surprised when met by the resistance led by the Game Warden sailors. PBRs and Seawolf helicopters also provided the firepower that held the enemy at bay in Ben Tre until reinforcing ground troops could arrive to drive the attackers out of the city.

During February, Lieutenant Godbehere was involved in a few skirmishes on the periphery of the major battles, but nothing terribly significant. This proved to be a lull before the storm for Dick Godbehere.

Lieutenant Godbehere's two-PBR patrol left Binh Thuy and headed southeast on the Bassac River en route to its assigned patrol area. The sky was growing dark, and the air was cool for a March night in the Mekong Delta.

Signalman Third Class Jere Beery, the after gunner on the PBR carrying Godbehere, politely looked away as one of the other crew members squatted over the rail of the boat, paying the price for having indulged in a local village's culinary delights. Privacy is one of the casualties of war—particularly on a 31-foot boat with no head.

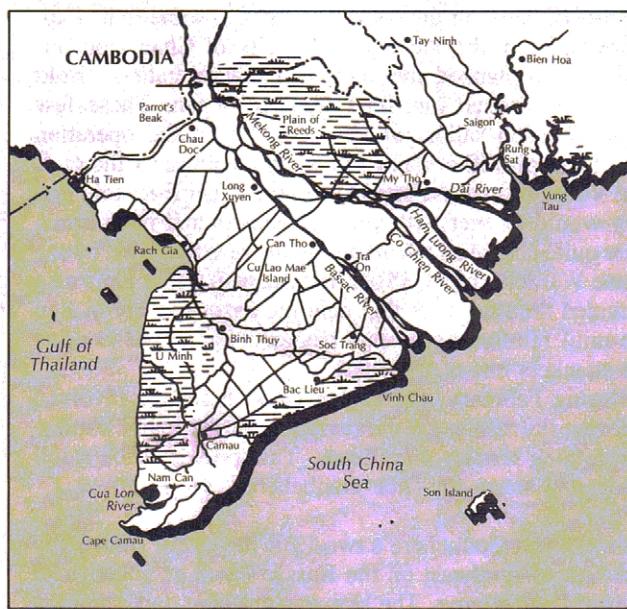
Beery looked down at his own tailor-made camouflage uniform, but the sky was too dark for him to really see it. He had just bought the outfit from a local Vietnamese seamstress and was wearing it for the first time. His shipmates had teased him about it, saying, "Hey, Jere, where are you? I can't see you with those camis on," or "Look at the walking tree."

The PBRs passed by Can Tho. Most of the city was quiet and dark, but the distant rattle of a machine gun

could be heard from the far side. Some weeks back, Can Tho had been enveloped in artillery fire and exploding aircraft ordnance as the allied forces fought to dislodge the Viet Cong from the university there. Beery had heard that the once beautiful Faculty of Science building had been reduced to smoking rubble, but he hadn't seen it.

A reporter who had come along for a story bumped into something in the dark and cursed the offending object and its ancestry. Beery remembered another occasion when a pair of reporters had talked Beery's boat captain into taking them into an infamous area known as the Ti Ti Canal. One of the pair was a large-framed man, wearing brand-new fatigues, who had told the section's commanding officer, "We need to show the people back in the States exactly what our boys are going through over here." The other was a man about half his companion's size. They had lugged several cases of camera equipment on board for the patrol. On the way to the canal, the big man was standing on the engine covers with his 16-mm. motion-

South Vietnam: Mekong Delta



picture camera on top of the boat's awning. As they neared the canal, Bailey, the boat captain, had hollered back to Beery, "Tell that son-of-a-bitch to get down here and put on a flak jacket and helmet." Beery relayed the message (in more polite terms), only to be rebuffed. "I can't maneuver the camera with all that stuff on," the big reporter had said. No sooner had he uttered those words than automatic-weapons fire erupted from both banks. The 16-mm. camera flew up into the air as the big reporter dove into the coxswain's flat, landing right at Bailey's feet. The boat captain kicked the reporter and yelled, "You better get up there and get your pictures, you son-of-a-bitch, we ain't comin' through here for you again!" The reporter's camera had been broken, and the only things to show for their efforts were a few still photo-

graphs taken by the little reporter and 136 bullet-entry holes in the hull of the PBR.

The two PBRs passed the upriver end of Cu Lao Mae Island. It was totally black on the river now. Only the radar could see.

A sudden flash of light appeared in Beery's peripheral vision over his left shoulder. He turned and realized that it must have been a B-40 rocket, for a second one had just emerged from the darkness of the island. Both rockets were well off target.

Beery could hear Lieutenant Godbehere on the radio—"Red Rose, this is Hand Lash Delta"—checking to make sure there were no friendly units in the area. All gunners were holding their fire, not only because of the possibility of friendly units but because the flashes from their weapons would give Charlie something besides sound to aim at.

Godbehere got the clearance he sought from "Red Rose" and ordered his patrol units to start a firing run. The PBRs swooped in toward the island and hammered the darkness from which the rockets had come. Flames of small-arms fire and machine-gun bursts flickered in the trees on shore as the boats roared in.

Beery squeezed off about a hundred rounds and then leaned down to open another canister of ammunition. Two fireballs burst out of the trees as he bent over. Beery recognized them as B-40 rounds but was certain that they would miss. He was wrong: one of the rockets struck the gunwale on the starboard quarter and exploded.

Lieutenant Godbehere was just aft of the coxswain's flat when the rocket hit. As he saw the reddish-orange rocket explode, he felt a blast of heat and pieces of shrapnel tearing into his legs. A few moments later a second rocket found its mark, this one detonating against the grenade locker on the starboard side. Godbehere, thrown to the deck by the blast, climbed back to his feet and looked about, trying to assess his situation. A gunner named Sherman had been standing near Godbehere before the hits; now he was gone. Godbehere thought he had been blown overboard, but soon he appeared next to the lieutenant, a steel fragment protruding from the back of his arm and another lodged in his foot. Aft, Godbehere saw that Beery was still standing at his gun but wasn't firing. "Go see what's wrong with Beery," Godbehere told Sherman and then turned his attention back to the battle that was still raging.

The other PBR in the patrol had been hit many times, and the damage to both boats was too severe to warrant any further engagement. Godbehere ordered the boat captains to retire to a safe location so that they could evacuate their wounded.

Sherman reappeared and said, "Beery's hurt bad, Mr. Godbehere."

Godbehere moved aft. Every step was painful; clearly, his legs had taken a lot of metal. When he got to Beery, the young gunner was still standing and holding on to his weapon. "Where're you hit?" Godbehere asked.

"In the gut," Beery rasped.

Godbehere looked down. To his dismay and horror, he saw that Beery's abdomen had been sliced open by the



exploding rocket: his intestines were trailing down to a grisly heap on the PBR's deck.

Godbehere grasped Beery firmly by the shoulders and, with Sherman's help, laid him down on the deck, then carefully piled the moist entrails onto Beery's abdomen. With a large battle dressing he cautiously covered the hideous mound. Sherman cut away Beery's trousers; the new camis were full of shrapnel holes, and his right leg and hip were a mess. A large piece of shrapnel had penetrated Beery's stomach and was protruding from his back. Godbehere doubted that Beery was going to live.

While Godbehere and Sherman worked, trying to dress Beery's many wounds, Beery tried to speak but didn't have sufficient breath left to be heard above the PBR's engines. He pulled Godbehere down and whispered in his ear. "If I don't make it," he said so softly that Godbehere could barely hear him, "tell my mom and dad what happened."

Godbehere said, "You're going to be all right. Your intestines just fell out. They can put 'em back for you. They do it all the time. You'll be okay."

Beery shook his head slowly.

Godbehere yelled, "Goddammit, Jere, you're going to be all right!"

The two PBRs were out of the firefight by this time, and Godbehere ordered them to head for Tra On village on the east bank of the Bassac River opposite Cu Lao Mae Island. Godbehere had visited several of the eight U. S. Army advisors there, and he knew the village pretty well. It was the nearest place he could think of to effect a safe medical evacuation. As the two boats headed downriver toward Tra On, Godbehere told Bailey to get on the radio and call for "Pedro," the Air Force medical evacuation helicopter. For the rest of the run into Tra On, Godbehere knelt next to Beery in a pool of their mingled blood, ignoring his own wounds and trying to soothe the mangled

PBRs did well on psychological operations because they could get so close to the people who lived along the delta's rivers and canals. But they slogged along slowly as an on-board loudspeaker blared out government messages—fat targets for the VC who watched them from hiding, omnipresent as jungle geckos.

man's fear and despair.

At the village, the Army advisors loaded Beery onto a stretcher. As they started to carry him off the boat, Beery smiled weakly and said, "I don't know how those guys managed to hit me." He held up a tattered remnant of his brand-new camouflage shirt. "I thought I looked like a tree."

Neither Lieutenant Godbehere nor Petty Officer Beery ever fought in Vietnam again. Dick Godbehere's wounds were serious enough to cause his evacuation for recovery and reassignment. He eventually retired from the Navy as a lieutenant commander.

The same spirit that had permitted Jere Beery to make a joke about his camouflage uniform in his hour of crisis got him through a long and trying ordeal of recovery. He lived and went on to become a motion-picture stunt man.

Commander Cutler served as an in-country naval advisor to South Vietnamese forces from January to December 1972, taking part in numerous river and harbor patrols, coastal surveillance operations, and Vietnamization projects. He also served on the staff of the U. S. naval advisory group in Saigon. He now teaches history at the U. S. Naval Academy and writes the monthly "Books of Interest" column for *Proceedings*.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This account is an excerpt from Brown Water, Black Berets: Coastal and Riverine Warfare in Vietnam, due to appear from the Naval Institute Press next month.

The Black Ponies

By Lieutenant Commander Daniel B. Sheehan, U. S. Navy (Retired)

In retrospect, March 1969 was a strange time to base a newly commissioned Navy OV-10 Bronco squadron in South Vietnam. Increasing public pressure to end the war resulted from—and in turn spurred—massive bombing campaigns in and around Vietnam. While Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and the North Vietnamese envoy argued over the shape and size of the peace conference negotiators' table, Jane Fonda and Ramsey Clark marched a little too enthusiastically to their own drummers, and increasingly frustrated U. S. military forces continued to take casualties under an increasingly obvious no-win policy.

But these thoughts were not foremost in my mind when the stretch DC-8 carrying Light Attack Squadron Four (VAL-4) arrived in Saigon. I was a first-tour naval aviator and a plankowner in the only Navy squadron flying OV-10As—the Black Ponies. VAL-4 was the only Navy OV-10 squadron and, as far as I know, the only squadron in Vietnam to use the Bronco in an attack role. Our mission was important: to provide close air support for U. S. and South Vietnamese forces in IV Corps and the southern half of III Corps. Once in-country, we were eager to show what we could do and anxious to measure the impact of our presence upon the heretofore stalled war. In short, we were naïve. I certainly was, at least.

As we debarked from our aircraft, we sprouted weapons. Personal pistols appeared from carry-on luggage and Thompson submachine guns emerged from a cruise box with a red cross prominently stenciled on the lid. The unarmed short-timers who casually witnessed this metamorphosis laughed at us. This was lesson number one, in a year full of lessons.

According to the rumor mill, the commanding officer (CO) of VAL-4 had requested naval flight officers (NFOs) to fill the OV-10s' back seats. All weapon selection and firing were done by the front-seat pilot, and not all flight controls and instruments were duplicated in the rear seat. For example, the back seat had stick and rudder pedals, but no trim controls. The back-seater could lower the landing gear, but not raise them; and he could shut down an engine and feather the prop, but not restart the engine. He could not jettison ordnance or eject the front-seat pilot. The back-seater's primary duties were flight communications and navigation. Occasionally, in routine situations, he took the stick for a few minutes to give the pilot some rest.

Unable or unwilling to assign NFOs, the Navy Bureau of Personnel (BuPers) solicited volunteers from my class of student pilots finishing the advanced multi-engine prop training pipeline. Twelve of us volunteered, but were not told until much later that the squadron considered us back-

seaters only. This judgment greatly affected our pre-Vietnam training.

Combined with the twin tasks of forming a new squadron and preparing to move to permanent bases in Vietnam, the stateside training program was hectic: counterinsurgency lectures, OV-10 maintenance training orientation, river patrol boat (PBR) operations familiarization, small arms and hand grenade checkout, and survival school.

Survival school was a real eye-opener. Our executive officer (XO) was in one of the first groups of squadron personnel to endure the school's prisoner of war (POW) compound at Warner Springs, California. During his "incarceration," two OV-10s appeared overhead dropping leaflets. Ostensibly addressed to the prisoners, these leaflets encouraged them to rally around the XO, who was described as a "Commie killer and street strafing extraordinaire." Naturally the "guards" took notice and gave our beleaguered XO even more unwelcomed attention than before.

Consequently, he insisted that each VAL-4 "POW" group be similarly identified, and often led the leaflet flights himself. Each leaflet batch outdid its predecessor, describing heinous war crimes of unimaginable dimensions in scatological terms. This practice continued until the day 200 leaflets hung up on a rocket pod and were held in place by the airstream until the pilot reversed upon landing. The leaflets scattered across Admirals' Row at the North Island Naval Air Station. We were ordered to cease and desist—immediately and irrevocably.

Because of our "back-seater only" status, we nuggets received virtually no flight training in the aircraft. That training was given to the mixed bag of second-tour A-1 Skyraider (Spad) and S-2 Tracker (Stoof) pilots, designated as front-seaters. The omnipresent rumor factory asserted that the jet community spurned fleet seats in a prop aircraft—hence, the assignment of Spad and Stoof pilots from decommissioning squadrons.

One combat-tested Spad pilot was openly contemptuous of a perceived lack of sophistication in the Bronco's weapon system. "The ordnance panel of the OV-10 is simple compared to that of the Spad," he would pontificate. We did not hear that comment again after he launched two rockets into Mexico while attempting to drop flares over a Yuma, Arizona, bombing range.

We rode back-seat on all flights that did not have an instructor there. Back-seaters got in a bit of stick time and even made one or two back-seat landings. When I arrived in Vietnam, I had 20 hours of OV-10 flight time, two of which were in the front seat. This was typical for most nuggets going into combat.

The squadron split into two groups. One operated from



COURTESY OF DANIEL SHEEHAN

Binh Thuy and the other from Vung Tau. Upon arrival in-country, each group set up its own operation. First, the Vung Tau detachment had to depreserve and check-fly our 14 aircraft, which had been cocooned and shipped as deck cargo. The pilot of the first plane to complete a functional check flight let the troops know their efforts were successful, by roaring low over the field and executing a high-speed victory roll. The pilot of the second Bronco imitated the maneuver, but neither his technique nor his airspeed were equal to the task. The nose fell through and the plane disappeared behind a low knoll before it could struggle back to pattern altitude. This same pilot repeated his inept roll on at least one other occasion—a dog-and-pony-show for ranking U. S. and South Vietnamese personnel. After that, he was told to stop, and we named the maneuver after him.

My first fleet-squadron instrument check was in a plane without a tactical air navigation (TACAN) system installed. With the plane's only navigational aid missing, the "up" criterion became the on-time delivery of the sleeping R&R-bound check pilot to Saigon. He woke up at touchdown, signed my papers, and deplaned to catch his freedom bird while I returned to Binh Thuy. That was a far cry from the B-26 check at Corpus Christi.

We began in-country flights to familiarize ourselves with the operating area and to regain aircraft and weapon proficiency. Navigation and communications duties quickly assumed greater importance than they had in the states. All pilots carried all required maps and publications, but we back-seaters bore the brunt of these duties and quickly became adept. All navigation was by visual flight rules, requiring bags that contained 90 charts or more. Standard practice was to use 1:250,000-scale charts for "to/from" navigation. These charts were extensively annotated with province and sector boundaries, and with the numbers of the 1:10,000-scale charts we used for shooting. A standard operating instruction contained the hundreds of callsigns and frequencies of units within our

The author is smiling here, but it was a different story when he and his fellow pilot volunteers for the Navy's Black Ponies squadron found out they would be riding in the backseats behind second-tour Spad and Stoof pilots. He later transitioned to the front seat and continued a distinguished naval flying career.

operating area. We back-seaters were very often busier than the proverbial "monkey trying to seduce a football" while navigating to the target area, getting Navy and sector clearance to fire and locating precisely both the target and any nearby friendlies.

Weapon and tactics training was definitely on-the-job; we wrote the close air support tactics doctrine for the OV-10. Because the Air Force and Marine Corps Broncos were primarily used for forward air controller (FAC) and artillery aerial observer (AO) work, they carried only 2.75-inch white phosphorus rockets and—at night—flares. Our Broncos, on the other hand, were loaded with 5- and 2.75-inch rockets, flares, 20-mm. and .30-caliber gun pods, and four internal .30-caliber machine guns. Our ordnance had to consist exclusively of forward firing weapons to keep us from coming under Air Force tactical control. Their cumbersome control system sometimes took hours to grant clearance to fire on targets that needed to be hit immediately.

A standard weapon load for a two-plane section consisted of: eight 5-inch Zuni rockets and either a Mark-IV 20-mm. gun pod or two pods of 2.75-inch rockets for the leader; and eight Zunies and either 14 or 38 2.75-inch rockets for the wingman. Occasionally, an SUU-11 .30-caliber gun pod would be substituted for one of the rocket pods. Later, wing racks were added to each plane, enabling us to carry four additional 5-inch rockets per plane.

The Zuni quickly became the weapon of choice. It was accurate and could be fused for bunkers (base-detonating fuses) or personnel (proximity fuses). At night, it produced a spectacular flame trail; we quickly learned to close one eye when launching.

One senior pilot was notorious for continuing his dive past the pickle point, so he could watch his rockets hit. He would pull off power during the run and break minimum pullout altitude. Not surprisingly, he often holed his own aircraft, by flying through his own shrapnel. When I flew his back seat, I added power for him at 2,000 feet and then initiated pullup at 1,500 feet. These unrequested actions invariably drew a response:

"Goddamn it Dan, don't add power!"

"Yes, sir."

"Goddamn it Dan, don't pull up. I've got it, Dan!"

"Yes, sir."

The next run would be exactly the same.

One night, I was shooting below a 3,000-foot overcast. On pullup, my aircraft passed between the flare and the cloud layer. Rapidly scanning for the leader, I looked forward. For an instant, I knew for certain that I was going to collide with him. And as I tore through my own plane's

silhouette on the overcast, I think I used up a year's supply of adrenaline.

U.S. and Vietnamese forces in the Mekong Delta area had not seen much of the supersonic Zuni; they reported a large number of secondary explosions when we used them. Only later did we realize that the troops mistook the rocket's sonic boom for warhead detonation—and then reported the warhead explosion as a secondary.

Listening to friendlies calling in my fire in whispers over the radio because they were too close to "Charlie" to speak normally made me want to whisper back. When your side is that close to the enemy, you've just got to be accurate.

The 2.75-inch rockets were much less accurate and less spectacular than the 5-inchers. It was not uncommon to observe a pair of 2.75-inch rockets—fired together, weaving and rolling around each other before pursuing independent earthward courses. They could be loaded in 7- or 19-shot pods. The 19-shot LAU-3A/A pod had two firing settings: single fire, which produced a pair of rockets fired simultaneously, and ripple fire, which launched all 19 rockets in a brief interval. The interval, less than two seconds, was designed to prevent these randomly erratic missiles from hitting each other.

I preferred the ripple setting. With a little more than one G on the plane at the moment of firing, the rockets would spread along the run-in line, which was perfect for treeline targets; with slightly less than one G, they would cluster nicely in a small circular area.

Theoretically, the Mk-IV 20-mm. gun pod was a superior weapon for our type of support. It offered excellent firepower that could easily be used very close to friendly forces. However, it was disappointing in practice. The pod was too heavy for the Bronco's centerline station and designed for faster aircraft. Our 240-knot dives produced insufficient cooling airflow. As a result, overheating limited burst duration and frequency, and caused frequent barrel and jamming problems. On one occasion, the barrels and the nose-assembly's blast-suppressor orifice became misaligned, and the gun shot its own nose off, peppering the underside of the aircraft with shrapnel.

Each flight that fired weapons had to submit a message "spot report" detailing target coordinates, damage assessment, and ordnance expended. The job of drafting this message quickly fell to the back-seater in the number two plane. Tallying rockets was easy enough, but giving an accurate account of the .30-caliber ammunition fired was both tedious and unnecessary. Most of us estimated the totals in round numbers, but I took it one step further. If 1,500 rounds was close, then 1,537 rounds sounded far more accurate and better researched. Plus, some GS-14 would have to add up figures in all four columns.

The flight leader had been impressively accurate, placing his Zunies squarely on target. In deference to his skill, my spot report read "three military structures vaporized." Later, the Commander Naval Forces Vietnam duty officer wanted to know what new weapons we were using. My argument—when you hit a hooch with a Zuni, it is damn well vaporized—was not well received.

I expected our initial operations to concentrate on reacquiring aircraft and weapon proficiency, as well as learning the operating area. But I did not anticipate the public relations campaign we would have to undertake just to find work. Few people outside the squadron had a clear idea of our mission or capabilities. The riverine forces in the field—who theoretically were to be our primary customers—had no inkling of the squadron's presence and purpose, nor did they know how to obtain OV-10 fire



U. S. NAVY (A. HILL)

The Broncos' Zuni rockets (above) were prized by the aircraft's crew members and the troops below for their accuracy, and were notorious for their spectacular flame trails. In addition to flying the only Navy OV-10s, VAL-4 crews had the rare opportunity to alternate between front and back seats.

support. The operational chain of command did little to ameliorate this situation. They did not develop an employment plan, or even specify combat objectives for the new capability. We were never told, in so many words, to "just fly around and see who wants you." In effect, however, that is exactly what happened. Therefore, as we flew



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over the rivers and canals, plotting and memorizing checkpoints, we solicited targets from every province and sector headquarters, and every PBR and outpost that had a published radio frequency. Whenever someone listened, we delivered a canned spiel advertising our capabilities—which also listed radio frequencies and telephone numbers for the naval operations center that controlled us.

Gradually, we became known around the Mekong Delta. The squadron operating area was basically between My Tho and the Parrot's Beak for the Vung Tau detachment, and from My Tho to Bac Lieu for the Binh Thuy group. Within these approximate north-south limits, detachment aircraft ranged from the South China Sea westward to the Cambodian border and the Gulf of Thailand. Later in the first year, the Binh Thuy group's area expanded to include Vietnam's southern tip—the Ca Mau Peninsula. There we supported area sweeps and cruise-and-destroy missions by PBRs and Swiftboats based at Sea Float, a nest of barges moored in the middle of the Cua Lon River.

Patrols normally lasted one-and-a-half to two-and-a-half hours. Even if there were no hot targets, we usually shot at something, even if only at abandoned hooches in free-fire zones. Thus, we got some target practice and showed the troops what we could do. Because this aggressive approach got us recognition, we were loath to abandon it.

Operations covering sea-air-land (SEAL) commando, PBR, and Sea Fleet missions required centerline station fuel tanks, which extended our combat endurance to approximately four-and-a-half hours, but reduced our ordnance load. Belly tanks were in short supply, so despite the hazards, we never jettisoned them—even when we took fire.

One pilot ignored low fuel-gauge readings until he was forced to acknowledge independent "fuel caution" and "fuel feed" warning lights. He landed at a South Vietnamese helo field and flamed out from fuel starvation while taxiing to the fuel pits. The remarkable aspect of this story was that he openly briefed us all. He admitted his mistake and taught us all something. That display of honesty took courage and moral fiber.

Each detachment maintained a scramble alert crew ready 24 hours a day in facilities next to the revetments. When alerted, each scramble crew front-seater boarded, started the left engine, and completed as many of the checklists as he could. His back-seater copied coordinates, frequencies, callsigns, and other situational information

from the squadron duty officer's list. After the back-seater climbed in, the right engine was started, ordnance armed, and the flight launched. The normal reaction time from alert to airborne was six to eight minutes in daytime and 10–15 minutes at night. Three minutes was our record at Binh Thuy, but we had advance notice and briefed coordinates on the radio.

On night scrambles, we often reacted faster than we could wake up. On several occasions, I fully awoke only after the flight was airborne and had to read a scramble sheet written in my own handwriting to learn where we were headed and what was expected of us. It was an eerie feeling for me to have started an OV-10, taxied, and taken off only minutes before, without any conscious recollection of those events.

As the squadron became more successful, the Navy chain of command, which initially dismissed us to pursue targets on our own, became concerned that the bulk of our firing was done to support Army units, and not the Navy forces the squadron was supposedly chartered to support. This "misuse" of Navy assets was probably politically embarrassing to upper-echelon staff personnel; it was quickly changed. Before, we had flown 80% of our missions during daylight, roaming our operating area at will. Now, almost 90% of our patrolling was done at night along prescribed routes covering the Cambodian border from Ha Tien to Chau Doc, the Vinh Te Canal, and the Parrot's Beak. These "interdiction" missions were supposed to deter infiltration and resupply efforts across the border. In theory, the very sound of OV-10 engines reduced border crossing. In practice, the shift in operations actually degraded squadron effectiveness, but it put the Navy back on politically solid ground. Navy units were again supporting other Navy units.

We shared a good working relationship with an Air Force tactical air support squadron (TASS) flying the infamous Pushme-Pullyou (O-2). They made no attempt to control us. However, they were often able to give us good targets while they waited for their tactical aircraft. This cooperation ended when a TASS FAC told a very tardy flight of F-100s, "Jettison your bombs here. The Navy has already hit my target." From somewhere on high came a directive that Air Force FACs would no longer work Navy air. About a month later, as a TASS FAC tried to steer my flight of OV-10s into a night action involving U. S. advisors in an overrun South Vietnamese Army outpost, an authoritative voice over the radio forbade the FAC's involvement. Ever the professional, he remained on station "inadvertently jettisoning" flares until we could arrive overhead. That such a "my war, my glory" attitude could get in the way of supporting those poor SOBs on the ground was deeply disillusioning. In time, this policy was rescinded.

Within two months of the squadron's arrival in Vietnam, BuPers announced a pilot replacement schedule, which set up an orderly transition from the commissioning crew to fleet replacement pilots over a four-month period. This schedule did not recognize the squadron distinction between front- and back-seaters, and kept junior pilots in-

country longer than second-tour pilots. Under this plan and existing squadron policy, the only combat-experienced pilots during the latter part of the transition period would be back seat-limited nuggets. Now we were permitted—even encouraged—to transition to the front seat.

After two front-seat familiarization flights and a solo (with a mechanic in the back seat), I was front seat-qualified. My ordnance training was equally as rigorous. During a one-day standdown from normal patrols, each nugget was allowed one flight on a free-fire zone. My first and last ordnance practice consisted of shooting eight Zunies and 14 2.75-inch rockets at Dong Island. Thereafter, weapon practice was conducted under combat conditions, and pilots now alternated between the front and back seats.

The Bronco was a good weapon platform; I had little difficulty learning to be accurate. The gunsight was not even necessary: the M-60 machine gun tracers indicated where the rest of the ordnance would go. Zunies landed on top of the tracers, while 2.75-inch rockets hit just short of where the tracers hit. For this reason, the transition from back seat to front went more smoothly than the reverse. Front-seaters fumbled with the charts and frequency books and took even longer to master the despised communications/navigation duties than we thought they would. Eventually, our fire teams became even stronger and more professional. My morale certainly improved when I was finally given a chance to fight the aircraft.

Using the Bronco in an attack role in Vietnam was an anomaly. Far slower than jets but faster than helicopters, our planes were initially untouched by hostile (or sometimes friendly) ground fire. The first hits accumulated in aircraft tail sections and slowly worked forward with time.

I was fired on by friendlies one night near Rach Gia. Fifty-caliber tracers (white, not green) passed between my aircraft and the leader's. Not surprisingly, we could not get clearance to return fire to the outpost that clearly was the source of the tracers. I wonder how many times supposedly friendly troops took pot shots at us without our ever knowing it.

The Broncos were lightly armored: fuel tanks were self-sealing up to .30-caliber hits, the center panel of the windshield was bulletproof, and the area directly beneath the crew members' seats was armor-plated. We joked that the rest of the plane was semi-bullet-retardant, at best. It seemed possible to poke a number two lead pencil through the structure just about anywhere on the plane.

The squadron's first casualty occurred when the flight leader was hit in the head by a .30-caliber bullet that penetrated the windshield just to the right of the bulletproof section. The back-seat pilot recovered the aircraft from its 30°, 240-knot dive, pulling out below PBR masthead height, and returned to Binh Thuy. The flight leader, who had helped down an enemy MiG while flying Spads in the north, was dead on arrival.

That was my first exposure to the sudden death we were all subject to, and it was chilling. Intellectually, I knew it could, and probably would, happen. But viscerally, I had naïvely believed we were just too good, too skilled, too

much on the side of the righteous and holy for one of our own to be killed. When it happened, illusions shattered and defenses tumbled. Now I knew that it could happen to me too.

Five squadron mates died that first year in-country. After the first casualty, we lost two aircraft and their crews. These events were upsetting—not only because we lost friends, but also because we never knew for sure just what had happened.

One of the Binh Thuy Broncos, flying number two on a night patrol, took a 10–15° nose-down attitude from 3,000 feet and flew into a 700-foot rock hill, exploding on impact. The flight had been taking sporadic small-arms fire as it transited the area, but had reported no hits. The crewmen of the downed plane made no radio transmissions, nor did either attempt to eject.

The Vung Tau detachment lost a Rung Sat Special Zone patrol—a single OV-10 carrying a Marine Corps air observer. This daily patrol covered the shipping channel into Saigon, flying at 100–200 feet, one-half flaps, and 110–120 knots while the crew searched for signs of ambushes, booby traps, and personnel movements, and called in artillery fire on suspect locations. After failing to return from the patrol, the aircraft, with the crew still on board, was discovered deeply embedded in mud, in an attitude characteristic of a low-altitude stall. Attempts to recover the aircraft failed and nearly resulted in the loss of a CH-47 Chinook helicopter when the lift strap broke, hurling the helo upwards and almost out of control. Too deeply mired for salvage, the wreckage was destroyed.

I do not know if the loss rate in following years was better or worse than in the first. I am certain, however, that the casualty rate and number of aircraft damaged by enemy fire would have been much higher had the squadron been located farther north, in I Corps. The Bronco was just too lightly armored to withstand heavy or high-caliber ground fire, and our tactics would have offered insufficient protection in a much more hostile environment.

I finished my year in Vietnam with 330 missions and a profound sense of relief that it was finally over for me.

My last OV-10 ride was memorable. I rode to Saigon to catch my freedom bird in the cargo section, with two other people. The cargo door had been removed and we were tied in with a cargo strap. Although we had borrowed parachutes, hedging against the bailout possibility, we never gained enough altitude to have used them. At Saigon, I think we had to climb to reach pattern altitude.

Commander Sheehan retired on 1 July 1987 after 20 years of Navy service. From March 1969 to March 1970, he served in VAL-4, as fire team leader, first lieutenant, and quality assurance officer. In subsequent assignments, he flew C-1As, C-130s, C-131s, C-12s, and instructed in T-28s. On a 1975–77 cruise in the *Coral Sea* (CVA-43), he participated in operations supporting the evacuation of Vietnam and Cambodia, and the recovery of the SS *Mayaguez*. He received the Navy Air Medal (23 strike/flight and two individual action awards) and four unit citations, including the Presidential and Navy awards. He was commissioned an ensign through the Harvard University NROTC program in 1967 and was designated a naval aviator in 1968.