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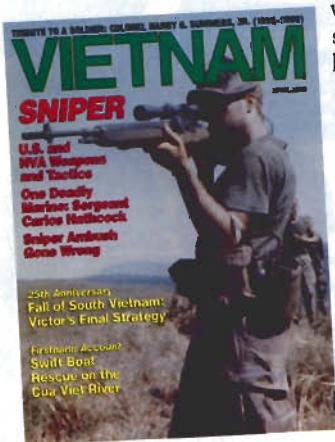
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Cover: Although snipers are usually envisioned as lone hunters, U.S. Army Spec. 4 John Rice, armed with an XM-21 sniper rifle, puts his sniper training to defensive use as he scopes the terrain looking for enemy troops in 1970. (see related stories on pages 16, 30 and 38). Cover image: National Archives



SWIFT BOAT RESCUE

When the coastal waters of the South China Sea turned treacherous, it was up to the crew of a U.S. Navy patrol boat to save comrades and Vietnamese civilians whose boats had capsized.

By B. Anthony 'Tony' Snesko



While I was reminiscing with a friend a few years ago about our experiences in Vietnam, he mentioned that he had found solace and emotional healing through reading articles about combat experiences in *Vietnam Magazine*. I asked him to lend me a copy, and the next day he dropped off the new February 1996 issue, in which I was excited to find an interview with a member of a Swift boat crew I had been stationed with in Da Nang ("Swift Boats in Operation Market Time," as told by Raul Herrera).

A knot rose in my throat as I read the part where Herrera was asked, "Did any Swift boats capsize while you were there?" Herrera recalled one boat that capsized in the mouth of the Cua Viet River in November 1967 and how, "miraculously, the entire crew was saved." It was my boat crew that had saved those men.

In 1966 I was nearing my discharge date while serving as a 3rd class boatswain's mate, finishing my fourth year aboard the heavy cruiser *Newport News*. I had been following the Vietnam War closely, and I decided to do my part in support of America's effort to relieve the suffering over there. I wrote to the secretary of the

Navy and volunteered to extend my service for a year if the Navy would allow me to serve aboard Swift boats in Vietnam. Within a month I received approval of my request. Shortly thereafter I got orders to report for PCF (patrol craft, fast, or "Swift" boat) training in Coronado, Calif. While in training I was promoted to E-5.

Our crew arrived in Cam Ranh Bay in June 1967. Because of an injury sustained shortly after our arrival in-country, our E-6 engineer was sent home. I assumed his position as petty officer in charge of our crew. Swift boats were supposed to carry a crew of six, one officer and five enlisted men—a boatswain's mate, machinist, radio-man, gunner and seaman. We were sent to Qui Nhon for a couple of months and then transferred north to Da Nang.

Sometime later our boat, *PCF-58*, and crew, along with two other boats and crews, were assigned temporary duty in Cua Viet, a U.S. Army base a few miles south of the DMZ. We were housed in Army barracks next to the Cua Viet River and daily patrolled the coastal region up to the DMZ. Since there was little commercial traffic north of Da Nang, most of our days were spent searching sampans and junks for weapons and checking the identification of every person we saw on the waterways.

Monsoon season was soon upon us, and it brought not only torrential rain and rough seas but also millions of snakes that seemed to blanket the coastal waters of the South China Sea. There wasn't 3 feet of open water between them, and they averaged about 3 to 5 feet in length, some longer. Their sudden appearance in such great quantity was due to the heavy inland rain that washed them out of the creeks and rivers. Watching the thousands of snakes surrounding our vessel was a little unsettling, but the deck of our 50-foot Swift boat was about 3 feet out of the water, so we weren't too worried about them—at least, not to start with. But that soon changed. Once, while we were on patrol at about 2 a.m., one of the crewmen on watch woke me out of a sound sleep to inform me that our propellers had become fouled in a fisherman's net. We had come to a dead stop, and the seas were slowly pushing us toward the shore, where the waves would surely capsize us.

The crew gathered aft at the ammunition locker and I asked if there were any volunteers to dive under the boat and untangle the net from the screws. No one stepped forward. As a matter of fact, each of them, including the officer on board, took a step back and said in unison, "Uh-uh, no way, not on your life!" I began asking each of them individually if they would help, hoping that there would be someone brave enough or foolish enough to volunteer, but they were adamant in their refusals—and I came to the awful realization that I would either have to do it myself or we would be washed ashore.

I looked down into the inky blackness and could see the moonlight shimmering off the backs of the snakes. We had all heard that some of the snakes in Vietnam were among the most venomous in the world, but my boat officer tried to encourage me by insisting that not *all* of the snakes were poisonous. I had no time left to think about it. I could see that the shore was drawing closer with every passing swell. I quickly stripped to my boxers and climbed over the ammo box to the opening in the handrail above the screws.

I turned to face the others as I started to jump in and noticed my boat officer shaking his head, with a smirk on his face. Suddenly I got a knot in my gut. My thoughts flashed back to our week of survival training before leaving for Nam. We had spent the last couple of days in a mock prison camp undergoing various torture drills. I had heard from others that the roughest part was being buried alive in an actual coffin, but they told me a prisoner only had to suffer through that particular torment if he had cracked during the claustrophobia-inducing test.

U.S. Navy Swift boat *PCF-58* plows through rough waves on the South China Sea during the monsoon season. **Inset:** E-5 B. Anthony "Tony" Snesco extended his tour in the U.S. Navy for a year in 1966, and the following year he served as the petty officer in charge of *PCF-58*.

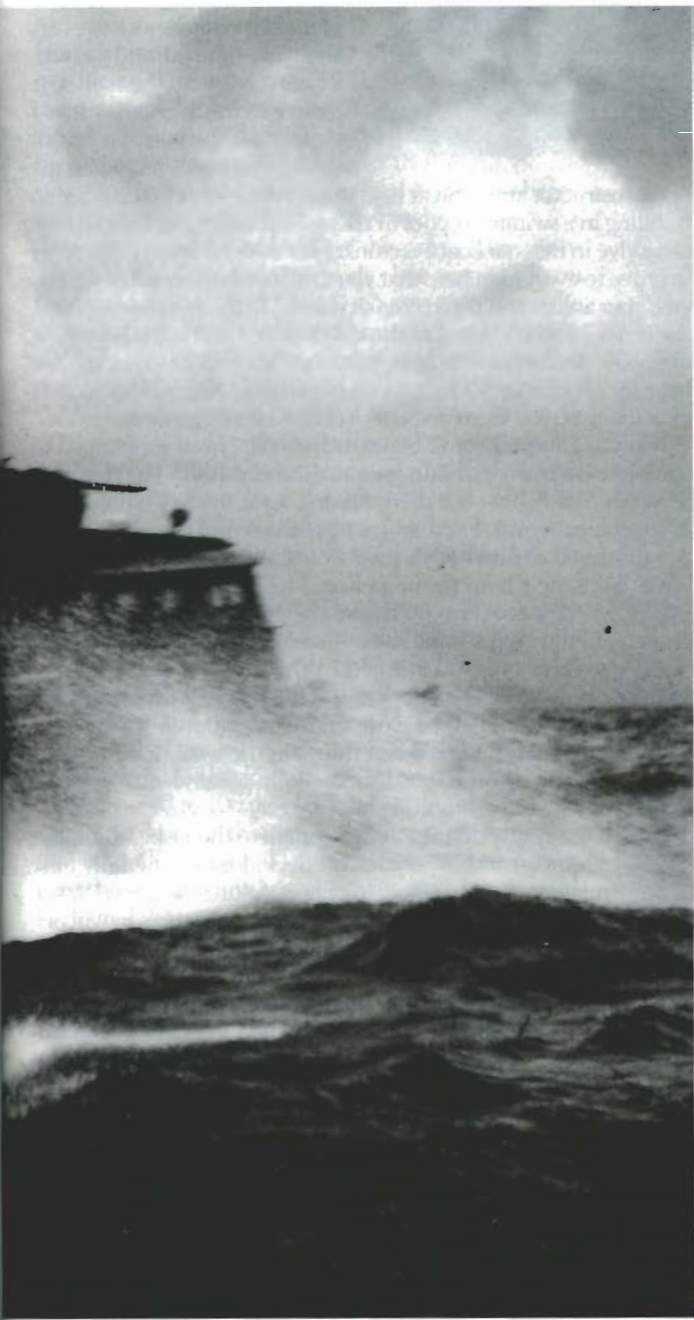
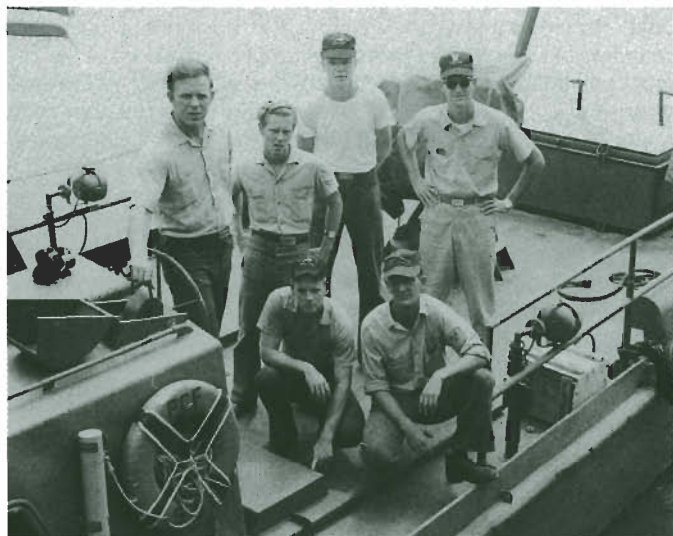


PHOTO: B. ANTHONY "TONY" SNESEO



PHOTOS: B. ANTHONY/TONY SNESEKO

Top: PCF-58 returns to home base—a barge on the Cua Viet River—after a patrol along the waterways south of the DMZ. **Above:** Snesko (far left) with the rest of the Swift boat's crew. Swift boats generally carried a crew of six, including one officer and five enlisted men.

The camp guards imitated sadistic, angry North Vietnamese prison guards. One of their tortures was to lock a soldier in a box. He was made to stand in a small wooden box, cross his legs, kneel and put his head on his knees. The box was just barely large enough to hold a man in that position. Then they closed the box, pressing the lid down on the subject's back, and locked it.

I called my mom the day before leaving for survival training and expressed my concern about failing that particular test. I had always been claustrophobic. She gave me a short prayer to memorize and told me not to allow any thought to enter my mind when locked in the box other than reciting her prayer.

I'm a tall person, so they had to sit on the lid in order to close and lock the box. I don't know how long I was in there. It could have been five minutes or half an hour. I have no idea. I remember only my strenuous efforts not to allow any thoughts to enter my mind other than the words of the prayer I had memorized and was reciting over and over.

Finally, I heard them fiddle with the lock on my box and say, "It's open, you can get out now." As I pressed up with my back, I could hear the guards snicker as the lid creaked. When I realized that the box was still locked, fear coursed through my body like cold lightning from head to toe. But I instantly recoiled into my tightly tucked position, shut out the fear and resumed praying.

That experience prepared me for the moment when I had to leap into snake-infested waters. Now, as I looked down into the dark sea just a few feet below and caught a glimpse of moon light shimmering on the skins of the serpents, I shut out every thought, jumped and prayed. The rough seas heaved the Swift's stern up and down as I sank under the boat. As I went down, I remembered when my

Navy instructor at the Swift boat school at Coronado had 75 men standing in a swimming pool in chest-deep water, teaching us how to survive in case our boat ever sank. He said confidently: "I'm going to prove to every man here that you can float. Now bend down and grab your ankles and then try to sit down." In the next few seconds, the other 74 men bobbed to the top—while I sat on the bottom of the pool. "You're an exception!" the instructor said, laughing. "You have zero-buoyancy." "Great," I said to myself. "Not good news for a man living at sea." Everyone else goes for a swim. I go for a "survive."

Now, as I literally sank beneath the boat, I was submerged in complete darkness. I couldn't see at all, and we didn't have an underwater flashlight—but then, I didn't want to see what else was down there anyway. Fumbling my hands around the propellers, I was dismayed to find both screws were fouled in the net. I would have to untangle both the propellers. I refused to think about the snakes. My new concern was the fishing net, which was now gathering and billowing around me as I surfaced for air every 30 seconds or so. Fear of getting caught in the net, coupled with pain from the bottom of the boat's bouncing hard on my head with every passing swell, helped to divert my attention from my venomous companions. I could feel things in the water touching my body every few seconds, but I successfully pretended that it was netting or seaweed—anything but snakes.

It took me nearly 30 minutes to complete the task. When the screws were freed and I was back on deck, I established my First Commandment as petty officer in charge, telling the crew, "Whoever is at the helm the next time we hit a net, that person will untangle the screws." But that was our last encounter with fishing nets.

During our tour in Cua Viet, the most exciting part of each day was trying to safely return the boat and crew to our base via the treacherous channel at the mouth of the Cua Viet River. The channel was about one-quarter mile long and 200 feet wide, lined on both sides by jetties of granite rocks. On a normal day the swells in the channel were usually 5 to 10 feet high, and surfing the channel with a 50-foot Swift boat required considerable skill. The real problems occurred during the monsoon season, when the waves in the channel were much larger. The challenge of surfing them was comparable to long-boarding in Hawaii—but with five other lives depending upon you. It was frightening!

One day a fast-approaching storm took us by surprise. All three Swift boats headed back to base, though channel waves were higher

than I had ever seen them before; navigating them was the toughest challenge I had ever faced. Twice, the waves we were surfing nearly turned our Swift sideways and swallowed us whole, but by working the twin screws (you can't use the rudders when surfing), I managed to recover and keep the crest of the wave on our stern and the bow pointed straight. We surfed past Vietnamese families in sampans who were also retreating from the turbulent ocean.

We all sighed with relief as we safely reached the calm river mouth. As we were securing the Swift to the small wooden dock, the other two boats that had arrived before us sped past us, heading back toward the channel. The crews waved for us to follow them, yelling that some sampans were sinking in the channel. I jumped behind the wheel as the crew threw off the lines, and we headed down the river at full throttle.

When we reached the mouth of the river, the turbulent channel was strewn with towering dark-green white-capped waves. My eyes were riveted to the twin screws of the Swift boat that had just passed me and was now upside down in the middle of the channel. A wave had caught it broadside and flipped it over. Ringing the perimeter of the sinking Swift was its crew of six and dozens of frantic Vietnamese men, women and children, some clinging to their swamped sampans and others disappearing with each violent wave that overtook them. The other Swift in front of us, driven by a boatswain's mate named McDonald, headed toward the capsized boat and started picking up its crew and the civilians. I went to the aft helm and guided our boat to the individuals struggling in the waves, then watched as my crew began pulling them from the water. After we had taken a few civilians aboard, I noticed that the waves were pushing McDonald's Swift dangerously close to the rocks on the left side of the channel. He, too, was standing at the aft helm, and the deck around him was filled with rescued people, including the crew of the Swift boat that had just sunk.

McDonald apparently saw that his boat was in danger of being destroyed on the rocks. Forced to react quickly, he thrust both throttles hard forward with his left hand while he vigorously spun the wheel to the right with his other hand. What happened during the next few seconds has replayed in my mind, in slow motion, for the past 30 years.

The wave that McDonald caught was at least 20 feet. The Swift's twin V12s roared as he took the boat full-speed into a hard right turn. The Swift boat looked as small as a bobsled heading high into a banked turn on an Olympic run. Centrifugal force kept his boat high in the curl of the wave. His crew, plus those they had rescued, tumbled back into the water as the boat's angle went from 90 to 100 degrees inside the curl. Everyone watching thought that he was about to wipe-out, but miraculously, McDonald managed to stand rigid, gripping the aft helm firmly as the Swift stayed in the curl. He exited the wave upright as he reached the right side of the channel.

The thrill of seeing McDonald's boat escape disaster was immediately replaced by the sobering realization that we would have to try to rescue 11 sailors and dozens of Vietnamese with our lone Swift. Since McDonald was the only man left on his boat, he had to abandon the rescue effort and head back to the river mouth.

Most of those still floating were in a large group. I steered toward them while my crew went to the bow of the boat to start pulling the survivors aboard. The huge, relentless waves were getting larger, and the interval between the waves was becoming shorter. I now had to struggle just to keep my bow pointed into the oncoming waves, which meant that it was nearly impossible

for me to direct my boat to the people in the water. Just the slightest turn exposed us to the possibility of capsizing and losing everyone we had saved plus my crew and those still in the water.

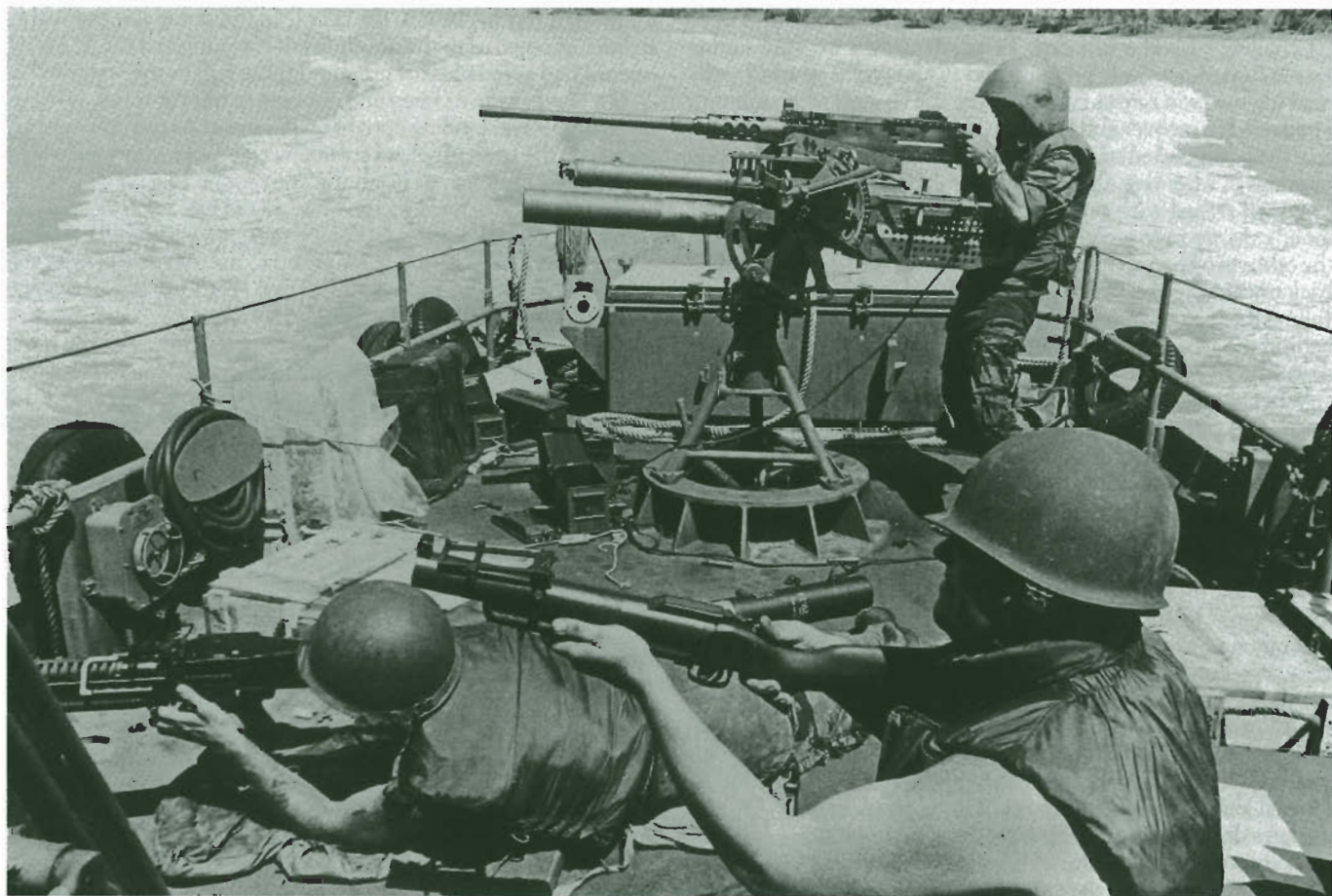
The waves were so steep and our bow so high at times, it felt as though we were standing upright on our stern. As the bow crashed back into the sea with every passing wave, those who were trying to swim close enough to reach the outstretched arm of one of our sailors were pushed away by the wake caused by our falling bow. As I struggled, an officer from one of the two crews floated next to my port position at the aft helm. He yelled to me to pull him from the water, but with the waves coming so fast, I couldn't chance letting go of the wheel.

I yelled to get the attention of anyone on our bow. But the noise of the waves drowned me out. To my terror I discovered that while I was being distracted by the officer in the water, the bow of the Swift had drifted to port (left). The officer was now a few feet past me and directly above my port screw. In that split second I realized that in order to prevent losing my boat in the next wave, I had to turn my stern toward the officer, which meant the very real threat of his being sucked into my screws and chopped to pieces. I knew then that I had no choice but to risk his life. I yelled to the officer to push away from the boat, warning him that I was bringing my stern in his direction. His eyes went wide as he realized what I was telling him. He screamed at me and pleaded with me to pull him



NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Swift boat crewmen check the identifications of Vietnamese aboard a sampan. Among other duties, PCF (patrol craft, fast) boat crews were responsible for stopping and searching all local boat traffic for contraband weapons and enemy troops.



U.S. NAVAL HISTORICAL CENTER

Swift boats carried an impressive arsenal. The crew of *PCF-58* is shown above manning (bottom left) an M-60 light machine gun and (bottom right) an M-79 grenade launcher. The crewman standing aft is aiming a Browning M-2 .50-caliber machine gun atop an 81mm mortar mount.

out, but I yelled at him one last time, "Push away now!" At that, I turned my head away from him. I couldn't bear to watch him being sucked into the screws. My boat was two seconds from being swamped by the next wave as I pushed the port throttle full ahead and pulled my starboard throttle into full reverse.

It seemed like an eternity as my bow fought off the next wave and slowly straightened out. I anxiously looked for the officer but didn't see him. Then I stepped to the side and looked down. There he was, alive, his arms stretched out along the waterline, his hands open and pressed against the side of the boat as though he had suction cups in his palms. I left the wheel in God's hands, took hold of a nearby stanchion in my left hand, and with my right, quickly reached down, grabbed his wrist, and with strength I have never felt before or since, heaved him on deck. I whispered a prayer of thanksgiving as I jumped back to the helm.

As our deck slowly filled with dripping survivors, a crewman from the sunken *Swift* slumped down next to me at the helm and wept. He said, "I was trying to stay afloat with a little girl and boy under each arm, but something hard struck me in the back of the head, and we went under. I lost them both under the water." I didn't know what to say to him.

Once the last person was pulled aboard, I was faced with three major problems. First, the waves had moved us to the left side of the channel, dangerously close to the rocks. Second, I had to find a way to turn the boat around without losing everyone on board, as had happened earlier on McDonald's boat. Third, I had my boat officer and the officers from the other two boats standing immediately behind me, each of them giving me different directions as to how to turn the boat around. One officer suggested that I back the boat into the river, but I dismissed that suggestion because, with the waves pushing us to the left, at some point I'd have to angle the

Swift and expose her broadside to the waves in order to get into the river mouth. Another suggested that I take the same action as McDonald did but start my move on the back of a wave. He was immediately rebuked by the other two officers. Finally, my own boat officer suggested that I take her all the way out of the channel, into the ocean, turn her around, and then bring her back in. I pointed out that if the additional weight and the higher seas didn't swamp us going out of the channel, they would definitely overtake us as we surfed back in. I knew that if we didn't do something quickly, the next two or three waves were destined to marry us to the rocks. I yelled, "Trust me!" and focused on the next wave.

As we climbed it and our bow broke its crest, I thrust the port throttle forward. We had started down the back of the wave when I flung my wheel hard right, pulling full reverse on my starboard engine. Holding our breath, we braced ourselves as *PCF-58* pivoted just in time to catch the next wave flush on her stern. As the boat thrust forward at full throttle, we instantly matched the speed of the waves. Those on board cheered as the wave picked us up and delivered us safely to the river's mouth.

Unfortunately, many civilians died that day, but many more would have had it not been for the heroic actions of the *Swift* boat crews. Although the men on board our *Swift* boat didn't receive a medal for their actions, their reward is knowing that every generation born to those who were saved will be to the credit of the crew of *PCF-58*.

B. Anthony "Tony" Snesko joined the U.S. Navy in 1963 and spent four years aboard USS Newport News before serving aboard Swift boats in Vietnam. Further reading: On Watch: A Memoir, by Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr.; and The Brown Water Navy: The River and Coastal War in Indo-China and Vietnam, 1948-1972, by Victor Croizat.