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VICTORY AT SA KY RIVER

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VICTORY AT SAKU RIVER



The author aboard *Skunk Alpha* in Chui Lai.

In an incredibly complex mission, the US Navy soundly defeats a North Vietnamese supply mission

BY RAUL HERRERA

This story is from the author's narrative non-fiction work in progress. Photographs are courtesy of the US Navy, the author, Dan B. Odenweller, and Max Branscomb. Readers with further information on this incident are requested to contact the author at BeanPCF79@aol.com



Commander Max Branscomb was flying Lockheed SP-2H Neptune YB-10 when *Skunk Alpha* was spotted.

Skunk Alpha underway in a photograph taken from Neptune YB-10. The lack of care on these enemy vessels is noteworthy.

On Tuesday, 11 July 1967, US Navy L/Comdr. Max G. Branscomb and Lockheed SP-2H Neptune YB-10's flight crew were on their last patrol run north along the Republic of South Vietnam coastline. Patrol Squadron One (VP-1) was Task Force 115's aerial surveillance unit. The patrol operation was formally assigned the code name *Market Time* on Wednesday, 24 March 1965. Its mission was the detection and interdiction of ammo-laden North Vietnamese steel-hulled vessels attempting to deliver arms and supplies to Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Regulars operating in South Vietnam.

The operation was fast tracked into existence as a result of a chance discovery, on 16 February 1965, of an enemy resupply trawler by Army 1st Lt. James S. Bowers. He was on an unscheduled MEDEVAC mission, taking a Special Forces officer to a field hospital in Nha Trang, located on the central coastline of South Vietnam. He banked his helicopter right, turning away from the coastline and flew over Vung Ro Bay. Both Bowers and his co-pilot, Chief Warrant Officer 2 Clifford Adkins, saw what appeared to be a tiny "moving" island. The patient's injuries were not life threatening, therefore, Bowers descended for a closer look. Still too high, he circled and

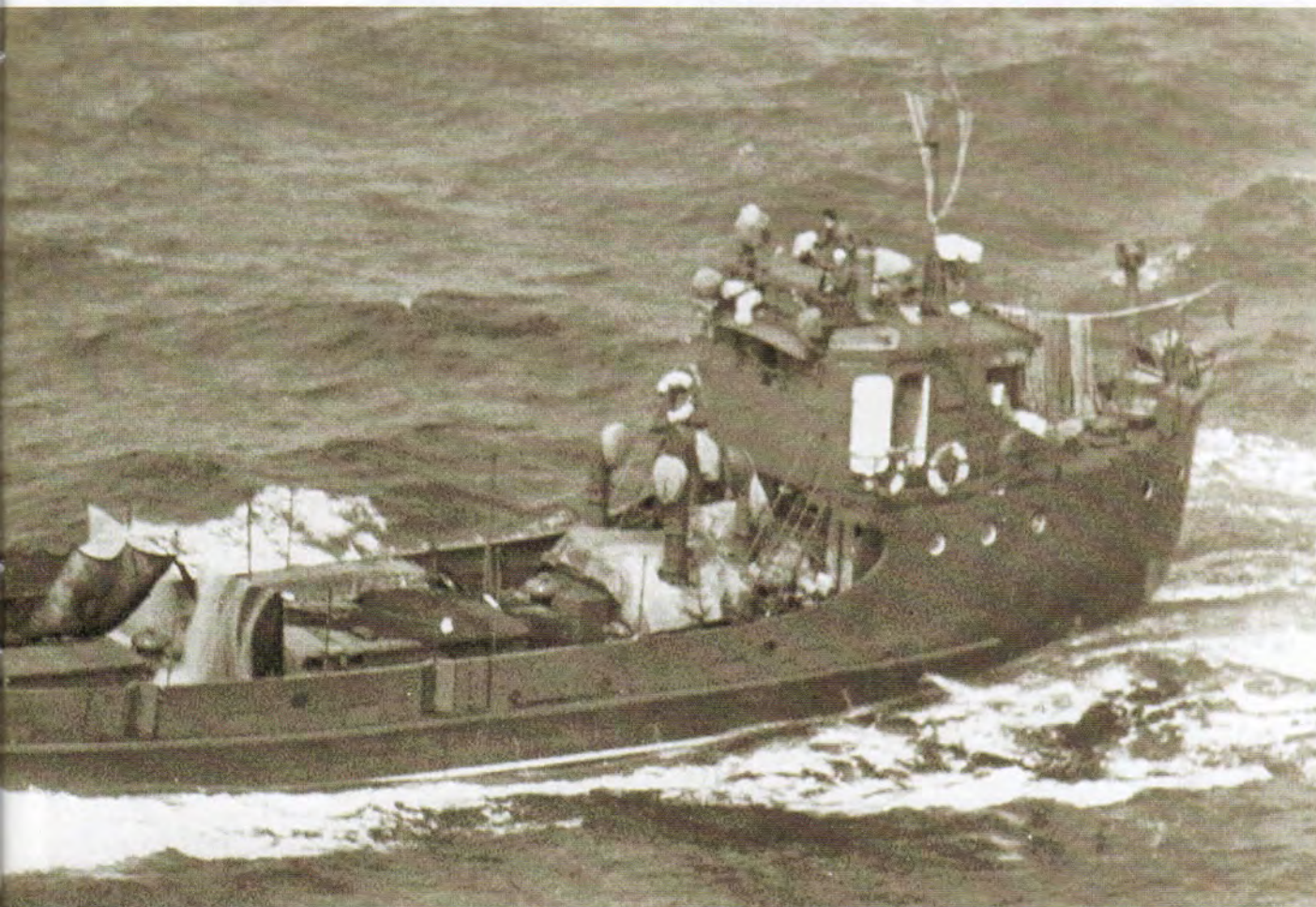




USS *Wiloite* (DE-397) was an *Edsall*-class destroyer escort commissioned on 16 December 1943.

Hard-working Lockheed Neptunes flew throughout the Vietnam War but seldom received publicity. Neptune YB-10 was assigned to VP-1.

dropped to a 500-ft elevation. Automatic weapons fire, from beneath a canopy of potted palm trees, greeted his helicopter as he sped over the contact, now positively identified as a North Vietnamese trawler, ready to unload more than 100-tons of arms and supplies to an awaiting Viet Cong force.



Lieutenant (jg) Vernon Jones, YB-10's flight Tactical Air Coordination and Control Officer (TACCO), advised L/Comdr. Branscomb, the Patrol Plane Commander (PPC), of a contact ahead and to starboard. The sun had set in the western horizon, but there was still enough daylight to investigate one more contact. Branscomb ordered his crew to man their rigging stations.

The aircraft descended from a

cruising altitude of 1500-ft to a near surface elevation, approached the contact from its stern and off its port side. Ordinance man Michael H. Hays took pictures of the contact at 1925-hrs. Copilot Lt. (jg) Steve Netherby identified the contact as a 120-ft olive drab steel-hulled trawler, on a southwest course, speed 10-kts. Netherby also noted the trawler was absent a flag of country origin. Maintaining its

course of 220-deg, the trawler would make landfall in the Quang Ngai Province coastline, approximately 26-mi south of Chu Lai. Having received contact information, *Market Time* Coastal Surveillance Center (CSC), Da Nang, ordered aircraft YB-10 to return to patrol altitude and maintain covert surveillance. The trawler's heading classified it as a suspicious contact. An hour later, L/Comdr. Branscomb reported the trawler had changed course to 120-deg, placing it on a southeasterly direction, taking it away from the South Vietnam coast. The Commander of the Northern Surveillance Group

Lieutenant (jg) Edward J. Bergin was the skipper of *PCF-79*.



PCF-78 and *PCF-79* were delivered to Da Nang from Subic Bay onboard *USS Gunston Hall* (LSD-5) on 30 July 1966.



EN1 Ronald M. "Porky" Rinehart aiding in the upkeep of *PCF-79* at Da Nang.

(NSG), Cmdr. Charles R. Stephan, oversaw CSC operations in I Corps. He was advised of the developments taking place off the Quang Ngai coast. The USS *Wilhoite* (DER-397), on its southern patrol boundary, was given the contact's coordinates by CSC. Commander Stephan ordered the *Wilhoite* to proceed at best speed, intercept, and further investigate the contact.

Commander E.W. Hays, *Wilhoite's* skipper, ordered his Combat Information Center (CIC) to vector an intercept course to the contact. Radarman Second Class (RD2) Dave Payson, operating the surface-search radarscope, informed

the bridge at 2000. He held the contact on radar and Payson designated it *Skunk Alpha* and RD3 John Wayne Bohon plotted the suspected enemy ship's position on the Dead Reckoning Tracer (DRT) table. At first light the next day, 12 July, the *Wilhoite* closed in on the contact. The trawler went dead-in-the-water as the *Wilhoite* circled the ship, taking pictures. The destroyer set course back toward the coastal waters of South Vietnam.

Commander Hays sent an encrypted message to CSC, Da Nang, confirming L/Cmdr.

Branscomb's contact description and added the trawler displayed bow plate numbers 459, fishing nets topside, and no evidence of radar or sophisticated electronic gear. *Wilhoite* continued west

until it was beyond the horizon, a distance of 10- to 12-mi.

Commander Hays brought his radar picket ship about and began a marathon covert chase.

Headquartered in Saigon, Commander Task Force (CTF) 115, Capt. Ralph Di Cori, sent word to Cmdr. Hays to continue the *Wilhoite's* stealthy surveillance of *Skunk Alpha* "all the way back to Haiphong, if necessary." The destroyer was approximately 250-nm east of Mui Batangan, a pronounced peninsula on the Quang Ngai Province coastline. Both ships were located south of Bombay Reef, and southeast of the Paracel Islands. *Skunk Alpha* dropped anchor at noon, east of the Paracel Islands, perhaps awaiting further orders from Hanoi as to what steps to take next, now that she had been discovered. The cat and mouse game continued, *Wilhoite* maintaining contact from



TM3 Robert J. Middleton at his position.

The author with *PCF-79* during her upkeep in Da Nang. After the event described in the story, *PCF-79* would see plenty more action. On 11 October 1967, *PCF-79* was closing on a beach approximately 5-mi northeast of Cape Batangan to investigate a small *junk* when the vessel received approximately 100 rounds of automatic weapons fire from three different positions. *PCF-79* sustained one waterline hit but was quickly joined by *PCFs* 19, 54, and *USS New* (DD-818) and their combined fire quickly silenced the enemy.



This after action shot shows *Skunk Alpha* stuck on a sandbar in the mouth of the Sa Ky River.

beyond the eastern horizon. An hour before midnight on the 13th, *Skunk Alpha* made a decisive move, she was heading back to the South Vietnam coastline for a second infiltration attempt. The *Wilhoite* continued its shadowing operation the remainder of the day and into the next.

Commander Stephan gathered the staff of the Northern Surveillance Group and formulated an intercept plan. It included the USS *Wilhoite*, already actively involved in the operation, Coast Guard Cutter *Point Orient* (USCG-82319) and the gunboat USS *Gallup* (PG-85). A Psychological

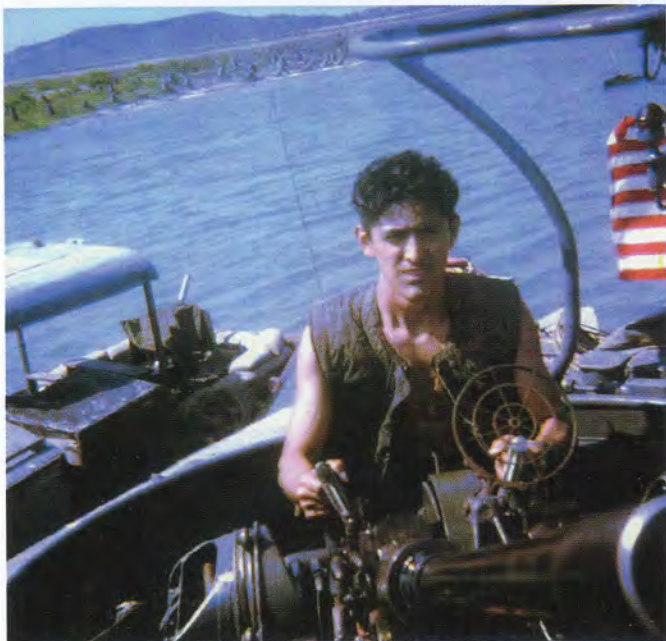
Warfare Operations (PsyOps) speaker team would board the *Point Orient*. A surprise pre-recorded message in Vietnamese would be blasted at the trawler 5-mi from shore, well within the 12-mi territorial limits of South Vietnam. An Explosive Ordnance Demolition (EOD) Specialist was included in the plan. It was known that North Vietnam resupply vessels were rigged with self-destruct charges. In the event their mission was compromised, they would blow themselves out of the water along with anyone at close proximity. A fourth seaborne element of the plan included a

Patrol Craft Fast (PCF), commonly known as a Swift Boat. The actual unit would be selected from the Swift Boats on station along the coast, and determined by *Skunk Alpha's* final approach toward its intended destination. Intelligence reports surmised that the Sa Ky River, in the middle of the Mui Batangan Peninsula, was *Skunk Alpha's* most likely objective.

At 0400 on 14 July, *Skunk Alpha* was 200-nm east of the Quang Ngai Province coastline. The USS *Wilhoite* maintained radar contact throughout the day. A message from CTF-115, Capt. Di Cori, confirmed the photos taken by *Market Time* aircraft as being a North Vietnamese resupply ship. *Skunk Alpha's* DR Track placed it in the vicinity of the Sa Ky River mouth on Mui Batangan by 2000, in the Same Drink Delta November patrol area. On station that day was Swift Boat *PCF-79*, Lt. (jg) Edward J. Bergin in command.

The *Point Orient*, skippered by Lt. (jg) Norman T. Saunders, departed Da Nang at 1545 and Lt. (jg) Ken Morris was the Executive Officer (XO). The USS *Gallup*, skippered by L/Commander Bill Spane, departed Da Nang harbor at 1715.

GMG2 Eddie Knaup inspecting an RPG round aboard *Skunk Alpha*.



The author in *PCF-79's* gun tub behind the twin .50-cal machine guns.



Skunk Alpha's pilothouse.

Commander Stephan and GMG2 Eddie Knaup, the EOD Specialist, were also on board.

Operation *Sky Hook* was underway. Commander Stephan's on shore call sign was *ARTICLE* and while afloat it became *IMPAIR*. The *Gallup* switched to her turbine power once beyond the deep water piers. She caught up to the *Point Orient* and approached her on the port side, slowing down to 20-kts to test the sound range capability of the PsyOps team speakers during underway conditions. I Corps PsyOps Officer Lt. Victor G. "Pete" Reiling gave the order and blasted the prerecorded message at the passing gunboat. Even when the *Gallup* throttled up to 38-kts, the surrender message was still audible.

An encrypted message was sent out by *IMPAIR* to all Operation *Sky Hook* units. It contained the designated intercept stations for each unit. On *IMPAIR's* order, the intercept plan called for the following formation: *Wilhoite* 20-deg abaft the trawler's starboard beam at 5000-yds. The *Gallup* was to take up a similar station abaft the port beam. *Point Orient* and *PCF-79* would take stations on the starboard and port quarters respectively at 2500-yds.

Lieutenant Bergin was at the helm in the pilot house. Knowing there was a high probability his Swift Boat crew



After capture, the hold of *Skunk Alpha* revealed a huge quantity of weapons destined for the enemy.



It is amazing that *Skunk Alpha* did not receive a direct hit in the hold.



Unloading war materials at Da Nang's Deepwater Pier.

would engage an adversary twice its size, he ordered his lead petty officer, Boatswains Mate First Class (BM1) Bobby Don Carver, and Engineman First Class (EN1) Ronald M. "Porky" Rinehart to break out an adequate number of illumination, high explosive (HE), and white phosphorus 81mm mortar rounds. Seaman (SN) Timothy McNamara made ready boxes of .50-cal machine gun ammunition for *PCF-79* twin .50 gunner, Torpedoman Third Class (TM3) Robert J. Middleton. As the Swift Boat's radio/radar man, I verified all electronic equipment was at optimum operational order,



Intelligence team inspecting the cargo of the captured enemy ship.

The captured trawler moored alongside Chu Lai Deepwater Pier.

including onboard voice operated communication telephone headsets. Lieutenant Bergin knew the Batangan Peninsula well. There were a number of extremely hazardous barrier reefs on both sides of the river's mouth. The most dangerous of all, however, was Hon Bong Than, a barely visible rock outcrop approximately 2.25-mi from Mui Batangan. We called it Flat Rock.

A rendezvous took place at 2000 between the *Gallup* and the *Wilhoite*, transferring Cmdr. Stephan to the *Wilhoite* as On Scene Commander. At 2300, *Skunk*

Alpha was 25-mi from Mui Batangan and closing. All units were ordered to take up their assigned intercept stations one hour before midnight.

Skunk Alpha took advantage of darkness of the moon conditions and crossed the 12-mi territorial limits of South Vietnam, confident their mission was about to come to fruition. Presumably, the crew was unaware of the intercept task force, just 7-mi ahead.

On 15 July 1967, 11-min past



midnight, *Skunk Alpha* was 5-mi from the Sa Ky River mouth. Commander Stephan ordered the *Point Orient* to commence broadcast of the prerecorded surrender message. "You must stop and don't shoot because you are surrounded! We knew clearly that you were coming here and we have been waiting for you for three-days. You must quickly wake up to the fact and surrender: The government will be merciful." No response. Message was repeated over and over again for 5-min to no response. *IMPAIR* directed the *Point Orient* and *PCF-79* to fire .50-cal. warning shots across the enemy ship's bow. Again, no response. Lieutenant Bergin ordered two 81mm illumination rounds fired. At the same time, Assault Helicopter Company *Rattler 5*, from Chu Lai, dropped flares.

Skunk Alpha changed course to a west/northwest heading and miraculously passed Flat Rock to the north. Seas became choppy close to shore. Most units lost radar contact on the trawler. Our radar, however, enabled Lt. Bergin to report, "IMPAIR, I've got one fast-moving contact 1500-yds from me, approximately 900-yds from river mouth."



Some of the huge haul of arms was put on display for the press.

"Delta November, this is Same Drink Sierra. Affirmative, that's your target... let's go get 'em," said Lt. Saunders on the *Point Orient*.

Lieutenant Bergin replied, "This is *Delta November*, I'm on my way!"

Moments later, Lt. Bergin advised *IMPAIR*, "He's headed up the river. Request permission to go in and get him, OVER."

"This is *IMPAIR*, per grau."

Lieutenant Bergin responded, "Say again, OVER."

Commander Stephan replied, "Permission granted, OVER."

PCF-79 went straight at the trawler while *TM3 Middleton* unleashed the twin .50s from his gun tub position. Immediately, the trawler returned fire. A volley of red tracers went out from *PCF-79* while green tracers from *Skunk Alpha* flew dangerously past us. I maintained careful watch on the radar and assisted Lt. Bergin with

The combined victory was of such great importance that considerable publicity was given to the display of the captured ship and its cargo.

radio comms in the pilot house. McNamara kept resupplying both firing stations with ammo, braving enemy fire across the open deck on the fantail.

Rinehart hand-loaded an 81mm HE mortar round. Carver set the mortar to trigger fire mode, leveled the mortar tube and fired. The round fell short. Rinehart loaded a Willie Peter (white phosphorous) round. Carver took aim and fired.

The round hit *Skunk Alpha's* starboard side pilot house door. The trawler's pilot house burst into a white ball of fire.

The *Point Orient* joined in the fray, firing their machine guns and mortar. The *Gallup* fired her radar-controlled 3-in gun as well. Assault Helicopter Company *Firebird 9-3* fired from above, scoring direct rocket hits.

Skunk Alpha lost control and



The battered condition of the enemy trawler is evident.

ran aground on a sand bar 50-yds north of two flat rocks that broke the ocean's surface inside the mouth of the Sa Ky River. To insure the awaiting Viet Cong forces didn't attempt to off load the trawler's cargo, the Korean Marines Blue Dragons took the trawler under artillery fire during the night as did other seaborne units.

Lieutenant Saunders expressed the task force accomplishment best when from the *Point Orient's* pilot house he exclaimed to his XO, Lt. Ken Morris, "We got it. We got that son-of-a-bitch!" *PCF-79* departed Mui Batangan at 0415. Lieutenant Bergin secured a broom on the

radar mast signifying a "clean sweep" as we entered Chu Lai harbor at daybreak.

The charred remains of a lone crewman were found on the catwalk outside the starboard side pilothouse door. No other crewmen were found on the trawler or in the water.

Late on the afternoon of 15 July, LCM-8 boats *No. 852* and *No. 798*, from Chu Lai, took the captured North Vietnamese resupply trawler under tow and departed the Batangan Peninsula at

1630. *En route* to Chu Lai, material in the trawler's holds began smoldering. EOD Specialist, GMG2 Eddie Knaup, pulled hoses off a Swift Boat and put out the smoldering material. The 2000-lbs of TNT self-destruct system was in danger of detonating. Knaup disarmed the system, heroically preventing a catastrophic event.



Rear Admiral Kenneth Veth, Commander Naval Forces Vietnam, and Capt. Tran Van Chon, CIC South Vietnamese Navy at Chu Lai to view the captured trawler.



Commander Charles Stephan (IMPAIR) and Lt. Victor "Pete" Reiling aboard the trawler.



Crew 10 on the battered enemy trawler.



Premier Nguyen Cao Ky decorating *PCF-79* skipper Lt. (jg) Edward Bergin.

The vessels reached the Chu Lai deep-water pier at 2030. A security team was set to prevent souvenir seekers from looting the trawler. Lieutenant Bergin's recommendation to temporarily shore bullet holes below the water line was ignored. At 0430, 16 July, the trawler settled stern first in the water. Pumps were used to extract water from the flooded compartments while holes were sealed. A crane was used to remove the contraband that *Skunk Alpha* carried in its holds. The task was completed by noon.

Commander Naval Forces Vietnam R/Adm. Kenneth L. Veth



BM1 Bobby Don Carver at the awards ceremony.

and Capt. Tran Van Chon, Commander in Chief, South Vietnamese Navy, flew to Chu Lai from Saigon to view the captured enemy resupply vessel. Later that morning, the Korean Marines Blue Dragons turned over to the South Vietnamese Navy some of the weapons they had removed from the trawler while it was stuck on the sandbar. *Skunk Alpha* was carrying more than 90-tons of weapons, ammunition, and supplies — enough to supply a Viet Cong regiment for several months. The following morning, Monday, 17 July, South Vietnamese gunboat *PGM-618* took *Skunk Alpha* under tow, north to Da Nang.

On 19 July 1941, Prime Minister Winston Churchill had made famous the “V for Victory” sign in support of former Belgian Minister of Justice Victor de Laveleye who, in a 14 January 1941 broadcast, called on Belgians to use the “V for Victory” as a rallying symbol during WWII.

Twenty-six years later on 19 July 1967, victory over a North Vietnamese seaborne adversary was being celebrated. In a grand awards ceremony, Premier Nguyen Cao Ky and Chief of State Nguyen Van Thieu congratulated and decorated Allied forces involved in the capture of *Skunk Alpha*, pinning the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry Medal on each individual. Operation *Market Time* units were on the front line of the Sa Ky River Victory.

The award ceremony took place in Da Nang, next to the Naval Support Activity Headquarters boat pier along the Han River. The charred remains of the 120-ft trawler had been cleaned of debris and anchored parallel to the shore, at the end of the pier. A large portion of the cache was put on display. A yellow-gold banner secured to *Skunk Alpha*'s starboard side pilot house stanchion reads: “PRAISE TO THE SOLDIERS (AMERICAN –



Battered by combat, *Skunk Alpha* became an important propaganda prize for the government of South Vietnam. The wording on the banners is explained in the article.

KOREAN – VIETNAMESE) OF SA KY VICTORY.”

An All Hands salute to the crews of Operation *Market Time* units SP-2H aircraft YB-10, USS *Wilhoite*, USS *Gallup*, USCGC *Point Orient*, Swift Boat *PCF-79*, as well as Assault Helicopter Company's *Rattlers* and *Firebirds*, Korean Marines Blue Dragons, South Vietnamese Coastal Group 16 sailors, and Chu Lai Support Activity personnel. **BRAVO ZULU!**

SC

