

The Opinion Pages

The Skunk Alpha Encounter



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The first United States Navy Swift boats began patrolling the coastline of South Vietnam in 1965. Later they moved into rivers near the demilitarized zone and in the Mekong Delta, conducting raids, sweeps and other operations.

In the language of the United States Navy, a “skunk” is any unidentified surface contact. It’s a word that elegantly accommodates the Navy’s innate paranoia. You hope it’s a tuna boat tossing chum over the side, but assume it’s the flagship of the Japanese Imperial Navy.

On the evening of July 11, 1967, a Navy surveillance aircraft spotted a big trawler in international waters off the coast of South Vietnam, east of Cap Batangan. The plane dropped down to get a better look. The trawler was 120

feet long — an olive-drab, steel-hulled ship riding low in the water, displaying no flag. Probably not a tuna boat.

The pilot radioed his superiors in Saigon, who in turn ordered the destroyer escort Wilhoite to intercept the trawler. The Wilhoite was patrolling the deep ocean as part of Operation Market Time, the naval blockade of South Vietnam's 1,200 miles of coastline. The trawler carried fish nets on deck and had no visible radio antennas or radar, but that was not much of a deception. A little after midnight the Wilhoite designated the trawler "Skunk Alpha," the first skunk of the new day.

For the next 72 hours the Wilhoite stalked Skunk Alpha by radar, skulking 12 miles away and out of sight, waiting for the trawler to run for shore. Three other ships, including the Gallup, a Navy patrol gunboat, and the Point Orient, a Coast Guard cutter, stood by to help. The final member of this flotilla was less formidable, but much more agile — a Swift boat on coastal patrol.

At first blush, Swift boats looked like the perfect solution to an unanticipated dilemma posed by the Vietnam War. When the shooting began, the Navy had no shallow-draft fighting boats that could patrol coastal waters or penetrate the Mekong Delta's thousands of rivers and canals. This was a major shortcoming. The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese moved much of their supplies, guns and ammo on the water. Bulk shipments traveled on custom-fitted ocean trawlers like Skunk Alpha. For smaller loads, they chose among the legions of junks and sampans plying coastal waters from the demilitarized zone southward to the tip of the Mekong Delta, then turning west into the Gulf of Thailand and north to the Cambodian border.

Needing a viable countermeasure, the Navy in 1965 struck a deal with Sewart Seacraft, a Louisiana shipyard that made zippy little runabouts that were used to ferry crews out to oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico. They were 50 feet long with aluminum hulls and two serious diesels that could turn 30 knots on a tranquil sea. The Navy decided that, with modifications, they could work along the Vietnamese coast.

They were designated Patrol Craft Fast, or PCFs — the Swift boats. Atop the pilothouse, Sewart installed an open gun tub with a pair of .50-caliber machine guns in a twin mount. On the fantail amidships was a reinforced steel tripod that supported an 81-millimeter heavy mortar with another .50 caliber machine gun mounted on top of it.

This configuration, known as "over and under," could be used in the traditional way: angle the mortar into the air and fire individual rounds on a high arc in support of ground troops. But on coastal or river patrol, the after gunner aimed the machine gun at a chosen target and had the mortar below it loaded and ready to fire on a horizontal line if the target was close enough. This way, the mortar worked like a giant shotgun — a fearsome weapon.



A captured North Vietnamese resupply trawler, code-named Skunk Alpha, at anchor in Da Nang Harbor, July 1967. Credit Dan Daly

Also available were an assortment of light machine guns, small arms, grenades of various types, knives and whatever else in the way of firearms, mines and explosives that the six-man crew could put its hands on in case they pulled alongside a suspect ship and a firefought broke out. The boats also had radar, radios, a fathometer, a hot plate, a refrigerator and four bunks. Patrols, it was hoped, could last up to three days, depending on the job.

Nice idea, but there were problems.

The pilothouse was too far forward, unbalancing the too-light boat. On coastal patrol, the boats pitched dangerously and at times uncontrollably, even in moderate seas. Over the course of the war two boats “pitch-poled,” meaning they flipped end-over-end in heavy seas. Men died. For this reason alone, sending a Swift to join the Wilhoite for three days of skunk shadowing in the open ocean was out of the question.

Later, when the boats were sent into the Mekong rivers and canals, the Swifts proved big noisy targets, and their quarter-inch aluminum skin had just enough resistance to detonate enemy rockets, blasting shrapnel throughout the boat’s insides. In the rivers, crewmen never went below deck longer than 15 seconds. Again, men died.

(Today, “swift boat” has a different connotation; to “swift boat” someone means to ladle invective on a political opponent, coined after the treatment dished out to Senator John Kerry, a former Swift boat officer, during his 2004 presidential campaign.)

Swift boats got in many firefights in the rivers and took a lot of casualties late in the war, but in mid-1967 they mostly searched sampans and junks for contraband and hung on to something solid during the monsoon. It was monotonous, tedious work.

Then came Skunk Alpha.

At 11 p.m. on July 13, Skunk Alpha turned southwest toward the coast, traveling at 10 knots. Five hours later, the trawler was a bit over 200 miles east of the mouth of the Sa Ky River, at the tip of Cap Batangan. By nightfall on July 14, a reception committee of three Market Time vessels took their positions five miles from the cape, waiting for the trawler to cross the 12-mile limit into South Vietnam’s territorial waters. It was a clear, starlit night with moderate seas.

Soon the chosen Swift boat joined them. It was PCF-79, with 26-year-old Lt. j.g. Edward J. Bergin as officer in charge. He knew the reefs and rocky outcrops flanking the entrance to the Sa Ky as well as anyone. The hero of the night, however, would be Boatswain’s Mate Second Class Bobby Don Carver, the crew’s leading petty officer. At 31, he was older than most Vietnam sailors, and in charge of the over-under gun.

The task force commander, aboard the Wilhoite, figured the trawler would wait until the moon went down near midnight before making its final dash to the Sa Ky, and he was right. By 11 p.m. Skunk Alpha was less than 25 miles away. The flotilla moved into position. The Wilhoite took station two and a half miles off the trawler’s starboard quarter, with the gunboat in the same position to port. The Coast Guard cutter closed within a mile and a quarter of Skunk Alpha on the starboard side, with PCF-79 to port.

At first, everything went well. Skunk Alpha crossed into territorial waters right around midnight, traveling at top speed — perhaps 15 knots. At 12:11 a.m., with the trawler five miles from the river mouth, the cutter broadcast a surrender message: “Don’t shoot, because you are surrounded! ... We will be merciful!”

No reaction. The cutter played the message repeatedly for five minutes with the same result. Then the task force commander ordered the cutter and PCF-79 to fire their .50 caliber machine guns across the trawler’s bow. Again, no response.

Maybe its captain thought the cutter was bluffing. These were small boats — Skunk Alpha was more than twice the size of PCF-79 — and it couldn’t see the other two.

Then the trawler caught a break. About four miles from the Sa Ky, the wind kicked up, turning a moderate sea into choppy six-foot whitecaps. The stalkers lost radar contact in the electronic clutter, and the trawler, pitching up and down in the surf, disappeared.

On PCF-79, however, Bergin was convinced Skunk Alpha was headed for the river, so he pointed the boat in that direction and hit the throttles. Very soon a fat blob appeared on his radar screen. "I've got one fast-moving contact, approximately 900 yards from the river mouth," Bergin radioed. Moments later he called again: "He's going up the river. Request permission to go in and get him."

"Permission granted," the task force commander replied.

The cutter and the PCF fired illumination rounds. Skunk Alpha suddenly emerged from the darkness, 200 yards ahead, "like a gigantic sea monster," remembered one of us, Raul Herrera, who served as PCF-79's radioman. The Swift boat, just off the trawler's port quarter, opened up with its 50-caliber machine guns. An enemy .51-caliber machine gun returned fire from the trawler's fantail. The PCF's turret gunner walked short bursts up the trawler's deck to the wheelhouse. The enemy machine gun fell silent.

Bergin turned the wheel left, and a second firefight ensued between the trawler's port-side machine gunners and the Swift boat crew. Skunk Alpha was 75 yards away. Carver fired a high-explosive mortar round on a line, but the shot fell short. Bergin held the boat steady while the engineman calmly reloaded the mortar with an incendiary round, as enemy fire poured in from close range.

Carver fired again. The trawler's pilothouse exploded in a ball of fire.

The battle was over. The other stalkers, with assistance from helicopter gunships and land-based artillery, moved in and all but obliterated Skunk Alpha. No one on board survived. The trawler was loaded with more than 90 tons of weapons and ammunition, including recoilless rifles, rockets and rocket launchers, TNT, electric detonators and cord, heavy machine guns, grenades and more than 1,000 automatic rifles. The Sa Ky river engagement was the closest thing to a ship-to-ship sea battle that a Swift boat ever fought.

Premier Nguyen Cao Ky and Chief of State Nguyen Van Thieu presented the Vietnam Cross of Gallantry to the crew of PCF-79. Bobby Don Carver won field promotion to boatswain's mate first class. But like most stories in Vietnam, this one did not end happily. Five months later, on Dec. 6, 1967, very close to where the battle of Sa Ky took place, Viet Cong guerrillas opened fire on PCF-79 with automatic rifles. The boat escaped relatively unscathed, but a stray bullet hit Carver in the head. He died instantly. The Navy posthumously awarded him the Bronze Star.

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