

In the dim light of dawn on 24 May 1967, a two-boat Navy patrol was silently drifting down a South Vietnamese river when Vietcong machine-gun fire erupted. Within minutes, the pair of PBRs was decimated and half their crew members dead.

For the U.S. Navy men of River Patrol Section 531, based at My Tho, a provincial capital city in the Mekong Delta of the Republic of South Vietnam, death had always seemed as distant as the rumble of artillery that drifted from far away over endless rice paddies. Heroism in battle had always seemed to come with a bargain price. But 24 May 1967 was the day reality paid a visit to the young men who had mostly spent their days quietly drifting down the muddy Mekong River and dreaming of the soon-to-come time when they would return home.

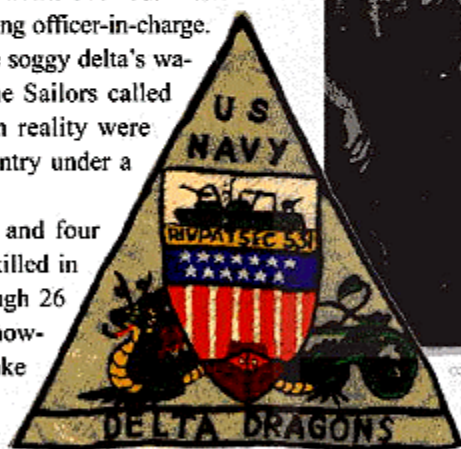
River Section 531 was an element of Task Force 116, which was part of Operation Game Warden during the Vietnam War. The unit was formed in May 1966, and a year later the plank owners were seasoned combat veterans, most of them beginning to rotate back to the states. Lieutenant Charles Donald Witt had recently taken over command of the section from the commissioning officer-in-charge. The mission was to deny use of the soggy delta's waterways to the Vietcong, whom the Sailors called communist insurgents, but who in reality were fighting to reunite the divided country under a communist government.

The section comprised 55 men and four officers. Only two men had been killed in action through March 1967, although 26 had been wounded. On 24 May, however, the casualty count would make a big leap.

The night of 23 May was wet and chilly. During such weather, there was no good place to find shelter on board a 31-foot PBR (patrol boat, river) except inside the enclosed bow, and that was not a battle station. When the 7-ton vessel was at full speed—the fastest could make up to 30 knots—rain drove horizontally across the boat and pocked the faces of crew members. They would spend their 12-hour river patrol soaking wet and so cold their bones ached.

U.S. NAVAL INSTITUTE PHOTO ARCHIVE  
*Opposite: A Mark I PBR (patrol boat, river) cruises along a Mekong Delta river. The maneuverable boat's armament included a twin .50-caliber machine gun forward, an M-60 machine gun amidships, and a third .50 caliber aft.*

That inclement May night, the ten men of the night patrol crowded into the small office of the command headquarters. A huge map of the patrol area covered one wall of the room. Lieutenant Witt used a pointer to indicate where new sandbars in the delta's immensely broad rivers had been reported by previous patrols. He said intelligence reports suggested that large numbers of Vietcong were on the move inland from the patrol area.



COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR  
*River Patrol Section 531 commander Lieutenant Charles Donald Witt (second from right) and his predecessor, Lieutenant Frank McDavit (far right), relax with other sailors on board PBR-105, one of the section's ten boats. Left: Shoulder patch worn by members of River Patrol Section 531.*

While attached to River Section 521 at Sa Dec the previous year, I had racked up 70 combat patrols on PBR-79, ten of which resulted in combat. After a transfer to River Section 531 at My Tho, I joined several more patrols, although I was mostly busy writing medal recommendations for my shipmates and taking care of other command correspondence. I had chosen to go on this two-boat patrol because my commanding officer, Lieutenant Witt, was leading it. I

missed the camaraderie of being part of a four- or five-man boat crew. But as a tag-along, things were not the same, even though I kept trying to recapture the feeling. Companionship, not combat, was on my mind.

Lieutenant Witt wished good luck to the men of the patrol, which would begin at midnight and end at noon, and we all trooped out the door into the driving rain. The boat docks were a short Jeep ride away. I, however, hesitated. There was something wrong with this patrol. I couldn't identify the source of my unease. Perhaps it was because I was an unnecessary afterthought to the mission. Maybe it was because the weather was nasty. Or perhaps it was one of those precognitive warnings that enter the subconscious and cause a fateful decision to be made.

I told the lieutenant that the weather was bad and I had decided to stay behind. He knew that joining the patrol was optional for me and that there was no stigma in dropping out. After all, it had been necessary to get his permission to tag along. I began to head for the peculiar oriental hotel that served as our barracks, the room walls of which were thoroughly slathered with *Playboy* and *Oui* magazine pinups.

In the distance, the twin 220-horsepower V-6 diesels of each Mark I PBR roared to life and the boats grumbled out into the river. Their spotlights swept the swiftly moving murky water for floating mines. The tide here, many miles from the South China Sea, was going out.

As dawn came, the rain had stopped. The two boats drifted down the Ham Luong River toward a channel just

100 yards away between a three-mile-long island and a riverbank. One of the tactics employed by the two-boat PBR patrols was to turn off the engines and drift silently with the river's flow. The radar would run off the batteries, sweeping the river for Vietcong sampans attempting to cross to an opposite shore.

Each boat had a four-man crew augmented this day by the patrol officer, Witt, in the lead boat and a South Vietnamese policeman in the cover boat. A couple of crewmen in each PBR were asleep, the rest at their battle stations, hardly stirring. The only person truly alert on each boat was the coxswain, who alternately watched the radarscope and the river.

Then, as the boats entered the channel, several machine guns almost simultaneously opened fire from the heavy vegetation of the riverbank. A moment later, a 57-mm recoilless rifle round soared across the water and hit the lead PBR just as its engines came to life. The shell struck the forward mount of the boat, exploding with a terrific blast. The forward gunner, who had swung his twin .50-caliber guns toward the enemy, was killed instantly, and the mangled mount was jammed in place.

Shrapnel from the recoilless round swept the length of the PBR. Lieutenant Witt, who had just dived into the coxswain's flat to get on one of the two radio transmitters, took a full load of shrapnel in the face as he was kneeling in front of the radios, both of which were shattered. Witt died instantly.

Shrapnel also hit the coxswain in the face, instantly killing him. The top of the radar dome was blown off. The boat began to circle out of control. The rear gunner, who was farthest from the blast and not badly injured, rushed to the coxswain's flat to take control of the veering boat. He had to pull the coxswain's body out of the way to get at the throttles and steering wheel. The fifth crew member, who also was not badly injured, took over the aft .50-caliber machine gun and stood on the trigger until the weapon ran out of ammunition. He then grabbed the boat's .30-caliber M-60 machine gun and fired several belts of ammunition until it, too, ran out.

The cover boat, meanwhile, had fared no better. Just after getting up speed, it took a recoilless rifle round amidships



COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

*Decimated PBR-101 was photographed by the author the afternoon of the ambush. During the opening seconds of the battle, a 57-mm recoilless rifle round exploded against the twin .50-caliber machine gun's mount, killing Lieutenant Witt and two other crew members.*

that tore a round hole in a slab of thin armor plate behind which the Vietnamese policeman had been crouching. He died instantly. The after gunner was blown over the side and killed, and the boat coxswain was wounded. The forward gunner, behind the twin .50s, opened fire at the erupting shoreline, reloading belt after belt of ammunition. The boat caught on fire as it zoomed down the river at full throttle.

The Vietcong had planned this ambush well. Three miles of river was completely embedded with automatic weaponry; up to a thousand enemy soldiers armed with machine guns and recoilless rifles had lined the island and the nearby riverbank. The two badly damaged PBRs headed downstream, which, unfortunately for them, was the long way out.

Both boats expended their ammunition before they escaped the extended ambush area. The gunner who had taken over the wheel of the cover PBR got on the radio to call in for air support, which didn't arrive until after the boats had escaped into the main part of the river. Then the burning cover boat sank until only its Styrofoam-filled bow projected above the water. The bullet- and shrapnel-riddled lead boat picked up the survivors.

Back at headquarters, officers had listened to the frantic calls for help when the fighting erupted. By the time a second PBR patrol arrived on the scene, the battle was over and five Sailors, half of the patrol, were dead. The wounded survivors were evacuated by helicopter to hospitals in Saigon. I never saw a single member of that patrol again. The PBR patrol that arrived shortly after the battle ended included Terry Schissler and Don Bryant, both boat captains. During a 2004 interview, they said the last names of the four dead Americans were Witt, Castleberry, Quinn, and Leasure. (The Vietnam Veterans Memorial lists Lieutenant Charles Donald Witt, Electronics Technician (Radar) 2 Roy Lee Castleberry, Seaman Michael Courtney Quinn, and Fireman Terry Franklin Leazer as having died on 24 May 1967). The captains contradicted one aspect of the official story: They said Lieutenant Witt was manning the forward gun mount, as was his habit, and not at the radios when the Vietcong sprung the ambush.

Later that day, LSTs dragged the remains of the two boats into our base at My Tho. The PBRs were put on trailers and pulled out of the water. A lieutenant commander ordered me to take official U.S. Navy photographs, using my Polaroid camera, of the damage. I took dozens of pictures, some of which I kept and still have.


It was hot and humid that afternoon. As I climbed onto Lieutenant Witt's boat, a foul smell made my stomach heave.



COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

*In PBR-101's coxswain's flat, shrapnel blew out the radarscope and destroyed radios. Despite the ferocity of the attack, the boat's two surviving crewmen returned fire and navigated the PBR through the ambush.*

Bits of flesh, hair, clothing, and spent machine-gun shells were everywhere. I calculated the rate of fire of the guns versus the amount of ammunition carried versus the time it took to clear the ambush. It appeared that the surviving gunners had fired so vigorously that they wouldn't have had time to reload. The lieutenant commander said it was the sort of impossibility that is common to desperate men.

I would never again go on a combat patrol. It had been fun; after Lieutenant Witt's final patrol, it was dangerous. I had been young and dumb; I was still young, but suddenly much older. 

Mr. Travnicek served in the U.S. Navy as a yeoman from 1964 to 1968. He later worked 28 years as a newspaper journalist and now resides on a farm in eastern Nebraska.