



# the Quarterdeck Log

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## Happy 223rd Birthday to the U. S. Coast Guard!

*CGCVA Leaders Attend Coast Guard Festival in “Coast Guard City, USA” Grand Haven, Michigan*

*Author's Note: It began with a telephone call when Steve Petersen called me and asked, “Want to go to Grand Haven?” That call began an adventure that we would call a once-in-a-lifetime experience. My wife Mimi and I met up with Steve and his wife Kay, who had driven up from Texas. We hope you enjoy the story as much as we enjoyed the trip.*

By Mike Placencia and Steve Petersen

The 89th Coast Guard Festival in Grand Haven, Michigan was in full force when we arrived. We were designated members of the Official Party by CDR Michael Smith (ret.), CG Festival Executive Director and put into the care of Ms. Mary Eagin, Official Party Hostess. In port and open for public tours were *CGC Mackinaw*, *CGC Mobile Bay*, and the Canadian *CGC Samuel Risley*. Street fairs, car shows and a carnival dotted the downtown streets of Grand Haven. The entire Tri-Cities Area came out in force to recognize the men and women of the Coast Guard and CG Auxiliary over a

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*Steve Petersen (left) and Mike Placencia stand by the Coast Guard City USA sign outside the CG Sector Office, Grand Haven.*



*USCG 223rd Birthday Cake prepared for the Retirees Dinner.*

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# “Skill, courage under enemy fire, and devotion to duty:” Bronze Star Medal Recipient Heriberto “Eddie” Hernandez and Coast Guard Smallboat Operations in Vietnam

by William H. Thiesen, Ph.D., Atlantic Area Historian

*Editor’s Note: All events, descriptions and contextual information in this article derive from official records, original documents, first-hand accounts, and correspondence with Point Cypress crewmembers and members of the Hernandez Family.*

Like many Vietnam veterans, Coast Guard boatswain’s mate Tom Hogan returned home from the war with a lot of emotional baggage. He would never lose that baggage. In 2007, at the 25th anniversary of the Vietnam War Memorial, he and his family joined other Coast Guard combat veterans in the nation’s capital. The day he visited the memorial, he searched for the name “Hernandez” among the thousands listed on “The Wall.” Hogan had to kneel before the monument to find the name he wanted. He found “Heriberto S. Hernandez” and brought out a pencil to rub its outline on a piece of paper. The inscription proved so long that he had to line up two sheets of paper to capture the full name on one line.

At that instant, on his knees while tracing the name of a fallen comrade, with his son and his grandson at his side, Hogan’s wartime experiences and pent-up emotions — good and bad — came rushing back. His tears flowed freely and his grandson grew confused asking why his grandfather was crying. It was difficult to explain to a four-year-old boy how Coast Guardsmen had fought and died in such a faraway place. And it was harder still to describe how men like Hogan,

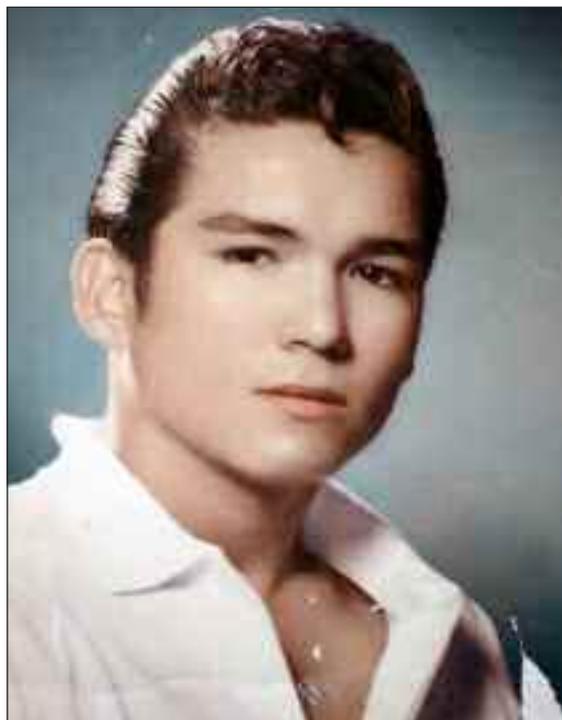
who served in Vietnam, felt the loss of a fallen comrade, even if each had served aboard different cutters. It was as if he and Hernandez were related not just by common purpose, but by blood.

Like their predecessors who participated in every major

American conflict since 1790, Coast Guardsmen who served in Vietnam shared a common bond. To many, the experience proved a defining event in their lives, never to be forgotten. While the Coast Guardsmen of Vietnam held within them this shared experience and the emotional scars that came with it, each was a unique individual. Like Hernandez, and Hogan, those who served in Vietnam came from different parts of the U.S. and each man brought to the Service, and the war, his own unique background.

And so begins the story of Heriberto Segovia Hernandez, who was born on July 13, 1948, in Laredo, Texas. His parents, Heriberto and Juanita Hernandez, came to the United States as migrant workers harvesting produce in the farm fields of West Texas. A second son, Hector

Segovia Hernandez, was born two years later and the two siblings grew very close over the course of their childhood. The family settled down in San Antonio, where a younger sister Margaret was born, and Heriberto senior began a long career with San Antonio’s famous Pearl Brewing Company. A hallmark of the Hernandez family was service to others. Pearl Brewing singled out Mr. Hernandez as a model employee and he and his sons were known to stop and assist stranded motorists along the roads of San Antonio



*A color portrait of Heriberto Segovia Hernandez during his school days at Kennedy High School in San Antonio, Texas. (Courtesy of the Hernandez Family)*

and western Texas.

Heriberto junior was a true Texan. To his family, he was known as “Betín,” but he acquired the nickname “Eddie” because his Anglo teachers and friends could not properly pronounce his first name. He had an extensive knowledge of, and love for, his home state and childhood vacations were spent with relatives living in Corpus Christi, where he enjoyed swimming, fishing and playing on the beach. His favorite song was “Tighten Up,” performed by the Houston rhythm and blues band Archie Bell & the Drells. In describing Eddie, one of his shipmates in Vietnam later claimed, “He was Texas.”

Eddie had two sides to his personality. On one side, he was helpful, easygoing and had the interests of many young men, such as girls and cars. His neighbors in San Antonio described him as “always willing to help in any way possible” and “always trying to better himself in every way possible.” His commanding officer in Vietnam, Jonathan Collom, remembered Eddie as an outgoing person who never bragged about himself and always smiled with “an infectious grin.” On the other side, Eddie could be strong-willed and tough, personality traits



*Eddie Hernandez's black and white service portrait showing him prior to his tour in Vietnam. (Courtesy of the Hernandez Family)*

shared by his siblings. While attending Kennedy High School, he took up boxing at the local gym and became a highly skilled lightweight boxer. Eddie was well liked by his shipmates in Vietnam, who remembered him for his compact yet powerful build.

It was Eddie's single-minded determination that led him to join the Coast Guard, volunteering as soon as he could. His fond memories of playing in the waters of Corpus Christi attracted him to the Service and, days before his seventeenth birthday, he began collecting the paperwork required to enlist. Against the wishes of his parents and well before he finished high school, Eddie joined the Coast Guard for a term of four years. On July 27, 1965, just two days after his birthday, he

departed San Antonio for the Coast Guard Training Center in Alameda, Calif. He left behind his saddened parents and siblings, and his high school girlfriend, who would wait to marry him after his enlistment ended.

Eddie had no trouble with the physical challenges of testing and training at boot camp. However, his stubbornness did pose problems for him as he learned to subordinate his own will to the dictates of the Service, and to work as

part of a team. Within two months of his arrival in Alameda, Eddie completed his



*Profile view of Point Cypress showing 50-caliber machine guns mounted on the fantail and amidships with 81mm mortar/50-caliber combination mounted on the bow. (Courtesy of Gordon M. Gillies)*

## Feature Articles

training and received the rating of seaman apprentice. And by mid-October, he departed Alameda for Honolulu to deploy with the high-endurance cutter *Bering Strait* (WHEC-382). During his time on board the cutter, Eddie crossed the International Date Line and saw duty in law enforcement, search and rescue, and ocean station missions. His tour in the Pacific must have brought back childhood memories of those hot days on the water at Corpus Christi.

On March 31, 1966, Eddie transferred from the *Bering Strait* to the long-range navigation (LORAN) station at Saipan, Mariana Islands. It was during this one-year deployment on isolated duty that Eddie experienced the greatest challenges of his Coast Guard career. When he first arrived, he qualified as a LORAN watchstander, but in the summer and fall of 1966, he experienced a series of setbacks for absence without leave and insubordination. These infractions led to restrictions to the base and a temporary reduction in rating.

By 1967, Eddie changed the course of his career. In that year, he received no disciplinary action and was reinstated to the rating of seaman apprentice. In April, he transferred back to the States and served a year close to home at Base Galveston, Texas. During his time in the U.S., he received the National Defense Service Medal for honorable service and he earned a high school GED certificate. He was also advanced to the rating of Fireman and volunteered to serve a combat tour in Vietnam. At the end of his tour in



*Hernandez with shipmate BM2 Alan Dillenbeck, the WPB's Vietnamese translator and another shipmate standing on the fantail behind the 13-foot smallboat. (Courtesy of Alan Dillenbeck)*

Galveston, Eddie bade farewell to his shipmates at a going-away party at Sara's Lounge, the Coast Guard watering hole in Galveston, and then left for two weeks of leave back home in San Antonio.

After his brief stay at home, Eddie travelled to Coast Guard District Eight headquarters in New Orleans to be processed for duty in Southeast Asia. In February 1968, Eddie transferred from New Orleans back to Alameda for his second tour at Coast Guard Island, but this time his regimen included Survival, Evasion, Resistance & Escape (SERE) Training in techniques for survival, evasion of enemy forces, and land navigation. After completing the SERE Training, Eddie took the usual route to Vietnam, joining other military personnel on a contracted passenger jet bound to South Vietnam from Travis Air Force Base, north of Sacramento.

On May 14, 1968, Eddie's jet touched down at Saigon Airport and, for the first time, he tasted the hot humid air of

*A smallboat mission with four crew, including Hernandez in the bow. Weapons included smallarms and M16s with battle helmets and flak vests providing crew protection. (Courtesy of Gordon M. Gillies)*



Vietnam. He was assigned to the Coast Guard's Coastal Surveillance Force designated Squadron One, or "RONONE" as it was known. Under the direction of the U.S. Navy, the 26 Coast Guard cutters of Squadron One patrolled the coastal areas of South Vietnam. In 1965, the Navy requested the deployment of these 82-foot patrol boats, or WPBs. This was due to the Navy's lack of a riverine capability and the Coast Guard's reputation for shallow water combat operations, a reputation dating back to the earliest years of the Service. The 82-footers supported the Navy's "Operation Market Time" campaign intended to cut off waterborne movement of enemy personnel and war material from North Vietnam to Viet Cong guerillas in the south. Well before the Navy's Swift Boats and other riverine patrol craft deployed to Southeast Asia, the Coast Guard cutters of Squadron One patrolled hundreds of miles of South Vietnam's coastal waters, which were navigated by thousands of local watercraft.

From Saigon, Eddie flew in an Army helicopter to Squadron One's Division Eleven, based in the village of An Thoi, on Phu Quoc Island. Division Eleven's area of responsibility included the coastal waters of Vietnam's southern tip. And, on May 16, 1968, Hernandez reported for duty to the patrol boat *Point Cypress* (WPB-82326). Once on board, he met the crew, including the captain, LTJG Jonathan Collom, and executive officer, LTJG Gordon Gillies. Like her Vietnam-based sisterships, the *Point Cypress's* missions included maritime interdiction; troop landings and insertion of Special Forces personnel; humanitarian, rescue, and training missions; naval gunfire support; and intelligence gathering missions.

Eddie quickly acclimated to Vietnam's intense heat,



*Eddie Hernandez practice firing the M60 machine gun from a standing position on the deck of Point Cypress. (Courtesy of Gordon M. Gillies)*

high humidity and drenching rains. He had no choice. He also grew accustomed to the fast tempo of operations on board the *Point Cypress*. The cutter got underway over 70 percent of the time, deploying on five-to-six day missions within her patrol area. During these deployments, the WPB's crewmembers boarded numerous sampans and junks in search of smuggled weapons and enemy personnel. Within weeks, Eddie learned to care for the cutter's engines and qualified to stand watches as *Point Cypress's* Engineering Watch Officer. Later in the summer, he was

recommended to take part in the Coast Guard Service-Wide Examination for the rating of Engineman Third Class.

*Point Cypress* and the other Coast Guard patrol boats proved very effective in coastal fire support missions. The WPBs were equipped with four Browning .50-caliber M2 machine guns mounted amidships and aft on each side. The 82-footers also boasted a bow-mounted "piggyback," or "over and under," 81mm mortar with a fifth .50-caliber M2 fixed on top. In addition, the cutters carried an array of smaller weapons, including side arms, M16 automatic rifles, an M60



*Hernandez on shore with the M60 during a smallboat patrol, also known as Salem Ops. (Courtesy of Gordon M. Gillies)*



*A smallboat mission showing dense cover provided by foliage along Vietnam's inland waterways. Hernandez is seated in the boat on the left. (Courtesy of Gordon M. Gillies)*

light machine gun, and M79 shoulder-fired grenade launchers.

Naval gunfire support missions included “harassment and interdiction” assignments intended to disrupt enemy supply networks and operations, and fire support missions on specific targets, such as enemy bunkers and fortified structures. *Point Cypress* carried out both missions on virtually all of her deployments. In October 1968, units of Division Eleven even received a congratulatory letter from the Division’s commanding officer, stating, “I have been receiving almost daily compliments from both Vietnamese and American authorities on the outstanding performance of Division Eleven units, particularly those providing gunfire support. Recent reliable intelligence indicates that our gunfire has been more effective and has caused greater damage to the insurgents than we had realized.”

*Point Cypress* also supported smallboat reconnaissance missions, called “Salem Operations” by naval strategists, or “Sitting Duck Ops” by WPB crewmembers. These missions were similar to Special Forces reconnaissance operations and required the use of the 82-footers’ smallboat. Known as a “skimmer” by some Coast Guardsmen, or “bait” by others, the smallboat was a 13-foot fiberglass Boston Whaler, which was the size of a large dinghy and carried no armor or protection for the crew. In addition, the Whaler was equipped with an underpowered and unarmored 35-horsepower outboard motor, which was vulnerable to enemy fire.

Typically carried out under cover of darkness, Salem Ops missions required the smallboats to probe the canals

and waterways of Vietnam’s coast. These missions usually entered enemy-held territory without cover even though they received no U.S. air support. Often under the watchful eye of the Viet Cong, these missions gathered intelligence regarding enemy weapons, troop movements, fortified positions and bunkers. During Salem Ops missions, the smallboats took depth soundings and gathered navigation information, and they observed American artillery barrages and provided gunfire damage assessments for fire support missions. For some smallboat personnel, these missions probably brought new meaning to the old Coast Guard saying, “You have to go out, but you don’t have to come back.”

Eddie served regularly on these hazardous missions and, when in port, he visited other WPBs to get advice and discuss best practices with more experienced smallboat patrol veterans. During smallboat operations, Eddie rode point in the bow of the Whaler holding the M60 machine gun with bandoliers of extra M60 rounds draped over his chest similar to Mexican Revolutionary General Pancho Villa. A well-worn flak vest and World War II-vintage battle helmet provided his only protection from automatic weapons fire or rocket propelled grenades.

On Oct. 5, 1968, Eddie participated in a canal probe on the Ca Mau Peninsula in which his force came under heavy enemy fire, but *Point Cypress* and another WPB managed to destroy enemy river barriers, fortified structures, bunkers and armed sampans before withdrawing. And on Nov. 9, he deployed in the smallboat on a gunfire damage assessment mission near Hon Da Bac Island, on the west side of the Ca Mau Peninsula, to assess a fire support mission just completed by a U.S. patrol vessel. During this mission, Hernandez’s smallboat located and destroyed four enemy sampans. After the Navy launched “Operation SEALORDS (Southeast Asia, Ocean, River and Delta Strategy)” in late 1968, Hernandez frequently volunteered for reconnaissance missions into rivers and canals in enemy territory — many of them never before penetrated by friendly forces. These missions helped to determine whether the waterways could be navigated by U.S. patrol craft, such as Coast Guard WPBs, or the Navy’s newly introduced shallow-draft Swift Boats and PBRs (Patrol Boat River).

In the first days of December 1968, *Point Cypress*

conducted daily smallboat operations and gunfire support missions, destroying three enemy bunkers and damaging three more. On Wednesday, Dec. 4, the cutter rendezvoused with a Royal Thai Navy gunboat to embark CDR Charles Blaha, deputy commander for Coast Guard operations in Vietnam. Blaha visited the WPB to familiarize himself with Division Eleven cutter operations and evaluate the effectiveness of Salem Ops smallboat missions. Blaha and cutter CO, LTJG Collom, planned to deploy Blaha and the Whaler the next day to determine the depth of the Rach Nang River for Navy Swift Boat operations, and to see whether the Rach Tac Buo River intersected the Rach Nang somewhere upstream. *Point Cypress's* XO, Lt. j.g. Gillies, would serve as coxswain and Hernandez volunteered to ride point in the bow.

According to after-action reports, Hernandez embarked the Whaler with the two officers at approximately 2:30 in the afternoon, on Thursday, December 5th. Eddie brought the M60, while the others brought M16s, and the men took an M79 grenade launcher with spare rounds. The smallboat proceeded first to the mouth of the Rach Nang River, then over to the mouth of the nearby Rach Tac Buo. The smallboat probed the shores of the Rach Tac Buo for a connecting tributary with the Rach Nang.

The brief survey up the Rach Tac Buo indicated that there was no navigable connection with the Rach Nang, so Gillies steered the Whaler back to the mouth of the Rach Nang. The smallboat crew then radioed *Point Cypress* for further instructions. They received orders to proceed cautiously up the Rach Nang to find the location of "hooches (American slang for village huts)," bunkers and fortified positions for future fire support missions. In

addition, the smallboat was tasked with destroying the nearest hooches using the M79 grenade launcher and highly flammable night illumination rounds. The smallboat proceeded with the mission and closed to within 30 yards of the structures on shore.

As the smallboat approached the hooches, the crew noticed an armed Viet Cong guerilla entering a shoreside bunker. Blaha fired a volley at the fortification with his M16 and the Viet Cong returned fire. As soon as he heard the gunfire, Gillies gunned the engine and the Whaler motored away from shore, but it was too late to dodge the hostile fire. With only their flak vests to protect them

against the enemy rounds, each man suffered severe bullet wounds. Hernandez was hit near the chest and slumped into the bow of the Whaler while the officers received gunshot wounds to the head, back, arms, shoulders, and legs.

Blaha radioed *Point Cypress* that they had been shot-up and were motoring toward the mouth of the Rach Nang. As they proceeded toward the river's mouth, the Whaler received more incoming fire from shore. Blaha did his best to suppress it with bursts from his M16, but the enemy fire held no tracer rounds, so he failed to pinpoint the enemy positions within the foliage on shore. As they approached the rendezvous point with *Point Cypress*, Blaha and Gillies grew faint from blood loss and Hernandez remained slumped in the bow, alive but groaning in pain from his wounds.

After *Point Cypress* received the message from Blaha, Collom had sounded general quarters and sped the WPB toward a rendezvous point at the mouth of the river. Once on scene, the 82-footer embarked the smallboat and wounded men. Next, Collom radioed a request for a medevac from the Navy's floating support base aboard the anchored landing ship, *USS*



***Heriberto "Eddie" Hernandez on the deck of Point Cypress in his typical smallboat patrol attire of battle helmet, flak vest and machine gun bandoliers. (Courtesy of the Hernandez Family) Note: Photo has been enhanced from the original.***

*Washoe County (LST-1156)*. During the half-hour transit to the LST, *Point Cypress's* crew did their best to stabilize the wounded in preparation for the helicopter medevac from the Washoe County to a local field hospital. When Eddie was brought on board *Point Cypress*, he was still conscious, but the bullet that struck him passed through his upper torso causing heavy internal bleeding. His wounds proved too grave to treat with the limited medical supplies on board *Point Cypress* and he passed away just as the WPB approached the *Washoe County* to moor beside the LST.

After the cutter arrived at the support vessel, the wounded officers were embarked on board the anchored ship. Gillies and Blaha were treated and then medevaced by an Army helicopter to the 29th Field Evacuation Hospital at Binh Thuy, located to the southwest of Saigon. Next, the men were transferred to the 21st Casualty Staging Hospital in Saigon and then flown to a naval hospital in Yokosuka, Japan, for treatment before returning stateside for extended medical care. In the after-action report for the Dec. 5 mission, the recovering Blaha wrote, "For me, this incident was a moment of terror I will never forget — not only because of what did happen, but because I see that it could happen again and again." In the same report, he summed up his thoughts regarding Salem Ops smallboat missions: "If our aim is to control the river banks, this will have to be done by ground forces. To look at it another way, we are asking our untrained small boat crews to do the jobs really in the province of [Navy] SEALs or RACs [Army Riverine Assault Craft forces]."

Eddie's body was flown back to Travis Air Force Base and then returned with a Coast Guard escort to his grieving family in San Antonio. On Saturday, Dec. 14, 1968, his mortal remains were interred at 1 p.m. at San Fernando Cemetery with full military honors. Hernandez posthumously received the Purple Heart Medal and Bronze Star Medal with a "V" device for valor. His Bronze Star citation read, "Fireman Hernandez's professional skill, courage under enemy fire, and devotion to duty reflected great credit upon himself, and were in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service." In addition, the Coast Guard named the Fast Response Cutter Heriberto Hernandez in his honor. He is the first Hispanic-American Coast Guardsman to be so recognized for combat operations.

In an ironic twist of fate, in early 1970, Eddie's younger brother Hector found himself serving on a high-endurance

cutter sailing out of the same Hawaiian docks walked by his older brother when Eddie served aboard *Bering Strait*. Hector was very close to Eddie and when word reached home that his brother had died in Vietnam, it had a profound impact on the Hector. Determined to fight in Vietnam like his brother, Hector enlisted in the Coast Guard, underwent basic training at Alameda and was deployed to the Hawaii-based cutter *Chautauqua (WHEC-41)*. Fearful that a second son might be lost in Vietnam, Hector's mother Juanita Hernandez, petitioned her congressman to prevent her second son from serving in combat. Mrs. Hernandez's petition succeeded in keeping Hector out of the war, but it also caused him great disappointment and bitterness. After completing his enlistment in the Coast Guard, Hector returned to San Antonio, where he worked for the local Sears Department Store for over 20 years. After returning home from the Service, and well after the loss of his older brother, Hector still could not talk about Eddie — even with his family. Within a year of his retirement, in April 1994, Hector passed away and was buried beside Eddie at San Fernando Cemetery.

And so ends the story of Fireman Heriberto Segovia "Eddie" Hernandez, a Coast Guardsman with a home, family and friends, and a life different from any man before or after him. And, like any other Coast Guardsman, he was trained to do a job and he did his best to carry it out. A few years ago, while commenting on his friend Eddie Hernandez, another Vietnam veteran stated, "He's still 19, and I'm 61."

Back at The Wall, Tom Hogan tried to tell his grandson how this fallen comrade, who died 40 years before on the opposite side of the world, caused Hogan such sadness and remorse. The aging combat veteran did his best to explain how Eddie Hernandez went in harm's way and died in the line of duty for his country, his shipmates and for what he believed in.

Today, few Americans remember the Vietnam War and even fewer realize that the Coast Guard served in that war from the beginning to the end of the naval conflict. But Service members, such as Tom Hogan remember only too well. Even though they did not serve together, Hogan and Hernandez were shipmates in the most profound sense of the word. They were both members of the Coast Guard family and Hogan felt the loss of his comrade as if they were brothers.