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MACOI
NAG NEWS RELEASE No. 14-66
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

16 March 1966

SAIGON, Vietnam (NAG-10) -- "It was a question of standing out in the middle of the street and whoever could put out the most firepower was going to come out on top. The crew just stood up there toe-to-toe and slugged it out. There's nothing to hide behind on these boats."

This is the way commanding officer Lt. Eugene J. Hickey, Jr., [REDACTED] described a fierce firefight last week between the Coast Guard cutter Point White and a Viet Cong junk.

The "street" was the Soirap river 17 miles south of Saigon and Point White came out on "top". Seven VC aboard the junk were killed, four captured and the junk sunk in the half hour action.

"It was about 10:15 on the night of March 9th, "Lt. Hickey said. "We were patrolling about a mile south of the entrance to the Vam Sat canal which is in the Rung Sat Special Zone on the eastern shore of the Soirap River. This was our first night patrol."

Engineman First Class Joe Moody, USCG, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] was bow lookout when the fight started.

"We were definitely expecting trouble," he recalls. "We knew that we had VC on both sides of the river. All day long we saw a lot of activity -- helicopters, ground fire, bombing -- big stuff like 105's (4-inch shells) was coming in. We could hear mortars going off.

"We got this radar contact," Moody continued. "Mr. Hickey gave me a bearing off the bow. I could see something dark in the water and the very split second that I trained on it they fired. I could see the muzzle flashes very well and I opened fire with the .50-caliber. Mr. Hickey turned on the searchlight and pinpointed the target."

Electronics Technician Second Class Gerald M. Sampont, USCG, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED], [REDACTED] had just been relieved on the helm and was on watch on the fantail.

"I had the headphones on," Sampont said, "and heard boarding stations, so I went to the .50-caliber mount on the port side aft. I couldn't see the junk but at this time Moody opened fire. Then the junk was illuminated. I opened up with a little over a quarter of a box (about 30 rounds).

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"I lost sight of the junk and there were other junks (units of Vietnamese Navy Coastal Group 33) in the area so I stopped firing. The next thing I knew it appeared about 25 or 30 yards off our starboard side coming around. Chief Weitzel (Chief Engineman Raymond O. Weitzel, USCG) and Gates (Gunner's Mate Second Class Lester K. Gates, USCG) each fired a hundred rounds into it and I emptied the rest of my ammo into her side. Everyone of 'em from those three fifties were hitting the junk. I could see splinters and tracers were going right into the side."

Seaman Leland B. Buzzele, USCG, [REDACTED] was in the crews quarters asleep when the action started.

"The general quarters alarm sounded," Buzzele remembers, "and we all headed up the ladder (to the main deck). This was the first time I had ever been in combat and I was a little shaky. I went up on the bow to my GQ station. Just as I was taking the cover off a box of .50-caliber ammo, the propellant charges on some of the mortar rounds in the ready box were set off. (An armor piercing round fired from the VC junk had slammed into the ready box full of 81 mm mortar ammunition.) It was about four feet from where I was but the chief (Chief Boatswain's Mate Archie A. French, USCG) had just bent over to pick up his helmet and he was standing right in front of the ready box when the ammo was hit. There was smoke and sparks in the ready box. Actually if it would have gone there wouldn't have been anybody left because the box was full of ammo. We didn't get rid of it right away after it happened because we had to keep on fighting the VC and get the survivors aboard."

Lt. Hickey was on the bridge. After sounding the GQ alarm he took the helm and maneuvered the boat while directing his crew in the fight.

"The fire was very heavy," Lt. Hickey said. "There was at least one automatic weapon of a small caliber plus quite a few other weapons being fired. It seemed like the firefight had been going on for an hour and a half but I think it was probably less than a minute. I estimated they had put out between two and three hundred rounds at us, which was entirely too many as far as I was concerned. I don't know how they did it. We had three .50's working them over plus a couple of rifles. They kept taking this .50-caliber fire right directly into the junk and it didn't even slow their rate of fire. If we stayed around too long shooting it out with them somebody in my crew was going to get hit so I decided to ram them. My idea was to stop the cheating somehow, to disable them from shooting at us.

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"Rather than actually cut them in half," Lt. Hickey continued, "I decided to try and hit them off the starboard side of the bow. So just about 10 or 15 yards before I reached them -- this was at 17 knots and the boat had quite a bit of momentum -- I put the rudder hard over to the left and struck them a glancing blow with the bow. We put out about a six foot wake from close aboard and this I intended to wash over them which it did."

Lt. Hickey's tactic was successful and fire from the junk ceased. Point White was about 25 yards from the junk after the ramming when fire from GM2 Gates' .50-caliber mount set off an explosion aboard the junk.

"Moody described it this way; "There was a big flash and I saw a body go up in the air and into the water. At this time the firefight stopped and we proceeded to pick up survivors. The first survivor we picked up was burned from head to toe. The only place that wasn't burned was his back. We had to go over the side and help him."

Lt. Hickey and Moody went down the scramble net on the side of the cutter and hauled the man out of the water. He was a hard core VC who had been in the Rung Sat Special Zone for more than a year as commanding officer of a training camp.

"We put him in a litter back aft," Lt. Hickey said, "threw a blanket over him and treated him for shock, trying to make him as comfortable as possible. He was very appreciative about the treatment. He said the next day when we saw him again that if he lived, Americans would always be his friends."

After picking up the badly burned man Lt. Hickey maneuvered Point White back alongside the junk in order to pick up other survivors. But in the well deck on the junk one mortally wounded Viet Cong was prepared to fight to the death.

"We had the junk alongside," Moody recalls. "There was one man lying in the port quarter of the junk on his back. He was badly wounded. He jacked a round into his rifle, lying on his back, aimed up at me and fired. I shot back but he got off another round even though I had hit him several times. Finally a Vietnamese Navy man in a junk on the other side leaned over and finished him off."

"We stayed alongside the junk for approximately 10 or 15 minutes," Lt. Hickey said, "while the Coastal Group junks came up on the opposite side. There was one man lying on top of the cabin. He was dead. There were two Viet Cong who appeared to be unwounded on top of the junk with their hands up."

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"They were plenty willing to come aboard the WPB so the crew helped them climb up. We pulled weapons and gear off that was lying on the main deck. The junk was taking on water quite rapidly. I gave orders for the submersible pump to be put aboard the junk, but just about this time her decks were awash and it was too late.

"Immediately after the junk sank we marked the spot and moved away. We found another couple of VC swimming and got one of them to come aboard. We could only pick up one at a time and the other one swam away. The one we got didn't want to come aboard either. He kept diving down, trying to stay under as long as he could. We just sat alongside of him with a light on the water. He'd come up for air, see us still there and go back down again. Finally he got tired of swallowing water so he came up our scramble net. That was the fourth prisoner."

With the survivors rounded up and the fighting over Lt. Hickey turned to the damaged mortar rounds still endangering Point White in the ready box up forward.

"My gunner's mate asked permission to throw the damaged rounds over the side but I said no I wanted to see them myself. I left the bridge, went up forward and looked in the ready box. At least three of the white phosphorous projectiles and an illumination round had quite a bit of damage to the cases. I moved everybody back from the area and asked the gunner's mate to step aside. Not that it would have done any good because if the box went up it would have blown the whole boat. They weren't smoking anymore but they were hot. I tried to get the rounds out without jarring them. Every time one would jar my heart would stop. They were on top of all the other projectiles and there was a lip on the ready box.

"Being clubfisted, everytime I tried to pull one out I'd rattle it a little bit. I'd move a couple of other projectiles so I could get this one down and one of the damaged ones would fall about three inches. I left them in the cases and threw them over the side. A 7.62 mm slug fired from the VC junk fell out of one of the white phosphorous projectile cases."

Lt. Hickey relinquished command of the Point White on March 14 and moved up to his new job as chief staff officer of Coast Guard Division 13, parent command of the Point White. His former crew presented him with a polished .50-caliber round as a memento of the action. He was also presented with the cutter's commissioning pennant, inscribed with each crewmember's name.

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"Lt. Hickey summed up his feeling in a brief farewell speech: "It has been a pleasure to serve with brave ~~men~~."

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