



## United States Coast Guard Historian's Office

*Preserving Our History for Future Generations*

---

# THE COAST GUARD IN VIETNAM:

*Recollections of Coast Guard Captain Paul A. Lutz, commanding CGC Sherman (WMEC 720) on events during Sherman's Vietnam Cruise, 1970.*



**USCGC *Sherman* (WMEC 720), August, 1969. Photo by PHC Ken Mather, USCG.**

---

### Editor's Note:

In 2002 Captain Paul A. Lutz, USCG (Ret.), provided the Coast Guard Historian's Office with the following memoir where he describes three different incidents that occurred during *Sherman's* Vietnam cruise in 1970, where the cutter was assigned, under his command, to Coast Guard Squadron Three. *Sherman* carries the distinction of having sunk, in combat, a North Vietnamese trawler that attempted to land arms and ammunition to enemy forces in South Vietnam. Captain Lutz describes that battle in exciting detail. *Sherman* also carried out an intelligence mission, bringing her dangerously close to Communist Chinese territory, in an operation that once again demonstrated the varied capabilities and responsibilities



# United States Coast Guard Historian's Office

## *Preserving Our History for Future Generations*

of the nation's oldest continuous sea-going service. In the final narrative, Captain Lutz describes how medical personnel from *Sherman*, though under threat of Communist attack, saved a Vietnamese village from a cholera epidemic, a humanitarian mission that brought great credit to *Sherman*, her crew, and the U.S. Coast Guard.

The Historian's Office would like to thank Captain Lutz for taking the time to provide a copy of his manuscript to our office, thereby ensuring its wide dissemination and permanent retention by the service of this important piece of Coast Guard history. It is only through efforts such as his that Coast Guard history is preserved for future generations. Feel free to read the entire narrative or click on the title of the different accounts to go directly to that part of his story. Thanks again Captain!

### Chapters

- 1) The interdiction of SL3 steel-hull infiltration trawler, 21-22 November 1970
- 2) *Sherman's* Wild Ride to Hainan Or Testing the Chinese
- 3) Stopping the Cholera Epidemic at Song On Doc

---

## 1. The interdiction of SL3 Steel-Hull Infiltration Trawler, 21-22 November 1970



My recollections of the events of 21 November 1970, on board *Sherman*, off the mouth of the Mekong River, Viet Nam.

**(Captain Paul A. Lutz, USCG)**

On 21 November 1970 the Coast Guard 378-foot cutter *Sherman* was running south just off the coast of South Viet Nam, going from Hong Kong to Area 9, the southernmost operating area for maritime operations off of Viet Nam, headed for our last patrol as part of the US Navy Coastal Surveillance Force. We knew that ahead of us the cutter *Rush* was following a steel hull enemy vessel as it ran on a



## United States Coast Guard Historian's Office

### *Preserving Our History for Future Generations*

NW course toward a barrier line of allied vessels. Apparently, the enemy vessel intended to reach the coast in the vicinity of the Mekong River to off load arms for VC [Viet Cong] or NVN [North Vietnamese] use. It was a very dark night with no moon and a high tide.

When evening darkness fell, *Sherman* was still north of the Mekong and was approaching the track line of the enemy vessel and of *Rush*. *Sherman* arrived at the vicinity of the action just before the OTC (*Rush*) [officer in tactical command--the commanding officer of *Rush*] directed the Navy minesweeper *Endurance* to challenge the enemy vessel that was now in South Viet Nam waters. All units were dark, both allied and enemy. We saw the minesweeper *Endurance* challenge the enemy vessel with flashing light and immediately after there was a fire fight with gun flashes from both the enemy and from the minesweeper. After a sharp exchange of fire, the gun fire stopped. The minesweeper was hit by a recoilless rifle round (85mm) which was imbedded in the wooden hull of the minesweeper, but it did not explode. The minesweeper then disengaged.



**(USS *Gallant*, sister-ship to *Endurance*)**

The enemy vessel, which our radar tracked, was on a course between N and NW at about 10 knots and when the firing stopped it was still underway at 10 knots. I remember looking at the radar scope on the bridge of *Sherman* and noted *Rush* and other units following the enemy at three or more miles. The enemy vessel was beyond all allied units and closing the shore. Further, I remember saying "my God he is through the barrier." At this point *Rush* commenced 5" gun fire which *Sherman* CIC [combat information center] and fire control reported were not hitting. After a short period of time, I guess a minute or two, *Rush* stopped firing and



## United States Coast Guard Historian's Office

### *Preserving Our History for Future Generations*

OTC (*Rush*) directed *Sherman* to engage the enemy vessel, which was still underway, closing the shore which was about one mile ahead.

*Sherman* was stopped, just outside the shallow water of the Mekong River mouth, maintaining very accurate positioning with LORAN "C."

(*Sherman's* CIC)



I saw that to close the enemy vessel, I would need to proceed into water that our charts showed as too shallow for

*Sherman*. I also knew that there was a very high tide and there would be some maneuvering possible. The delta was very flat, and we should have indications from our two excellent fathometers when we begin to lose our water.

I knew that *Sherman* had to act very quickly, or the enemy and its arms cargo would make it to the shore and I went into the shallow water of the delta. Our course was set the same as our fire control bearing (our fire control was locked on the enemy). Additionally, the Navy mine sweeper confirmed as we passed her, "enemy directly ahead." When over the shallow water delta, our charts showed depths of between 2 to 3 meters of water, not enough for *Sherman*. The *Sherman* fathometers (as I remember) showed about 15 feet of water under our keel when on the Delta. As *Sherman* propellers went down to about 6 feet below the keel we were all right for the time being. *Sherman* was on the turbines at speed of 210 turns (about 26 knots).

I don't know how long we were at this speed, my guess about five minutes, until my navigator LCDR Roger Williams became very concerned and screamed at me "Captain,

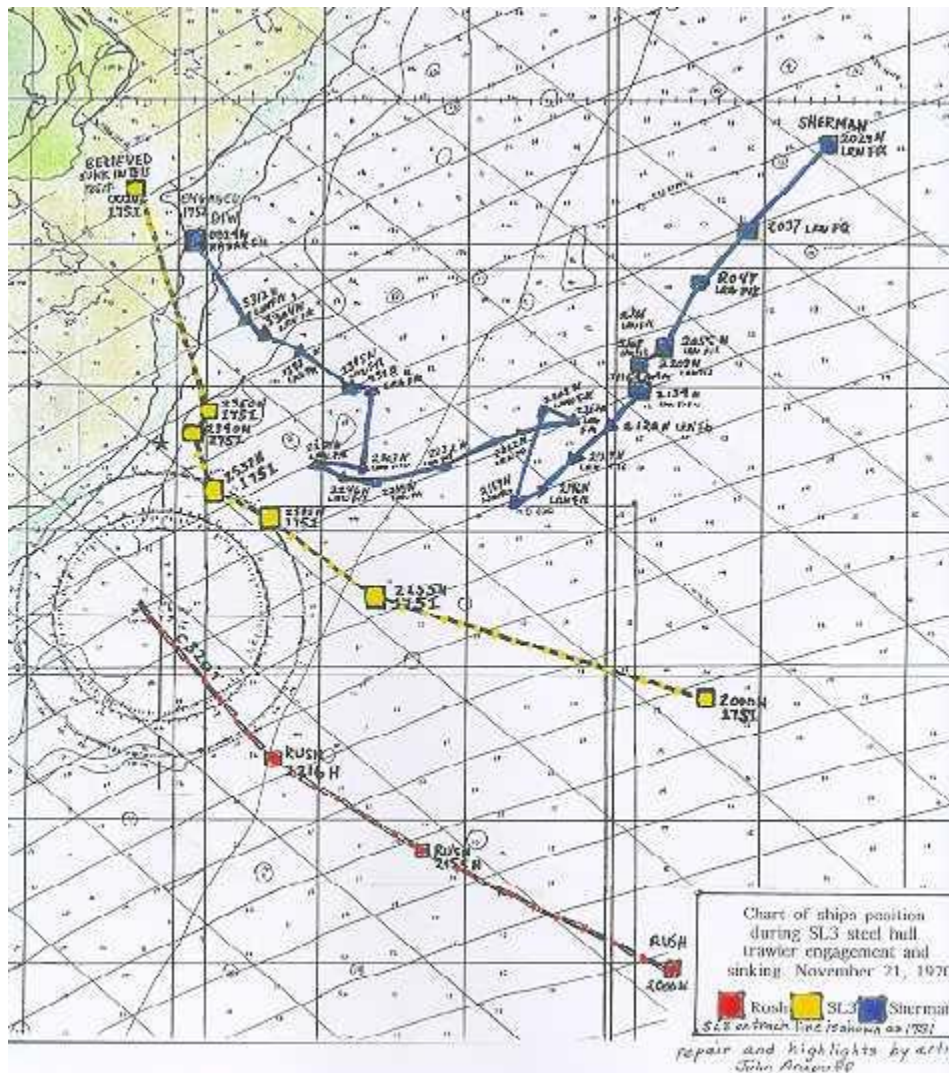




# United States Coast Guard Historian's Office

## Preserving Our History for Future Generations

you have got to stop!." I replied, "All right Roger we will stop" and I personally put the annunciators at "Stop." *Sherman* then stopped and our gun fire began while stopped.



"Chart of ships position during SL3 steel hull trawler engagement and sinking, November 21, 1970."



## United States Coast Guard Historian's Office

### *Preserving Our History for Future Generations*

The enemy vessel was still at 10 knots, running dark in a pitch-black night and no unit was firing. I probably could have opened fire immediately, as our fire control team was sure they were locked on the enemy ship, but to be doubly cautious, I ordered firing three star shells to illuminate the target and ensure identification. Accordingly, *Sherman* first fired three star shells that clearly showed an enemy steel hull infiltration trawler. As soon as the star shells were fired, the enemy ship opened fire on *Sherman*. Her rounds had red tracers from one kind of gun, which I believe were from his 60 caliber machine guns, and brilliant green tracers from a different weapon, which I believe was his 85mm recoilless rifle. The tracers were coming directly at *Sherman* but falling short.

[*Sherman's* running lights were on as ordered at the time of the challenge to the enemy ship.] The open fire range was about 2600 yards. I next ordered fire control to shift to direct fire.



**(*Sherman's* main battery fires during a naval gunfire support mission)**

As soon as the enemy rounds began coming inbound, I wanted to expedite the *Sherman* direct fire and told fire control "There are incoming rounds, pour it on them." Fire control replied "Do not understand." I told my excellent battle talker "God damn it! Fire for effect!" To my surprise CSC Petrusovich, my talker, correctly repeated it exactly to fire control "God damn it! Fire for effect!" Gunnery moved quickly to begin direct fire and I couldn't help chuckling to myself at the way the order was relayed. (Chief Petrusovich was able to simultaneously report on one subject while receiving info on another subject. This was an extraordinary talent.)

As we prepared to begin direct fire, the 5" gun was depressed and the barrel struck the forward bulwark. I had to twist *Sherman* so the gun could be lowered aft of the bulwarks. The low elevation of the gun was soon seen as very advantageous.



## United States Coast Guard Historian's Office

*Preserving Our History for Future Generations*



**"*Sherman* sinks armed enemy vessel, *SL3*, at Mekong River mouth, 21 November 1970; Artist: John Wisinski."**

After the first round in direct fire with point detonating rounds, I saw an explosion and a bright illumination of the enemy vessel. I knew that prior enemy vessels had usually destroyed themselves when caught by allied forces and accordingly I thought it must be a self-destruct explosion. However, as our succeeding rounds showed as they hit there was the same marked explosion and a vivid illumination of the enemy vessel. *Sherman* was firing her forward 5" 38 caliber gun at maximum rate of fire (as I remember 18 rounds/minute) and every round hit and brilliantly illuminated the enemy. The rhythmic hit, hit, hit etc. were synchronized with the firing of *Sherman's* 5-inch gun and were



### ***Preserving Our History for Future Generations***

awesome to observe. After about 8 to 10 rounds (and hits), taking about one half a minute the enemy ship was stopped and brightly burning.

(Although there was some question, I believe even our first round hit because only one very small 1/2 mil spot was made after the first round. One of our two fire control operators saw the first round as a hit. The other fire controlman saw the first round as very close.)

With the enemy ship stopped, I ordered a shift to air burst to silence any remaining guns in case we wanted to board the enemy vessel. Before this shift could take place, the enemy ship sank (flames disappeared and radar target disappeared). As *Sherman* was still on the Delta and vulnerable to the shallow depth of water I moved out to open water with a feeling of relief and set course south to relieve the patrol ship in area 9 after recommending to OTC to have a small vessel search the area of the sinking of the trawler.

### **Post-Action Comments**

After relieving as patrol ship in Area 9, we began to see messages from the naval command in Viet Nam that reported the next day that the wreck of the enemy ship was found and visited by U.S. Navy divers. The wreck was above water, at low tide, its location was, as I remember, about one mile from the shore. The divers reported her starboard side was "riddled by 5-inch gun fire". This confirmed the sinking by *Sherman* as *Sherman* was the only vessel firing at the starboard side of the enemy and in fact the only ship firing at the time of the sinking.

The Navy divers found the 60 caliber machine guns and recoilless rifles (2) that we expected and found the hold of the vessel filled with enough ammunition and weapons to arm a division. A few bodies were found. On the first- or second-day probable crew



***Preserving Our History for Future Generations***

members from the enemy ship were found dazed and wandering on the shore and were captured. They were tattooed "Death before surrender" or something very similar.

I believe our first or second round killed the Commissar, and this halted the usual self-destruct. This was the first (and I believe only) capture of crew members from the steel-hull arms running vessels during the Vietnam War. *Sherman* never received any report on what happened to these prisoners. A week or two later *Sherman* requested a memento from the wreck and *Sherman* received a trophy board with a B40 rocket launcher (a very popular VC weapon that was like our bazooka) from the Commander U.S. Naval Forces Viet Nam. This trophy has a brass plate on it, which read:

**USCGC Sherman WHEC 720**

**PRESENTED IN RECOGNITION OF OUTSTANDING PERFORMANCE OF DUTY IN THE ENGAGEMENT AND SINKING OF THE NORTH VIETNAMESE SL-3 INFILTRATION TRAWLER IN SOUTH VIETNAMESE TERRITORIAL WATERS ON 22 NOVEMBER 1970.**

**J.H. King Jr.  
Rear Admiral, United States Navy  
Commander U.S. Naval Forces Vietnam**

I donated this trophy board with the B40 launcher and brass dedication plate to the museum at the Coast Guard Academy along with one of the paintings of the action made by John Wisinski, a well-known Coast Guard artist in 1972. These donations were made in 1972 or 1973. The Superintendent of the Academy, Rear Admiral Bill Jenkins sent me a very kind letter of thanks for these donations to the Academy Museum.



## United States Coast Guard Historian's Office

### *Preserving Our History for Future Generations*

**(SECTRANS John Volpe and ADM Prins, escorted by CAPT Lutz, meet with members of *Sherman's* crew during *Sherman's* visit to Hong Kong.)**

Following the action, awards were received from the Navy: Meritorious Unit Citation for *Sherman*; *Bronze Star* for Capt. Lutz for "heroic achievement" and a *Bronze Star* for our very capable executive officer, CDR John Maloney; Navy Commendation Medals for our careful navigator LCDR Roger Williams, excellent OOD LTJG Douglas Cox; and Navy Commendation Medals for the outstanding *Sherman*



gunnery, fire control team and 5" gun mount team. CAPT Lutz also received the Distinguished Service Medal from the Republic of Vietnam and additional ships members received Vietnam decorations.

At the end of *Sherman's* patrol in Area 9, *Sherman* was relieved by USCGC *Rush*, CAPT Robert Durfey, an outstanding officer and an old friend. The *Rush* had performed outstandingly by following the suspect enemy vessel for several days and never being detected by the suspect vessel. I believe this was the only time in the Vietnam War that an American Ship had been able to do this.

At this time Captain Durfey and I discussed the engagement. Captain Durfey described to me the *Rush* tracking of the enemy ship from just over the horizon. He said that the *Rush* radar plots showed the enemy ship continuously turning in circles and he could not understand why. Captain Durfey told me that *Rush* had trouble with its five-inch gun fire control and wrote in the *Sherman* guest log "Robert W. Durfey Capt USCG CO RUSH (WHEC 723) With many thanks for your fine help and outstanding shooting."

At some later time, the [Coast Guard] Squadron Three Commander, Captain Richard Hoover told me that the Navy divers had recovered crates of living homing pigeons from



## United States Coast Guard Historian's Office

### *Preserving Our History for Future Generations*

the wreck of the enemy vessel. We discussed what the pigeons were for. Captain Hoover felt that they were to take messages to the home base of the vessel. My view was that since the enemy vessel made their attempt to infiltrate on a very dark night onto an unlighted shore, without radar, they needed navigational help. The homing pigeons, if their home was the destination of the enemy vessel, would show them the course, when released, for the vessel to follow, and also could take messages. The circles made by the enemy, as described by Captain Durfey, were to help the pigeons homing orientation, which I understand is related to the earth's magnetic field.

The officer of the deck for *Sherman* during the steel trawler shoot out was LTJG Douglas Cox. This excellent officer was sent with the *Sherman* after action report to the headquarters of CTF 115 at Cam Rahn Bay. Upon returning to *Sherman* he gave me a copy of the chart which CTF 115 staff prepared to show the action with track lines for the different units. A reduced copy of this is enclosed. Also he informed me that the Commander Naval Forces Vietnam (ComNavV) was recommending *Sherman* for a Presidential Unit Citation, but this never materialized. After returning to Boston I learned that *Sherman's* gun crew had retained eight of the expended five inch brass powder casings. Four of these were given to the First District Commander and four are being offered to the Coast Guard Museum.

This account is an accurate summary of the action of 21-22 November 1970 in Vietnam. It has been prepared to document the story for those of us who were there.

---



## United States Coast Guard Historian's Office

*Preserving Our History for Future Generations*

### **2. *Sherman's* Wild Ride to Hainan**

**Or**

#### **Testing the Chinese**

This event started about eight thirty on a very black foggy night when *Sherman* was on her second patrol near the southernmost part of Viet Nam. We had been watching the coastal traffic and boarding some fishing vessels who mostly were taking sharks for their fins, a valuable item in Asia for use in shark fin soup. *Sherman* was very quiet, was showing navigation lights, and was slowly going northeast up the Vietnamese coast, about 20 miles off. I was standing on the catwalk just aft of the bridge on the starboard side. Lieutenant JG Doug Cox, the Officer of the Deck came from inside the bridge to tell me that he had a radar target about 4 miles away that was dark (no navigation lights). He said, "We might have something there." I said I'll take a look and followed him to the bridge.

The radar target was very sharp, and nothing showed visibly on the bearing. Next, I looked at the star scope. The image was not clear, but something was there, so I told Mr. Cox to turn off the navigation lights and to head over toward the target and to man the 50-caliber machine gun amidship. After we had decreased the range about a mile, I checked the star scope again and the image looked more suspicious. This was threatening enough that I told Mr. Cox to go to GQ (battle stations). When at GQ we increased speed and prepared to use the searchlights. The target remained dark. At a range of about 100 yards, we put the searchlight on him, and we saw it was a steel hull vessel about 90 feet long of the type used to bring in arms to the VC. As soon as we identified his as an "enemy" it struck me that, as we were well outside the territorial water of South Viet Nam, I could not stop him with force unless he fired on us first. We continued to close on him and watched to see if he would fire on us. However, he did not fire on us and although the South Vietnamese Navy Officers on board *Sherman*





## United States Coast Guard Historian's Office

### *Preserving Our History for Future Generations*

were very agitated and screamed at me "He VC, shoot" I obeyed the rules and just followed the vessel from close aboard.

Meantime we had reported to higher authority and received orders to just follow him (Trawler 10-F-1) and we followed about a quarter of a mile behind the vessel. We essentially never saw any crew members. There was no fishing gear on the vessel and there were no weapons to be seen. The enemy vessel continued on a northeasterly course at about 9 knots.

After a day we were joined by a Navy destroyer and were told to arrange a close approach to take complete photo coverage of the enemy ship. We prepared the plan where *Sherman* would go in for the photography and for the destroyer to follow at about 1000 yards in case, we needed her. We were already starting the run in with the destroyer behind when we got urgent orders from higher authority to stop the photo operation. There was no indication that the enemy noticed what we were doing. Shortly after, the destroyer was ordered away, and *Sherman* continued alone with the enemy.

After several days it was clear that the enemy was going to go past North Viet Nam. We were on a northerly course and went near the Paracel Islands heading for the Gulf of Tonkin. After clearing the Paracels the enemy headed NW toward the direction of Hainan Island. At about this time we began to notice we were being followed by a very large radar target, which we assumed must be an aircraft carrier although it stayed out of sight and we never saw it or were told about it. Also we had radar contacts of aircraft flying over us at high elevations. It was soon very clear that the enemy ship was going toward Hainan Island, a part of China.

When we were about a day away from Hainan Island we got orders to follow the enemy in. Our navigation was by LORAN A and the area of Hainan was on the base line extension of the LORAN line which we were using. This is an imprecise area for a



## United States Coast Guard Historian's Office

### *Preserving Our History for Future Generations*

LORAN line. So we were apprehensive as the approach to Hainan would occur at about midnight. As we approached the island, our equipment showed that *Sherman* was being locked on by missile fire control radars. There were no other vessels in sight as we closed until the enemy vessel headed very close to a ship ahead which had very bright lights. I had difficulty identifying what it was. The enemy ship went very close to this brightly lighted ship and *Sherman* followed. It seemed clear that this was a ship that essentially was acting as a light ship. When *Sherman* passed closely to the lighted ship I could see there was a large open area in the ship like a ferry. My conclusion was the light ship was a good-sized ferry that was sent out as a sentinel to meet the incoming enemy ship.

Early in the evening I had told the ship's company what was happening and that we would go to general quarters at about 9:30pm. When I went to the bridge, before the planned time to set general quarters, I was surprised to see the entire ship's company already in their flack vests and helmets and at their battle stations. Every post was manned before the general alarm was sounded. I had never seen this before, even in World War II at the Southern France beach head. I remember saying to myself "My God". I was very moved, grateful to my men and very soberly anticipating the events of the evening. (As I remember this was the 13th of May 1970.)

As we approached the sentinel ship, *Sherman* was at battle stations and the high-speed gas turbines were on the line. As mentioned before, the LORAN A was very sluggish. It took a long time for the numbers to change. As we knew what the reading should be when we closed within 9 miles, it was very tense as the readings were not changing as anticipated by our dead reckoning. Fortunately, our air search radar began to pick up the mountain peaks on Hainan. They were quite clear and we began plotting our position ranging from the peaks. When the positions showed we were inside the 9-mile limit to about 7-½ miles, *Sherman* turned and retraced our track line.



## United States Coast Guard Historian's Office

*Preserving Our History for Future Generations*



**"*Sherman* approaches Hainan Island, 13 May 1970; Artist: John Arapoff."**

We set our speed at 210 turns, 26 knots, which was an excellent speed for the ship, although short of the top speed. After a short time at 26 knots, the engine room made a call to the bridge which gave us a good laugh. The call was "Bridge this is engine room - We have more down here." Aside from the humor our departure from Hainan was without incident. As we approached Hainan Island *Sherman* kept position directly behind the enemy ship. This is the usual practice for a ship entering unfamiliar waters, to follow another ship which knows the waters. Later I learned that was particularly good practice as the Japanese had heavily mined these waters during World War II.

*Preserving Our History for Future Generations*

**Post Action Comment:**

With 20/20 hindsight it would have been better to have assumed the unlighted ship was an enemy and have stayed over the horizon following her with radar until she entered Vietnamese waters. Unfortunately, the enemy ship was the first that *Sherman* had encountered while we had seen a number of innocent fishing vessels that were dark at night, so a dark ship at night was not always an enemy.

**Additional review:**

The absence of weapons on the "enemy" ship could have been significant. It may not have intended to close the coast. Rather it may have been trying to off load weapons at sea. Finally, it could have been a vessel on an innocent passage, although the Chinese missile fire control radar locking on *Sherman* was certainly not friendly.

**Final comment:**

The decision not to attack the "enemy" in international waters was correct. I never learned the rationale behind the orders to have *Sherman* approach so close to China. Apparently, it was to test the Chinese response.

---

### **3. Stopping the Cholera Epidemic at Song On Doc**

On the day before *Sherman* was to be relieved of her last patrol she was operating near Song On Doc, on the south west coast of the Republic of Viet Nam. It was 9 December 1970, I believe. Everyone was looking forward to our imminent start of our homeward voyage and spirits were very high. At about 7:30 a.m., the [ship's] doctor, Lt. Thomas Saddoris, and Chief Hospital Corpsman William Fleming came to my cabin and told me they had been talking on the radio with a US Army liaison officer with the





## United States Coast Guard Historian's Office

### *Preserving Our History for Future Generations*

Vietnamese. They concluded that there was a cholera epidemic in the village of Song On Doc and the US Army liaison officer said it was urgent that the village population be given the shots to immunize against cholera.



(L to R: Dr. Thomas Sadoris, USPHS & CHC William Fleming, USCG)

The liaison officer was not a medical person but he had a quantity of the vaccine that could be used. Dr. Sadoris and Chief Corpsman Fleming wanted my permission to go in by boat to give the immunizations. I was not happy to hear this. The US forces had already abandoned their base at Song On Doc, the village was at the mercy of the VC and there were no American or ARVN [Army of Viet Nam] forces to be called for protection. I told the doctor and chief this but they were not dissuaded. They said the situation was desperate and the US Army liaison officer said there was a good chance that a medical team would not be attacked as the VC people would be in the lines of people waiting to get their shots. After further discussions, with great reluctance, I agreed to let the doctor and chief go in and do the immunizations. I watched with a heavy heart as these two splendid men, the doctor a direct descendant of Cotton Mather and the chief corpsman a direct descendant of African slaves, left to go to the endangered village.

I paced the deck all day waiting for our boat to return. When I greeted them they said the medical mission was a great success. They had used up all the vaccine that the Army officer provided and used up the entire supply from the *Sherman* stock. They felt they had inoculated something like 80 percent of the village population, including all the VC in the area. Everything went very smoothly with no hostile acts of any kind.



## United States Coast Guard Historian's Office

### *Preserving Our History for Future Generations*



Later I learned that the medical mission was a great success as the epidemic was stopped.

(Left: Dr. Saddoris & village chief)

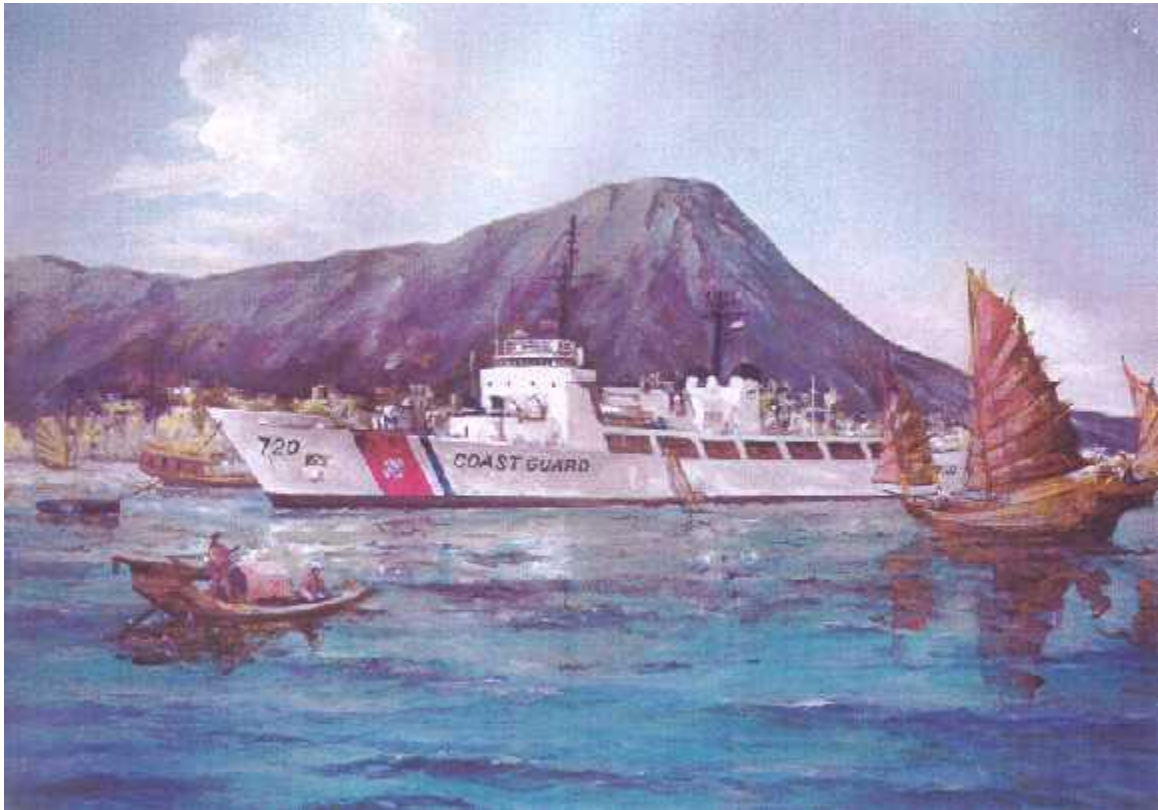
Possibly, this unselfish act by these two brave men was the finest contribution that *Sherman* made during our time in Viet Nam. I will never forget how I felt when they departed for the village or how I felt when I saw they were safe and back on board.

The next day *Sherman* left Viet Nam enroute Boston via Subic Bay, Honolulu and Canal Zone. In these hectic days before we left Subic Bay, we made our recommendations for awards for our men. Among these, we made a glowing recommendation for Dr. Saddoris and for Chief Corpsman Fleming and they both received the Navy Commendation Medal. Afterwards, I wished we had made another special recommendation for the mission to stop the cholera epidemic, as I now appreciate, that was our finest hour. The *Sherman* medical team, while in great peril, inoculated over 700 Vietnamese and stopped the cholera epidemic.



# United States Coast Guard Historian's Office

*Preserving Our History for Future Generations*



**"*Sherman* in Hong Kong Harbor, November 1970; Artist: Bill Fitton."**

