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The Village

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“Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we will pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty.”

-John F. Kennedy
Inaugural Address
January 20, 1961

To the eighteen-year-old first year, an Irish Catholic from West Virginia laboring at Mr. Jefferson’s University, these were words of inspiration. JFK was the subject of my consummate, unequivocated admiration. As a navy ROTC midshipman, I began honing my aptitude and my skills to meet this challenge. The seeds were planted.

A year and half later, my apartment mates (all ROTC participants) and I were enthralled with the president’s announcement of the navy’s “quarantine,” better understood as a blockade, to neutralize the Soviet threat in the Cuban Missile Crisis. In his speech, JFK intoned forcefully yet calmly that “the greatest danger of all would be to do nothing.” We accepted that claim with passion and conviction. As a group, we were ready.

So it came to be, after nearly three years on amphibious ships homeported in Norfolk, Virginia, that I, a lieutenant junior grade, volunteered for Vietnam. My request was granted, and in the spring of 1967 I received orders as Executive Officer (the number two guy) of the USS Jennings County (LST846) operating in the Mekong Delta bordering on the South China Sea.

Before deploying to Vietnam, I was sent to San Diego for additional small boat training and to polish my ship-handling skills. I was accompanied by my wife of two years and an infant son two months old. When the training was complete, we had a week to drive up the California coast and enjoy time together as a young family.
Ultimately the gut-wrenching day came for me to depart. I put my sobbing Peggy on a plane at the San Francisco airport with a baby in her lap and one in her tummy (oh, those Irish) and waved goodbye as her plane departed for Washington, DC. Pegs cared for and loved two infants while her husband was at war 8,000 miles away. Never ever overlook or take for granted the sacrifices of family members during wartime.

Arriving in Saigon from Travis Airforce Base on May 20, 1967, I could not dismiss a certain exhilaration. This place—bustling, noisy, smelly, dirty, but exciting—was exactly where I should be.

“Let the word go forth from this time and place that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans—born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed at home and around the world.”

-JFK
1/20/61

After a day or two of orientation administered by the army, it was time to join my unit. From the river patrol boat base at Nha Be, a few miles from Saigon, I was driven down the Co Chien River to join the Jennings County. My first taste of the river was deceptive in its serenity.

The boat captain, a first class (E6) gunner’s mate named Elmer was soft-spoken, but knowledgeable and helpful. He would be killed in a fire fight two weeks later. But on this day, Elmer introduced me to river patrol boats and the mouths of the Mekong calmly and politely.

The Jennings County was one of four World War II class LSTs reconfigured to serve as a mother ship to a squadron of ten river patrol boats (PBRs), two HU1E gunship helicopters, called
Seawolves, and periodically a detachment of SEALs for special operations. Our official mission was to interdict Viet Cong activity in the mouths of the Mekong. We would steam to the location of reported VC activity, dispatch the boats and the helos, which in turn would proceed with various approaches to interdiction.

The ship was 300 feet long with a crew of 100 sailors and ten officers. It was equipped with four large booms, two on either side, to which the PBRs could be tied and towed as we navigated the shallow rivers of the Delta. The original tank deck was converted to a maintenance and repair facility for the boats, heavily armed fiberglass units, twenty-two feet long. The helos were tied down on the flight deck, topside.

Importantly, the ship also held sixteen barrels of forty-millimeter firepower. They were designed for anti-air warfare, but we leveled them out and fired them horizontally. A forty-millimeter bullet is nearly a foot and half long.

The Captain of the JC was a Lieutenant (03), a Mustang officer who had come up through the ranks. His demeanor and frequent dismissal of his junior officers kept them on edge, but he knew his stuff operationally. He greeted his new baby-faced XO skeptically but with a comforting level of acceptance.

Operating in a combat environment in the Mekong Delta was taxing but never dull. We moved the ship several miles every night after dark to prevent the enemy from setting up an attack on a known location. Long hours, scary moments, exhausting days and nights passed quickly and torturously slow. We were good at what we did, and I never ceased marveling at the selflessness and professionalism of the men with whom I worked. We got the job done—whatever it took. These young sailors were the heart and soul of a courageous, effective force, and the folks back home would never appreciate their skill and valor.
On a Sunday afternoon in my first month onboard, one of our boats on patrol at the Southern end of the Co Chien took a single gunshot from a tiny village just north of the free-fire area known as the Rung Sat Special Zone. The boat officer reported being shot at from the village and asked for instructions. The CO of the PBR squadron huddled with the skipper of the *Jennings County*, and together they chose to attack the village with all the weaponry at their disposal: boats, helos, forty-millimeters. The boats began to pummel the shoreline with .50 caliber machine gun fire. The helos dumped rockets and rocket propelled grenades on the landscape. The *Jennings County* went to general quarters and pounded the area with forty millimeters. Directing the guns was my responsibility.

There were more than a few gasps at the numbing totality of our action. The village offered no resistance. After forty-five minutes, our assault stopped. There was some stirring in the little village, but no response. Wounded staggered down to the shoreline. No celebration ensued from our side. As if to underscore the maddening nature of what we’d done, we sent a medical team ashore to treat those we’d just sought to destroy.

When GQ was over, I slunk to my stateroom. What I had participated in was a terrifying and debilitating taste of war. Was this what JFK had in mind?

“We shall never negotiate out of fear, but we shall never fear to negotiate.”

-JFK
1/20/61

Through the next eleven months, we prosecuted the war in Vietnam effectively and, frankly, honorably. But I never fully recovered from the sense of guilt from my role in destroying that village. It was a sharp tangible lesson in the unforgiving and often senseless nature of combat. Action, reaction, overreaction. Whether inspired by fear, power, stubbornness
or perversion, the machinery of war causes people to act differently from the people they
otherwise, and more truly, are.

The Tet Offensive came and with it a rising intensity of enemy attacks. We held our own.
Slowly, inexorably, we learned of the anti-war attitudes swelling back home. I have long
believed that throughout Vietnam, Tet wasn’t lost on the battlefield. Undeniably, the American
people viewed the enemy offensive as a humiliating and exasperating defeat, and the soldiers,
sailors, marines, and airmen fighting the battles overseas were to blame. No matter our valor,
energy, devotion, and commitment, we were to be disdained and dismissed as villains.

In the wake of my terrible experience with the village much earlier, I came close to
accepting that mantle. Thank the Lord, I rejected it.

“Now the trumpet summons us again – not as a call to arms, though arms we need; not as
a call to battle, though embattled we are; but the call to bear the burden of a long twilight
struggle…a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease, and
war itself.”

-JFK
1/20/61