



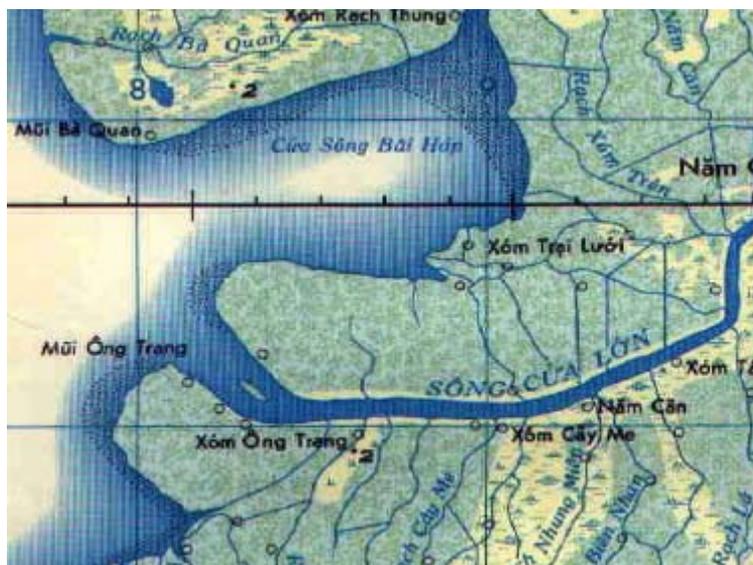
S.E.A.L. Missions

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I flew out of Can Tho with the 162nd Aviation Company (Assault), the 'Vultures', from December 1969 to December 1970. There were three flight platoons in the company; two were SLICK platoons ('Vultures'), which flew "H" model Hueys and one was a GUNSHIP platoon ('Copperheads'), which flew "C" model Hueys. I was assigned to the second platoon. My call sign was Vulture 22.

A few of the aircraft commanders, that also had Command and Control orders, over the year that they was there, seemed to develop a reputation for being very good at flying a particular type of special mission. Very often when the operations officer needed someone to fly one of these special missions the "expert" in that field was assigned to fly that day. In the latter part of my tour I became one of the pilots that flew many joint services missions with the Navy SEALs and sometimes combined command with Navy helicopter pilots. In fact I later learned that the SEAL Teams were requesting my services.

The Navy pilots flew "L" model Hueys that had a smaller cargo capacity than my "H" model and used a little less powerful engine. They were also modified to fly off of ships; this included a mast brake to stop the rotor from spinning in the wind after the helicopter landed on a moving ship. The Navy pilots were often fascinated by the size of our cargo bay.



"Sea Float" was located on the Song Cua Lon

The Navy worked out of a base located south of Ca Mau on a collection of steel barges lashed together floating in the mouth of a small river in the middle of the U Minh Forest code named "Sea Float". One of the barges was a floating fuel tank that contained JP5, the Navy used that instead of the Army's JP4, and served as the landing site for helicopters. It was just large enough to have two Hueys land on it and sit side by side. There the SEAL Teams would live along with all of the other Navy personnel supporting the base. One of the nice things my crews liked about flying the SEAL Missions was that they got to eat Navy food, which even I must admit was much better than the food we were eating in the mess hall back at our company. ¹



View of "Sea Float" from the air



Photo by Jim Ewart

River Boats tied up on the side of "Sea Float"

SEAL missions always started with the operations officer calling you to the operations hut the night before the mission and giving you a set of coordinates. When you went back to your hooch and plotted the coordinates you were given, the site was ALWAYS in the middle of nowhere out in the U Minh Forest. After the second mission I flew with the SEAL Teams, it became quite obvious to me that those coordinates were very near where the center of the action would be the next morning. It was just someone's way of letting you know where you were going and letting you prepare to get a map with greater detail of the action area.

The SEAL Teams used photographic maps taken by some surveillance aircraft and would offer you a copy before the mission; I didn't like them and always went to supply to get a nice detailed topographic map of the action area.

During my tour in country I flew many SEAL missions, many of which were "routine" where the SEALs would go into the area, perform their mission and then after several hours call me back for an extraction. However, there were two SEAL missions that really stand out in my mind and are vividly remembered by me to this day, some thirty-one years later.

The first of these missions occurred in the early summer of 1970. The pre-mission briefing started out as usual with the SEAL Team and the helicopter crews going over each other's call signs that would be used for communication with each other over the FM radio. Then the main objective of the mission was discussed. It was explained that their intelligence sources had gotten very reliable information that there was to be a visiting North Vietnamese Colonel having a meeting in a certain building along a creek bed in the northeastern sector of the U Minh Forest that morning. Their mission was to disrupt the meeting and capture the Colonel for interrogation back at a secure location such as Sea Float. The location of the building, as shown by the SEALs' photographic map, was right on the bend of the stream where most of the structure was not too exposed from the surrounding tree line. There was no good landing zone within 1000 meters of the building but we all felt that this was a good point because it would allow the SEALs to egress to the area without too much fan fare.

So at about 0800 Hours we started up the two "C" model gun ships, my "H" model Huey, and the Navy's "L" model Huey which would serve as the chase ship for this mission. As we approached the LZ, with the entire SEAL Team ready to exit the cargo bay, the SEAL Team leader THEN asked me how quietly could I approach the LZ. I thought to myself "NOW HE ASKS ABOUT THE *&%\$# NOISE HUEYS MAKE ON LANDINGS!" I told him I would take care of it. I then cut the throttle back, dropped the collective and auto-rotated into the LZ from about 1200 feet. Just as I started my flair at 75 feet, I increased the throttle back to 6600 RPM, pulled up the collective, and kicked in left pedal bringing the ship to a three-foot hover. The SEAL Team vanished into the tree line and called me, whispering on the radio, to say that they were on egress and would call me if they needed me.

The entire flight remained on station at 1500 feet and about 6000 meters east of the target building for about an hour "cutting donuts" in the sky. I had the chase ship remain on station while the gun ships and I took a five-minute flight to Ca Mau [with our radios tune to the action frequency] to hot refuel (we used JP4), so our fuel tanks would be topped off in case of an emergency. That took about ten minutes and when we all returned I sent the chase ship sent back to top off their fuel tanks at Sea Float (they used JP5).

With us all back again "cutting donuts", the FM radio came alive with the voice of the SEAL Team. They informed use that they were ready for pick up and they were located about 2000 meters due west of the building on the other side of the stream and they would pop smoke at their location when they saw us overhead. Off we all went toward that location and when we arrived all we saw was a nice lush green growth of beautiful trees. Suddenly, there was a fine wisp of red smoke floating to the top of the trees that grew heavier and heavier as the seconds ticked away ever so slowly.

I called to the SEAL Team; "This is Vulture 22. You guys are in a pretty dense area. What's the plan?" They called back; "We are going to make an LZ". The next thing the entire flight saw was tree top after tree top starting at the red smoke as its epi-center falling away in an ever increasing circle with the opening to the ground getting larger and larger with each explosion. Finally the SEAL Team called; "Is that big enough?"

I sent the gun ships down to scout the new LZ area and estimate the relative size of the new LZ. The gun ship leader stated the area was clear and it looked like a Huey could hover down to the near ground area. The pilot flying the mission with me in my ship was a relatively experienced pilot, the 162nd never sent pilots with less than two months in-country time on SEAL missions.

Suddenly, his voice came over the intercom and asked; "Are we going to land in there?" I said; "Yes. Are you ready?" and told the gun ships I was going in with a High Overhead Approach and Landing. This maneuver is when you over fly your landing target at 1200 feet and do a spiral descent down to the landing target. Away we went, coming to a hover just above the tree top level over the opening in the Forest. Slowly I brought the Huey down into the hole in the trees with the gun ships circling within fifty meters of our position. The tree stumps were all about four feet high so the Huey could go no lower and the SEAL Team just threw their prisoner, whose arms and hands were tied behind his back, into the cargo bay and then climbed in themselves right after him.

To this day I have never forgotten the EXPRESSION on the face of that NVA Colonel when I glanced back to see how things were in the cargo bay. It is the reason I have never forgotten this mission. It was a look of astonishment [What is this machine?], surprise [How did I get here?], and fear [What is going to happen next?] all rolled into one just before one of the SEALs placed a blindfold over his eyes.

Now came the hardest part of this mission. I had to bring this now loaded Huey out of this hole in the trees and then attempt to get airborne from a hover at tree top level. I told the crew chief and door gunner to watch for blade strikes and I began to increase the collective and push in left pedal while watching to make sure that the torque meter didn't exceed our company's limit of 40 pounds of torque. The ship began to rise out of the hole in the trees and about 3/4 of the way up we all heard a loud bang—one of the tree branches on the ground had blown up and struck one of the rotor blades. The ship continued upwards until the skids got to tree top level. I slowly pushed the cyclic forward gaining airspeed at an increasing rate until the Huey began to gain altitude and we were safely on our way back to Sea Float.

When we landed at Sea Float the SEALs got off with their prisoner and took him into an area somewhere in the back of the barges. We stopped the engine and examined the main rotor blades. There was a small dent in the leading edge of one of the blades but there was no break in the surface. I still would have to write it up and fill out an incident report when I got back to Can Tho. I went looking for the SEALs and found one of them sitting in a room. I wanted to know how they knew about the NVA Colonel. He just smiled and never offered an answer. Later that day the "L" model Huey took the blindfolded NVA Colonel and a couple of SEAL Team members to some unknown location. Weeks later when I would ask what ever happened to him or what information did he reveal, I was told that he was now just a POW and any information he had was obsolete.



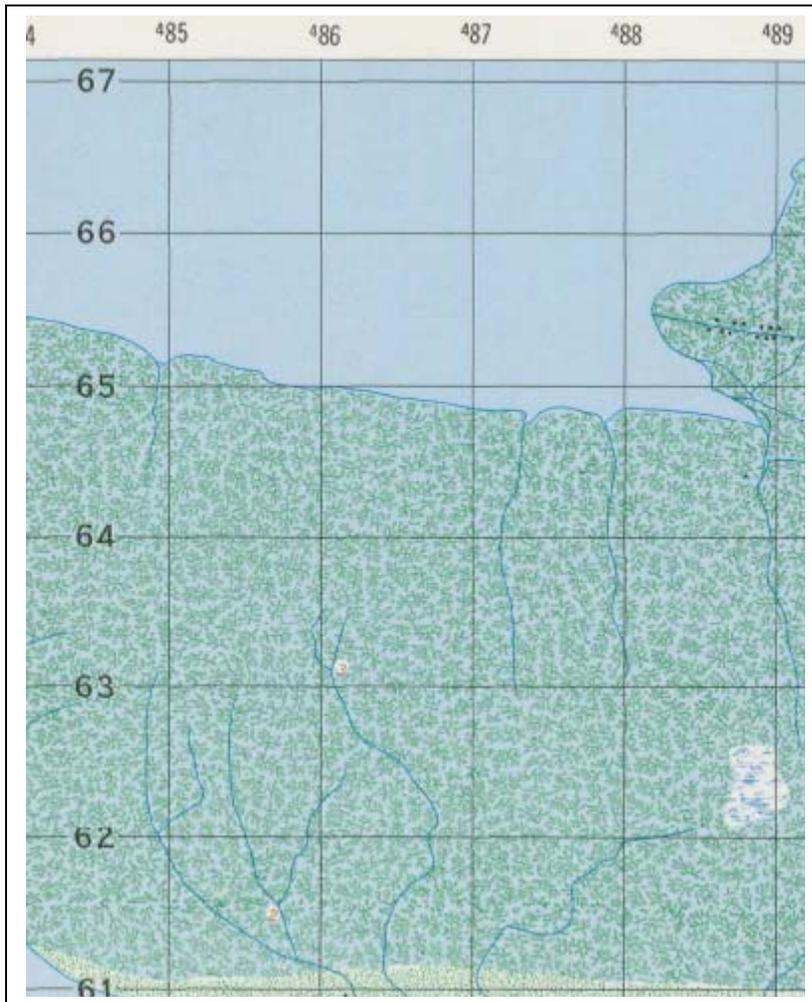


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The second SEAL mission that I will never forget was a mission during my tour of duty in Vietnam where the operations officer called me at the Officer's Club right after dinner and ordered me back to the company headquarters. The mission started right then with me being given a set of coordinates that were located somewhere in the lower U Minh forest this time very close to the Gulf of Thailand and also being told that my crank time was 0300 hrs at Can Tho.

The onsite briefing was unusual in that it started at 0500 hrs on Sea Float and I was informed that the mission had already begun with the SEAL team going into the target area after being dropped off by a gunboat the night before and they were expecting the Copperhead fire team [2 UH-1Cs] and the Vulture command and control ship [1 UH-1H] to assist the SEAL team with any support that they may need at first light that morning. There was also a chase ship assigned to the mission that was this time another Vulture [UH-1H] aircraft. The SEAL team's mission was to infiltrate the area of a known enemy base camp to search the area and destroy any enemy facilities that they found.

When the fire team, chase ship, and C & C got over the assigned coordinates, ⁹63 ⁴87, at first light, a call was made to the SEAL team on the ground over their assigned FM frequency. They informed us that they had managed to get into the base camp area and destroyed a great deal of equipment. The SEAL team also informed us that they had managed to commandeer a number of sampans and that they would be paddling them out of the area through a nearby stream that emptied into a river that eventually connected with the bay off the Gulf of Thailand.



The SEAL team was asked to pop smoke so that their position, $9^{\circ}64' 487$, could be determined by the gun ships and the gun ships could start their air support. The gun ships found the SEAL team's position and began to scout the area. The SEAL team informed the gun ships that they would be paddling out but they didn't know the enemy's disposition in the area because they were sure that a few enemy soldiers that had escaped the initial assault were in the area.

Now came the eventful part of this mission!

The ground forces team was a mixed group of combatants, consisting of American SEALS and South Vietnamese Marines or Commandos members that had infiltrated the enemy base camp now

started to paddle the sampans down the stream that emptied into the river. The gunships began to fly in a race track fashion around the small group of sampans firing their machine guns, 40 mm grenades, and rockets into the tree lines on both sides of the stream. This continued for quite some time as the paddlers went from the stream to the river where the tree lines on both sides of the river got slightly denser and denser. For some reason the last sampan in the group of sampans paddling out of the enemy territory was manned by a single South Vietnamese soldier that was working very, very, very hard to keep up with the rest of the group. From the air it looked like he was going to die from overworking before he would make it to the small bay that the river emptied into several miles away.

The Copperheads kept up their firing for the entire length of the sampan's journey out of the enemy's territory. It was a textbook case of the gunships firing the suppressive cover perfectly with exacting precision.

I had been told in the pre-mission briefing that the gunboat would make contact with us and that they would rendezvous with the SEAL team and pick them up and take them out of the area. So, I climbed up to 2500 feet to see if I could catch sight of the gunboat coming towards the SEAL team from the Gulf of Thailand. Just to the northwest of where the river emptied into the bay, I could see the gunboat traveling towards the SEAL team in a southeasterly direction.

I told the gunships and chase ship to monitor the SEAL team on their FM frequency and switched my FM radio over to one of those awfully low FM frequencies that the navy uses for their communications. Contacting the navy gunboat, I informed them to continue on their southeasterly direction and I would vector the SEAL team towards them. Switching my FM radio back to the FM frequency the SEAL team was using and informing them that once they

reached the bay to continue on in a northwesterly direction to meet up with the gunboat. However, the last man in that sampan was starting to fall a little behind the rest of the group, but the Copperheads were still making sure that he was supported by lengthening their race track formation around the entire flotilla. He was still working very hard trying to keep up with the rest of the sampans.

Switching back and forth between the SEAL team's and navy gunboat's FM frequencies, I managed to vector the two parties towards each other until they both came within sight of each other. I took one last pass over the flotilla and there was the last sampan with just one soldier paddling trying his best to close the little gap that had opened up between him and the rest of his comrades. They all went on to rendezvous at the edge of the bay and the Gulf of Thailand with the Copperheads flying cover until they were well on their way back into the Gulf of Thailand.

It looked like every thing was going to be all right, so we all headed back to Ca Mau to refuel and head on back to the Vulture's roost and the Copperhead's snake pit back in Can Tho.

This is the only mission I ever participated in Vietnam where the navy inserted the ground forces and army aviation served as the both the command and control and supplied the air support for both the ground forces and the navy assets in the water.

Eric Bray
Can Tho
12/69-12/70

¹ During 1971 the Vulture mess hall went from one extreme to the other—from extremely poor to exceptional, all within a few months. Early in the year, the mess sergeant was court-martialed for skimming off the company rations. It seems he had been in-country a long time, 4 or 5 years, and had a restaurant downtown, complete with a Vietnamese wife, or whatever. One day, one of the unit police at the main gate stopped the deuce and a half that picked up and returned the civilian KPs employed in the mess hall. He stopped the truck because he thought something was leaking from it. However, subsequent investigation revealed a false bottom in the bed of the truck and a compartment full of Vulture rations. The mess sergeant was very fortunate the MPs whisked him away—he wouldn't have lasted long if he'd been sent back to the roost

After this episode a new mess sergeant and mess officer were brought in and they did a magnificent job. Everyone in the 162nd at the time fondly remembers the Vulture mess hall and the food served in the later half of 1971. The mess hall went through several contests and inspections and was actually awarded a plaque by USARV as the "Best Mess Hall in Vietnam". Those steaks and lobsters served every Friday evening locked up the award.

-----epilogue-----

*From: Jesse Garza [tekemex101@adelphia.net]
Sent: Thursday, March 10, 2005 1:03 PM
To: Len Malick
Subject: Re: 162ahc.com Guest Register*

I just read Dr. Bray's story about the Navy Seals, and the VC prisoner we took that day. He was also old about 65 years old never been flying. After the interrogation on the barge, we flew over a hooch that was suppose to be his, and showed it to the VC prisoner and asked him to talk; he wouldn't talk so the navy gunship blew it up. Still the hardcore VC would not talk. So then they blind folded the VC and tied a rope around his waist with a sandbag to it. Then we went over the South China Sea and told him to talk or they would throw the sand bag and him into the South China Sea the VC never talked so they threw the sand bag out and the old man stiffen up ready to be pulled by the sand bag. But they had untied the rope from the sandbag.

I could see Dr. Bray looking back and told the Navy Personal, "Let me take him for a Joy Ride in the helicopter to see if he would talk."

Well you would have to have seen this chopper old, no doors about 20 different colors, and YES we went for a ride for about 30 minutes. We went forward, backwards, and sideways dives still he would not talk. Went back to the barge the VC jump off and kissed the ground. Hell I was about to do the same thing after that ride.

Jess