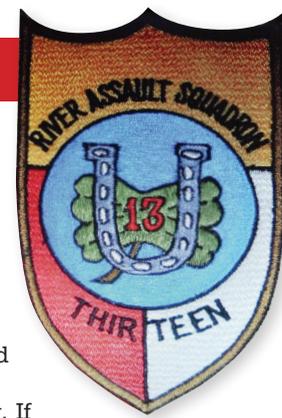


"Snoopy's Nose" and the "Crossroads"

River Assault Squadron 13 – Division 131 – Mekong Delta, Vietnam – 1968-69



River Assault Squadron 13 Patch

It was the spring of 1966. Robert (Bob) B. Conaty was a senior at St. Joseph's College, Philadelphia, PA. The war in Vietnam was an ever growing conflict, and the chances of Bob being drafted into the armed services was extremely high. Prior to graduation, he was accepted by the Navy to attend officer's candidate school (OCS) at the Naval Training Facility in Newport, Rhode Island. He reported for training in August 1966, and was commissioned an ensign in December 1966, reporting to his first duty station in Norfolk, Virginia as a member of the Admiral's staff. He was later assigned to anti-submarine warfare matters, aboard the USS Randolph, an Essex Class Aircraft Carrier.



Joe Del Campo

After a cruise in the Mediterranean and out of what Bob described as "a sense of duty," he put in a request to go to Vietnam and, more specifically, to be assigned to Swift Boats – off shore, v-bottomed, high-speed (25 mph), assault boats. Well, the Navy fulfilled his request to go to Vietnam, but slightly modified his request for the type of watercraft he would be assigned to – River Assault Boats. The name *sounds* exciting, but the boats? Not exactly. River Assault Boats were in-shore, flat bottomed, lumbering, troop carriers – maximum speed 6 mph.

These boats were similar to the "Higgins" landing craft used in World War II, recon-ditioned with heavy armament protection and a variety of automatic weapons. Their primary role was troop transport. Oh, and by the way, crews assigned to Swift boats, unlike River Assault Boat crews, did not have to go through the dreaded Survival Evasion Resistance Escape training (SERE).

How difficult can SERE really be? Well, the training is so realistic, that just after two days of being captured and placed in a mockup POW camp by Navy staff members who assumed the roles of enemy prison camp personnel, "...less experienced trainees, succumbed and broke the code of military conduct, giving up names and other personal information, about fellow detainees," says Bob. It was that real.

Bob made it through SERE training, and arrived in Vietnam in May 1968, where he was assigned to River Assault Squadron (RAS) 13, Division 131, which consisted of three officers, 191 enlisted, thirteen Armored Troop Carriers, two Howitzer Monitors, one Flamethrower Monitor, two Command/Communication Boats and three Assault Support Boats. These boats were captained by enlisted men and usually had a crew of five or six. Armament included: 105 mm howitzers, 30 caliber and 50 caliber machine guns, as well as M79 grenade launchers.

The primary mission of RAS 13, was the safe transportation of men (9th Infantry Division, United States Army) and material, to and from an area of operation, in a riverine environment. In addition to troop transportation, RAS 13 performed a variety of secondary missions: interdiction of hostile water traffic, security for the Mobile Riverine Base, mine sweeping operations, direct and indirect fire support to assault forces, and blockades of hostile beaches and waterways.

Bob recalls, "A patrol normally consisted of a single file column of at least three boats, but usually more like nine to twelve boats, loaded with soldiers. Our mission could last as little as four hours, or in many cases a full day, inserting and extracting soldiers at various landing points. Normally, the boat crews rarely engaged in skirmishes involving

enough amount of smoke produced. It wouldn't disperse and hung in the air like a heavy, foreboding fog. If you weren't the lead boat, you barely saw anything in front of you and had to motor through it almost blind. These boats moved no faster than a slow jog. It was hairy."

There were two areas on the river which were notoriously dangerous and a favorite haunt of the Viet Cong. One was called "Snoopy's Nose." It consisted of a narrow strip of land, maybe 40 – 50 yards wide with heavy, dense foliage. In order to continue to follow the river, the boats had to make sharp 180° turn, which took them to the other side of the strip. So, if the Vietcong fired at the first boat, which had to follow the river around to the other side of Snoopy's Nose, the remaining crews needed to use extreme caution about shooting across the strip and possibly striking the boat(s) which had already made the 180° turn.

"I made four nervous trips through Snoopy's Nose. We got shot at twice; nonetheless, each time you approached the area, the anticipation of the unknown was just as intense. You always wondered whether or not there'd be a firefight, whether or not you or your crew would be wounded, or worse, killed. There was always that pucker factor, it never left you."

Another foreboding location, where you didn't want to go much, was called the "Crossroads." It was an intersection of two canals, crisscrossing each other, a spot where the Viet Cong loved to set up ambushes. "In late February 1969, I was leading a column of six boats, transporting troops to a drop-off point, when all of the sudden we received intense, incoming fire consisting of B40 rockets whistling over our heads. I was on the boat carrying the 105 mm howitzer which I ordered to steer straight at the rocket launching area, feeling this action – rather than remaining broadside – would make our boat more difficult to hit. Fortunately, we silenced the rockets and landed our troops without further incident." Taking such decisive action and demonstrating incredible initiative earned Bob a Bronze Star. He was also awarded two Navy Commendation Medals for actions taken during other engagements.

Bob returned to the U.S. in May 1969, where he conducted classroom and water training for River Assault Boat crews who were scheduled to go to Vietnam. Later, he attended George Washington University, where he received an MBA in Hospital Administration. He served as a hospital administrator



Bob Conaty's armored troop carrier.

the troops they had dropped off, since these usually happened inland, which, because of the heavy, dense foliage along the riverbank, prevented the boat crews from seeing anything."

Bob remembers being involved in eleven firefights, while traversing the tributaries of the Mekong River. "Normally, the Viet Cong hid in the jungle-like foliage along the river bank and would open fire as the boats motored by." His first firefight occurred just weeks after arriving in Vietnam.

"I was seated on an exposed deck, outside of the protective shielding, when all hell broke loose," he said. "I remember seeing muzzle flashes coming from the machine guns, hidden along the shoreline, followed immediately by the impact of bullets hitting the sandbags around me. I thought, 'I'm going to die.' I assumed a crouched position with radio in hand; however, the noise of our 30-caliber and 50-caliber machine guns, and other weapons being fired was so loud I couldn't hear a thing. Finally the cease-fire order was given." He continues, "Another big problem with all that firing was the phenom-

CONATY, continued next page