

Rescue off a 31 foot PBR under fire.

Toward the end of my tour things seemed to be slowing down. I was sitting in the Seawolf Hooch when the Ops Officer asked me where I wanted to sit on the next day's flight schedule. Since I had been there the longest, I got to pick with the exception of the new OIC what seat I wanted. The junior pilots were all getting their quals and were chomping at the bit to get some actual aircraft commander time. The new OIC had just made FTL, so I said I would take the nugget seat. That meant I would be flying in the most junior spot in the Fire Team, which didn't bother me. Although most the officers thought I had an ego, they were wrong. There is a difference between knowing what you can do and having confidence in your abilities. To me that was much different than someone with an over-inflated ego. My not being the FTL bothered the crewmen more than it did me. They enjoyed the way I handled the team and the way I flew. I was always able to find something to get us into.

That duty day as luck would have it, we had just refueled and were starting to take off when two PBR's got ambushed up the T-Ten area. We immediately launched and headed inbound to provide support. We could hear the gun fire when the petty officer keyed the radio desperately asking for help. He was a young sailor and you could tell by the tone and the excitement in his voice he was in a desperate situation. If you have ever been in a combat situation you understand that these situations can really get your heart racing. You're flying inbound to help, and some guy is on the radio pleading for someone to come in and help his wounded buddies that were dying right in front of him.

Iron Butterfly
By Ralph Christopher

"It was around noon on November 8th, 1968, Chief Smith was leading a patrol with Boat Captains James Middlestein on PBR 841, and Bloss on PBR 755, when they received a radio message to proceed to the Nga Ba River. The area was known as a Viet Cong stronghold and had been the site for many ambushes in the past. Chief Smith was directed to steam up a narrow stream with his two patrol boats and act as a blocking force for the Vietnamese commandos and their Marine advisors that had been inserted earlier in the day. During their sweep they had made contact with the Viet Cong force in a thickly forested area and were trying to flush them out.

The PBR patrol left the Nga Ba and proceeded up a small stream and stayed there for some time blocking any enemy escape. But the Viet Cong seemed to have evaded bringing the mission to an end. After the troops had been extracted by helicopter, the two PBRs began to withdraw, exiting their blocking positions to go back out onto the main river. Chief Smith on the lead patrol boat called over to the cover boat and told them to shoot down the tree with the claymore in it as a precaution. Gunner's Mate Third Class David White from Alabama complied and with PBR 755's aft .50 cal machinegun, and began chopping the tree down which took quite a few rounds. The lead boat then exited first onto the river. As the cover boat began to exit and turn, a rocket came barreling out of the jungle slamming into her, throwing the crew to the deck. Then seconds later, a second rocket-propelled grenade hit PBR 755 on the starboard side slinging hot flying metal every which way and wounding everybody aboard.

The Viet Cong had set a well planned ambush in the trees with both patrol boats taken under

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fire. There was a tremendous amount of rocket and machinegun fire coming from both banks. In the first few minutes, the cover boat had taken two rocket hits forward with everyone of the crew wounded multiple times. Boat Captain Bloss suffered deep shrapnel wounds in both legs and was able to stay on his feet at the helm but kept sinking in the cockpit. Seaman Molodow, who was on his first training patrol, was seriously wounded in the head and Seaman James Lonsford on the forward .50s was hit in the arm but refused to stop firing.

Reacting quickly, Petty Officer White was able to make it back to his feet after being knocked down three times and was returning fire on the aft .50 cal machinegun. Although White and Engineman Third Class John Bragg were both covered in blood from shrapnel wounds, they were still able to alternate between firing their weapons and administering first aid to the other three wounded men. Petty Officer White moved forward and applied a battle dressing to Seaman Molodow's head wound. Then he unselfishly took off his flak jacket and helmet and gave it to Molodow to put on for protection.

There were only enough flak jackets and helmets on board for the four man PBR crew that day and Molodow was riding as a passenger on his first day on the river. Then David White went forward and put a battle dressing on his Texas buddy Jim Lonsford.

After taking PBR 841 through the kill zone on a firing run, Chief Smith turned the lead boat around and returned in the midst of enemy rockets and automatic weapons fire to help the badly wounded cover boat and her crew. At first the Chief ordered Gunner's Mate Third Class Albert F. Johnson from Denver to jump over and take the helm of PBR 755 since Boat Captain Bloss was seriously hurt and could no longer stand. But Chief Smith changed his mind and jumped aboard PBR 755 at the last minute. Almost immediately he was hit by a rocket, which killed him instantly and wounded the rest of the crew as well. Seeing that his boat captain was momentarily stunned by the intensity and accuracy of the enemy fire, and seeing no one moving on the badly hit cover boat, Petty Officer Johnson immediately took command of PBR 841 and maneuvered his boat between the ambush bank and the cover boat while the crew returned fire.

With blood gushing, Seaman Lonsford had caught shrapnel in his throat and tried to cover it. Despite his own painful wounds, Petty Officer White again left his aft gun and rushed forward exposing himself to intense rocket and automatic weapons fire to aid his grievously-wounded friend who was bleeding profusely. After applying a big gauze bandage to Jim Lonsford's throat to stop the bleeding, Dave White then pulled his six foot four inch friend out of the gun tub and laid him across the bow and took his buddy's place on the twin .50s firing away. Seaman Lonsford just laid there in pain covered in blood as he pinched the main artery in his own neck trying to slow the bleeding.

Tracers ricocheted and whistled by as the lead boat got underway and started making firing runs with Petty Officer Johnson at the helm firing an M79 grenade launcher while calling for help on the radio and steering the boat. Fireman Bill Polacek stood completely exposed on the engine covers loading belt after belt of ammo into his M60 machinegun pouring lead into the hostile positions throughout the entire firefight. Gunner's Mate Third Class Andy Winters struggled to keep the forward .50s going and keep a steady flow of bullets directed at the enemy during the PBR's high speed runs laying down cover fire. Since the aft .50 of PBR 841 had been emptied on

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their first firing runs, Petty Officer James Mildenstien grabbed a gun and added to the fire power as PBR 841 made another run on the west bank. Back at the operations center in Nha Be they listened helplessly over the radio to the attack but could do little to help.

Because Molodow's head wound and Lonsford's wound to his throat were so serious, no one thought the two men would survive unless they got immediate care. With the radios out on PBR 755, an urgent call for help went out from Petty Officer Johnson on PBR 841 for dust-off choppers to come and medevac the wounded. But because of the high tide and trees, there was no area for a landing zone. It was also extremely hot with tremendous amount of weapons fire being exchanged, so everyone figured not many would attempt such a rescue.

But as luck would have it, a Navy Seawolf gunship fire team from Detachment Two in Nha Be had just taken off when they heard the distress call from Petty Officer Johnson coming from the northern part of the Rung Sat Special Zone. Riding in the nugget seat, the most junior spot of a Seawolf fire team, was Lieutenant Junior Grade "Hollywood" Al Billings, Seawolf 28, at the end of his tour and about to rotate back home. Loved by the enlisted men that served with him, Mr. B, as Billings was called, was confident and a born leader and had already proved himself many times as fire team leader. Now he was riding in the second chopper backing up the new pilot so he could get more experience. But when Mr. Billings heard the gunfire and tone of the young PBR sailor desperately begging for help over the radio, it got his heart racing. Mr. Billings had already witnessed one of his roommates needlessly die when he was attached to the carrier USS Bon Homme Richard.

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All I heard was the young sailor had two seriously injured shipmates and the PBR commander was dead, the others were all injured. The Army was called to MEDIVAC the badly wounded sailors, but could not pick them up without a Landing Zone (LZ). The PBR was floating helplessly downstream with the current and could not get to an LZ. When we arrived overhead, the fire team leader cautiously stayed above 1500 feet over the spot of the attack. He continued to orbit overhead, apparently waiting for something to happen, the petty officer came up over the radio again with another gut wrenching plea for help. The other boat was making high speed gun runs trying to provide protection for the stricken PBR.

This was about all I needed, we were not going to sit there and do nothing while these guys bled to death. There was only one way to get them out, and if the Army wouldn't do it, someone had to. I don't know what triggered my next reaction, maybe it was still the promise I made myself when I lost my roommate on the *Bon Homme Richard*. Or the pilot I tried my best to save. There was just something inside me, driving me. Nobody was going to die on my watch.

I grabbed the controls and took the helicopter away from the pilot and shouted, "I have the aircraft." He didn't hesitate to relinquish the controls; I had trained him since he arrived in country. I keyed the radio and told the FTL that we had to get down there and help them. The FTL said there was nothing we could do. I had heard that too many times before. That was it. I was going down to get them off the PBR and told the lead aircraft I was going in. The OIC came back over the radio in a defiant voice, "You're not going down there. It's too hot. That is an order." I don't remember what I said next. I was too busy assessing the situation and what my

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options were, but I was sure it was colorful. As a pilot I couldn't just circle overhead while I listened to someone tell me over the radio, his buddies were dying. Pilots are a different breed; at times they have to make a conscious decision to go down into harm's way. There are always hundreds of reasons to justify why it can't be done. I had to try.

I rolled in and came up over the radio telling the FTL to keep continuous fire on both banks. I radioed the other PBR and told him that I wanted him to make some coordinated high speed gun runs when I gave the word. I leveled the helicopter and lined up on the right bank of the river, we fired off half of the rockets along the bank where the other PBR was returning fire. I then rolled the helicopter up into a rotor over and emptied the remaining rockets into the other bank. The door gunner and the crew chief were focused and keyed into my every move. Not a word was said. They had flown with me on hundreds of missions and anticipated my every move. I told them to get rid of anything they didn't need and then pulled the helicopter up into a tight turn and headed for the stricken PBR.

"We were flying a routine cover mission and running low on fuel so we headed back to Nha Be to refuel. As soon as we touched down the call came. The PBR's were being attacked from both banks and had two seriously injured people. Medevac helicopters were dispatched but when they arrived, their response was it was too hot for them to pick up the wounded. Our pilot, Lieutenant Junior Grade Al Billings, called and requested permission for us to go pick them up, which was denied by the Officer in Charge. Mr. Billings decided to disregard the commander's direct orders and pick up the wounded anyway. Surveying the area, there was gunfire everywhere and the PBR in question was just sitting dormant in the middle of the stream, at the Viet Cong's mercy.

My biggest fear was that Mr. Billings was going to use my side to pull them into the chopper and I was correct. At this point I was completely terrified and just knew we weren't going to survive the mission. I was only twenty years old at the time and didn't want to die in Vietnam. In our favor was our pilot, Hollywood Al Billings. If I had to do it, I wouldn't want to attempt it with any other pilot. He was amazing at his job and I always had the utmost confidence in his abilities and judgment.

The first thing we needed to do was lighten up our chopper to accommodate the two wounded. So we started tossing out our ammo and anything that had weight to it. Then Mr. Billings proceeded to go down. It would not be easy, due to the high wind and its direction. As we approached the PBR, the gunfire started increasing in intensity but we all stayed focused on our task. Mr. Billings steadied the chopper next to the boat and placed the skid on the deck. At that point, I jumped out and grabbed the first wounded and literally tossed him into the chopper.

Bullets were hitting all around us, as I grabbed the second wounded soldier and tossed him into the helo. My guess was they both weighed between 180-200 lbs, but my adrenaline was so charged it was like lifting a small child. I jumped back into the chopper with gunfire still ringing around us and we flew off. The first wounded sailor was wounded in the neck with blood pumping out at a steady flow. I applied pressure to stop the flow. The second sailor was wounded in the head and I honestly thought neither was going to survive. When we arrived, the sailors were taken away and we found out later they both survived. To this day I thank God that

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none of our crew was injured, I'm not sure how though. Later, everyone was congratulating me and I was still numb with fear. I drank myself to sleep that night and many other nights and prayed to God for letting us save our comrades and sparing our lives."

Glen Smithen,

The adrenaline was beginning to peak. Everything was in a hypersensitive state. The bullets were flying through the air in every direction. I could feel every vibration of the helicopter as we maneuvered into position. We felt heavy. I told the crew again to get rid of anything we didn't need. I began to focus on the patrol boat. I could see where the winds were coming from by the smoke, but it eventually didn't make any difference. I told the fire team leader I needed him to keep a continuous stream of fire on the bank when I reached the PBR. He circled overhead and remained well above the skirmish but did what I said. In our favor was the 50 Cal the lead ship had. If you have ever seen the destructive power of 50 Cal it is very impressive. With the 50 CAL raining down from above I'm sure Charlie was looking for cover. At least I hoped he was.

This was going to be a very tricky maneuver. The PBR was 31 feet long; the UH-1B was 53 feet long tip to tip and the fuselage was about 42 feet. The rotor down wash on the fiberglass PBR was going to be 80 knots plus in a loaded gunship. The damaged PBR was drifting freely with the churning current of the stream. When I came around for my approach, I told the other PBR to start their run and to make sure they kept Charlie's head down. Despite the renegade Seawolf, everyone did their job. The lead ship was circling overhead and the door gunners kept continuous fire on the banks. Power was going to be critical on this rescue, so I told the pilot (now co-pilot) to give me a continuous update on the power settings as I came into the hover. I placed the left skid of the helicopter on the bow of the PBR. The entire cabin area had been blown off along with the antennas. Those days we flew with the doors off. They weren't much good for anything and they cut down on the visibility. The rotor wash from the helicopter started to blow the PBR around. I had to somehow make sure I kept contact with the PBR in order to make the transfer. The crew chief kept the twin 30 CAL's going continuously, keeping Charlie's head down. He could really make them sing, switching out one can at a time when the ammo ran out. He never stopped firing. I then instructed the door gunner to get down into the boat and grab the wounded.

I don't think the door gunner was ever given the credit that he truly deserved. This man, without hesitation climbed down into that stricken patrol boat with bullets flying everywhere with no concern for his own safety and picked those men up and put them into the helicopter. Not once did any crewman ever let me down, and he knew I would never leave without him.

I had to completely focus on maintaining contact with the PBR as it was being blown around in the water. I kept the skid on the side of the boat. It took total concentration; I could not move my eyes away to check the instruments. Too much pressure and I could sink or slide off the boat, too little and I would lose contact and have to chase the boat. The other PBR continued to make high speed gun runs with their 50 CAL's and M-60's blazing away, as the lead ship poured their machine gun fire into the banks. The amount of fire power that was poured into the jungle was impressive.

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I thought to myself, "If this transfer took longer than 60 seconds our chances would decrease dramatically". I had picked the right person to get the injured out. Smithen was built like a tackle. Within seconds he had both the injured in the helicopter. The crew chief helped pull them in while he continued to fire the 30 CAL's. As the second one came aboard I hollered at the pilot to give me my power. I told him to give me continuous updates on my power setting and had not heard anything from him during the entire rescue attempt. I really needed to know what the power settings were. I yelled a second and a third time while I struggled to keep the helicopter steady. There was no way I could take my eyes off the front of the PBR. I was getting frustrated; I heard nothing. As the door gunner started to climb back into the helicopter I turned toward the pilot and as I did, I looked across the instrument panel at the power settings. We were fluctuating around 6,100 RPMs every time I moved the rudder pedals, normal was 6,600 RPMs. The RPM warning light was starting to flicker. The torque meter was reading around 41 lbs of torque, again well over the engine topping of 37.5. That meant we were well past the limits of what the engine had to offer.

I knew we couldn't get out of there the way we were. If I tried to fly it out and we lost anymore RPMs we could stop flying at any minute, so I slid the helicopter down off the PBR holding in as much power as I dared to, hoping to get some help from the ground cushion off the surface of the water. It didn't help. We continued to settle right into the water before the ground cushion took effect.

We were not going to stay there. I had no idea what Charlie was planning. He could be setting up for a better angle away from the current gun fire that was going into his position. I headed downriver with the current. The helicopter was sitting in the water and I was holding as much power as I could. The chin bubble quickly filled with water.

As we moved forward, water was sloshing around and inside the chin bubble mixing with blood from the wounded. I told the crew to get everything out of the helicopter they could. Just about that time I heard the pilot in the other seat come up over the radio and order "Lighten ship! Lighten ship!"

We emptied the helicopter and I pulled in power trying to pull the helicopter out of the water. It didn't work, with the additional weight of the water the RPMs dropped off too fast. We got rid of some more equipment. I pushed the nose forward to pick up as much ground speed as possible in hopes that I could get to transnational lift where the helicopter didn't require as much power. I pulled in the collective and held the nose where it was, the water slowly started to drain from the aircraft. Going with the current helped with the forward speed. I was able to break the suction from the water as the RPMs started to slowly decay 6500, 6400, 6300. I eased the nose slightly over and dropped the collective, in a slight milking action to hold my RPMs. I had done it hundreds of times, trying to get airborne off the short runway during the summer months; only this was a bit more challenging.

It worked; we were airborne and we were flying, the RPMs were at about 6,400 and slowly starting to build back. The helicopter wallowed out of the river as the water drained from the chin bubble. When we had enough airspeed and altitude, we headed directly to the Army field hospital near Saigon. The two sailors were badly wounded. The blood covered the floor of the

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cockpit and the chin bubbles. I hated that smell; it was something you would always remember. I could still smell it from the *Forestall* and my first rescue. We got both of the men to the hospital and I found out later they both lived, which made it all worth it. The door gunners performed flawlessly. I wouldn't have had a chance without them.

I received this note 40 years later from Gunner's Mate Al Johnson:

"I don't know how to start this, except by saying "THANK YOU". You and your cover ship kept my patrol from being wiped out, Nov. 8,'68. I have wondered for 40 years who you were, and to thank you. Had you guys not shown up when you did, we would not have, I believe, made it out of the Te Vi that day.

Your willingness to put your ass on the line for us, and your incredible flying skill when we dusted off our shipmates can be considered nothing less than heroic.

Take care and again, many thanks for your dedication to duty and combat brotherhood.

Your Shipmate Al Johnson (GMG2)"

When we arrived back at the Seawolf compound the OIC had some words for me. For such a mild mannered person he could get pretty angry. He didn't like the idea of me going against his direct order. "Who the hell do you think you are? That was a direct order! I'm going to see to it that you lose your wings for this!"

I wasn't going to get into it with him, and as I tried to ignore him it just made him more irate. "When I give you a direct order lieutenant I expect you to obey it. You could have gotten everyone killed by that stunt."

I tried to walk away. I had heard it before, and besides I felt a little drained from the whole thing as the adrenalin wore off. He followed me so I stopped and stood there waiting until the OIC got it off his chest. As I stood there in my own thoughts I could hear his voice but not what he was saying. It bothered me. Why was he so pissed? Was it something he should have done and didn't? Was it just going against his direct order? Was it a crazy stunt? I didn't have an answer and honestly I didn't care. I don't think those two sailors would have lived if we had waited. They had lost a tremendous amount of blood. The lead helo remained and PBR recovered the other sailors downstream and got them out of the area. Frankly I was surprised to hear they both made it. Only I could pull off a rescue like that and get in trouble for it. It was something that would be repeated throughout my career. When the OIC seemed to run out of things to say I turned and walked into the hooch.

Later that evening a group of chiefs from the PBR detachment came over to the hooch. They walked in and wanted to meet Seawolf 28. I stood up to introduce myself and my crew. The chiefs held up a bottle of Jack Daniels and a box of cigars. "This is for you for being there. We understand that it was quite an exciting rescue."

The accolades went on for a few minutes and I started to feel very uncomfortable. I didn't like being praised for doing my job. It was like I had two personalities; one, I would stand toe to toe with anyone if I thought I was right, yet the other side of me did not know how to handle the

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praise being bestowed on me. After about an hour the chiefs left and gave me an open invitation to the NCO club. I would be an honorary member and would never have to buy another drink while I was in country. I thanked them and was glad to have all the attention go away.

The next day Bill had duty and I was sitting in the hooch playing cards with him while the duty crew waited to be called out on a mission. That morning a couple of reporters came into the hooch with some photographers. They started with, "We heard there was a daring rescue yesterday and we'd like to know more about it."

It just so happened that the OIC and my pilot were both in the hooch at that time. The OIC jumped up from his seat and said, "I was the Fire Team Leader in command of the rescue," as he walked toward the reporters. Right behind the OIC was the other pilot.

"I was the aircraft commander of the rescue helicopter," he stated.

Both the OIC and the pilot escorted the reporters outside. As they walked toward the door I overheard the pilot say that he turned the helicopter over to his co-pilot because it was easier for me to make the rescue from my side. Go figure! I looked across the table at Bill as he sat back in his chair and rolled his eyes. We continued to play cards without saying a word; there was no need to say what we really thought.

I never saw those reporters again, but I did hear that the OIC and the pilot of the rescue helicopter got their names in a few newspapers. As luck would have it one of the reporters was from the pilot's hometown. I was a little disappointed in human nature but blew it off as I usually did when I saw things go against what I believed in. I was still struggling with whether I would stay in the Navy or get out. The airlines were starting to look pretty good. The following day a couple of the chiefs from the PBR detachment brought a *Navy Times* reporter over to talk with me. Fortunately that day nobody else was around. The reporters were very interested in what took place, but I continued to play it down since there was a chance I would lose my wings, and I sure as hell was not going to tell them I almost went into the drink. This was not the act of an arrogant egotistical young aviator, but then again few people would know who I really was.

Another day went by and I didn't hear anything more from the OIC about my losing my wings, which was fine with me. Maybe getting his name in the newspaper distracted him from going after me. Another day would pass before the OIC came into the hooch and told me the CO wanted to see me down in Vung Tau, immediately. I asked, "Do you know what it's about?"

The OIC answered, "He didn't say," but the seemingly personal look of satisfaction on his face left me with a knot in the pit of my stomach.

I didn't have duty that day, so I asked Bill to take me down to Vung Tau and drop me off. I had plenty of time to sit in the back of the helicopter and think about my fate. Bill dropped me off and said he was going on a patrol and would be back later to pick me up. I went over to the squadron spaces and was sent into the CO's office almost immediately. The CO was sitting behind his desk and looked up at me, as I stood at attention in front of his desk. "LTJG Billings reporting as ordered sir!"

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I had never met the CO. He was a Navy captain, which was very unusual for an aviation squadron CO. Either he was deep selected or the Seawolves had high enough visibility to warrant a Navy captain. He was a big man with a stern face and looked to be in his late 40's. I figured my aviation career was about to end, but hoped there was a light at the end of the tunnel. The captain picked up a newspaper and handed it to me. It was the *Navy Times*. There was an article in the paper about a daring rescue of some wounded sailors off a stricken PBR. "Is this you?"

I looked at it briefly and replied, "Yes, sir, I believe so," my voice was scarcely audible.

The captain broke in, "Let me tell you something son. I don't ever want to read about my men in the newspaper without knowing about it first hand, is that understood?"

"Yes, sir!"

"You tell your OIC that I want to know about everything that goes on in that detachment."

"Yes, sir!"

After that, the captain seemed to settle down a little and asked me about the rescue. We had a good talk and he turned out to be a pretty decent guy. He was very complimentary and said they would make transfers from small boats part of their training. After a few more minutes of small talk he wished me luck and I left.

Navy Helicopter Rescues 2 Wounded off River Boat

SAIGON—A daring rescue by a Navy Seawolf helicopter was credited with saving two seriously wounded sailors of a river patrol boat after six U.S. and three Vietnamese Navy boats came under heavy fire in three separate incidents, two in the Rung Sat Special Zone, near Saigon.

One American was killed and three wounded. The U.S. casualties came in a single firefight when two boats were hit by rocket-propelled grenade and heavy automatic weapons fire.

The two more-seriously wounded Americans were evacuated when the helicopter landed on one of the 31-foot, fiberglas boats. The two boats had been providing a blocking force for a Vietnamese ground sweep when the first attack took place.

AS THE BOATS were leaving their blocking positions they came under heavy fire. One boat was hit on the starboard side by two rocket-grenades and three crewmen were wounded. The two boats then ran up another stream where they rendezvoused and the patrol officer went aboard the stricken PBR to help the wounded.

The boats then reversed course in the narrow stream and made firing runs along the west bank. They again received numerous rocket-propelled grenades and heavy automatic weapons fire and one sailor was killed.

Meanwhile, U.S. Navy and Army helicopter gunships were scrambled from the nearby Nha Be Navy Base. Ten minutes after the first attack, Navy Seawolf helicopters made firing runs on the enemy positions.

One of the Seawolf pilots, Lt. (jg) Alan Billings, radioed the

PBRs for an update on the wounded.

"I found out that a couple of them were wounded pretty badly," he said. "One had a head injury and the other was bleeding badly."

BILLINGS CALLED back to Nha Be and found the regular evacuation helicopters still were 15 to 20 minutes away. The fire team leader authorized Billings to attempt to rescue the wounded sailors, but there were no landing zones nearby, except in the area the PBRs had just come from.

"They didn't want to go back in there," Billings said. "It was too hot."

Billings decided to try to "land" on the 31-foot patrol boat. He flew his gunship helicopter alongside as PBR crewmen turned their boat into the wind.

"I set the left skid of the helo on the front of the bow as best I could," Billings continued, "and my door gunner grabbed hold of the first wounded man, who was hurt badly and couldn't move very much on his own."

The door gunner, Airman Glen R. Smithen pulled the wounded sailor inside, while the right door gunner, Petty Officer Third George C. Heady covered their right flank with his twin .30-caliber machine gun.

Lt. (jg) Tim Hayes, the aircraft

commander, ordered all ordnance dropped overboard to lighten the load and make room for the wounded men.

"WE GOT the first patient in," Billings said, "and they had one more to come aboard. We didn't think we could take him, at first. We felt we were getting too heavy, but they said he had a head injury, and you can never tell about a head injury, so we took him aboard, too."

"We made it out of there with no problem at all and took them to the Third Field Hospital in Saigon."

Billings praised crew chief Heady, saying, "He did an outstanding job. He took the first aid kit out and administered first aid as best he could. We weren't sure that one of the boys was going to make it, but we got word later that he did make it, which made the whole operation worthwhile. We're glad we could do it."

On my way back to Nha Be the tension in my body started to slacken. I was sure I had pushed it too far and I was going to lose my wings. When I arrived, the OIC was in the ready room area and asked me to step outside. He said the CO had just called and instructed him to put me in for a medal. He wanted to know what I thought I deserved.

I replied, "As far as I understand the process, I'm not supposed to know about any awards that I'm being recommended for, but if you're asking me, I've never had a Navy Commendation Medal." What can I say; I was a genius with words. I turned and went back into the hooch. It was difficult for me to be nice to someone I didn't respect. The incident with the newspaper reporters ended any chance of my respecting anything but the rank he was wearing.

I understand that the newspaper articles that were sent along with the citation carried more weight than the nomination did. I could get philosophical here and say that it didn't really matter, but as a young man and still to this day, the truth was very important to me. I never understood that telling the truth could be considered a character flaw in real life.

The Navy Commendation Medal came back in the following citation and is a perfect example of what really happened and what gets documented, very little was correct. I wasn't told but I found out later (rumor only) that the FTL and the pilot of the wing ship were both put in for medals so it couldn't go down as it actually happened. The Commendation Medal as I knew it was upgraded to a Silver Star:

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**COMMANDER IN CHIEF
UNITED STATES PACIFIC FLEET**

The President of the United States takes pleasure in presenting
the Silver Star Medal to

Lieutenant (junior grade) Alan James BILLINGS
United States Naval Reserve

for service as set forth in the following:

CITATION

"For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action while engaged in aerial flight while attached to Helicopter Attack (Light) Squadron THREE on 8 November 1968. As co-pilot of a helicopter gunship, Lieutenant (junior grade) BILLINGS piloted the aircraft in an unprecedented medical evacuation of two seriously wounded men from a PBR in a hostile fire area. The helicopter fire team was scrambled from Nha Be to assist two PBR's that had come under heavy enemy rocket and automatic weapons fire from both banks of a small stream. The patrol officer had been killed and four crewmen were wounded, two seriously and in need of immediate medical attention. Since a MEDEVAC helicopter was still 20 minutes out and there was no helicopter landing site accessible to the PBR's, Lieutenant (junior grade) BILLINGS received permission from the fire team leader to attempt an underway pickup. The PBR's were still quite near the area they were when first hit. Lieutenant (junior grade) BILLINGS had the pilot put an attack into the enemy positions in order to discourage fire on his aircraft and also to jettison the bulk of his ammunition. To further lighten the aircraft he had the gunners jettison most of their ammunition. He then made his approach to the boat with only his gunners to protect his precarious position. He placed one skid on the boat's bow while the left door gunner pulled the two seriously wounded men to safety. He then flew directly to the hospital in Saigon. Lieutenant (junior grade) BILLINGS' courageous actions, sense of responsibility and devotion to duty were in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service."

For the President

JOHN J. HYLAND
Admiral, U. S. Navy

Commander in Chief U. S. Pacific Fleet

Rescue off a 31 foot PBR under fire.