

How a Cook Found a Berth on the LCU-1499 in I-Corps

(Authorized by Joe Criscione, MRFA member and former LCU-1499 crewmember; January 2006, as told to Tom Lanagan, MRFA member and former YFU-79 crewmember)

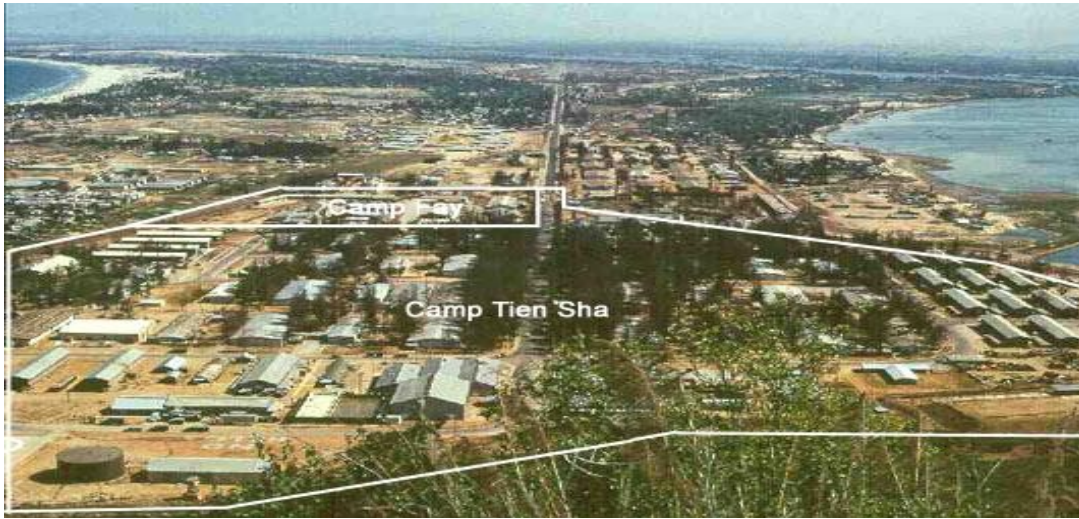
I don't know how it happened but there I was sitting on a jet going to Vietnam. The date was August 25 1968 and I just turned 21 years old and had been recently married. The airplane was filled with sailors, soldiers and marines with most of us going to Nam for our first tour. The plane was very quiet for most of the flight. Most of the guys were probably thinking the same thing that had crossed my mind. What lies ahead, what's it going to be like, are they going to be shooting at us as we land at Da Nang airport? We had already heard that DaNang had mountains on most sides and that landing could be tricky especially if there was any in-coming fire from the NVA. Through much of the flight, my mind was racing and playing tricks on my common sense.

The plane was like a big tube and you could see from one end to the other because there were no partitions and no first class section. Gee, I guess there is no first class on the way to hell? The flight was to take about 20 hours with our first stop in Hawaii. I thought to myself, wow I'm finally getting to Hawaii. I could think of nicer circumstances or an easier way to get there. We landed in Hawaii about 1A.M and we were scheduled to be refueled and be on our way in about 1 hour. They told us to deplane because the plane needed something repaired. We were glad to get out and stretch our legs and see Hawaii (the airport anyway). It was August and there was a very moist warm breeze. Most of the guys headed for the nearest bar for a quick brew or drink. I wasn't much of a drinker so I just walked around the airport and took in the sites. Most of the people we found were servicemen also going to you know where. The luckier one's were on their way home. That seemed like a life- time away. About 3 hours later we were on our un-merry way. Next stop Guam.

When we landed at Guam the airfield was surrounded with B52 bombers. I had never seen a B52 before and it was an awesome sight. The design of the plane made it appear as though the tips of the wings were touching the ground. They looked like giant vultures sitting on the side of the road waiting for their next unsuspecting meal. These were the bombers that were called for air strikes throughout North and South Vietnam. There had to be at least 50 of them just sitting there, waiting! We were not allowed to get off the plane in Guam because all our aircraft had to do was to refuel. Next stop, that place we heard so much about in the news---Vietnam!

" Gentleman, we will be landing at DaNang Airport in a few minutes. The temperature is a balmy 115 degrees and it's sunny and humid. Good luck to all our servicemen and we wish you all a safe return. Thank you for flying Continental." Like we had a choice what airline we were flying, the Transportation Officer had arranged the whole thing. Have you ever gotten off an air-conditioned plane into 115 degree heat with 100% humidity? All I wanted to do was get back up that stairway. When I turned around to look at the plane I saw some of the stewardesses standing in the doorway waving and crying. This job must have been hard for them. While I was on the flight I overheard one of the stewardesses talking to another sailor about the flights when they bring men back to "The World". She said those flights are even quieter than flights to Vietnam.

When we left the plane they herded us into a building they called a terminal. It was a large hanger type building where they separated us by branches of service and destination. The marines went one way, the soldiers went another way and all of us sailors went to Camp Tien Sha by bus with wire over the windows. This was the Navy's largest Naval Support Activity Command with Headquarters NSA DaNang located in an old French Colonial building along the river known affectionately as the White Elephant.



NSA DaNang's Camp Tien Sha from Monkey Mtn. - 1969

The gray military bus approached the main gate of Camp Tien Sha and came to a stop. One of the marine guards got on the bus and looked around. He gave the driver a kind of salute and said "OK you can go ahead". As we drove through the gate I thought to myself, that was not a real close inspection for a base in a War Zone. It was the middle of the afternoon and a sunny day and oppressively hot. As I was getting my duffel bag off the bus I could not help noticing how dingy the base looked. This was a first impression, and you have to remember I had just left a modern, shiny, Boeing 707 and the U.S. It wasn't many days later that I began to realize that Tien Sha was one of the nicer spots in DaNang with many of the buildings having been built by the French. After a while it would not look so bad. As it was, I was assigned to a temporary barracks and I thought that was just fine because I would not want to be here permanently.

That night I was given my first assignment. They told me I was going to ride shotgun on an 18-wheeler flat-bed delivering ammunition to local areas throughout Danang. The best part of this assignment was we were going to do it at night with almost no lights. I remember thinking, oh great; I'm going to buy the farm on my first night in Vietnam. Well I lasted the night, but needless to say I was scared. I did that for 3 nights in a row and by the third night it didn't seem too bad, but I was a cook, what the hell was I doing here riding shotgun? The driver of the truck was a little uneasy, too, when they assigned him a cook for his shotgun. I decided to put his mind at ease and told him I was an excellent shot and would have no trouble using the M16 if I had to. Whether my bravado made him feel any better or not I never did find out but sitting shotgun and driving through the streets of DaNang at night was really strange. Even our worst neighborhoods back in the States looked better than downtown DaNang. Also, in the distance, you could see tracer fire and the outgoing marine artillery firing into the hills and occasionally see in-coming rockets from the NVA. Great place.

Finally I learned that the Navy intended to assign me to the "U boats". Well "U boats", what the hell were they? I didn't know they had submarines here in Nam. I came to find out there were 60 or so flat-bottomed riverboats with crews on them that delivered supplies up and down the coast and up the rivers throughout all of I-Corps.

When I received orders for a boat, it was LCU-1499. I was told it was a "tar baby", what the hell was a "tar baby"! It turned out a "tar baby" was one of the older boats which would be sent in a few months to Subic for overhaul but in the meantime it was used for hauling all of the nasty cargo including everything from asphalt to napalm canisters to barrels of Agent Orange. I had no idea what to expect when I got the orders. The first thing I thought of was how they could keep the boat clean with all that tar on board. All I knew was that I was going on a boat that traveled the rivers of Vietnam and that has got to be something dangerous. Let's see now, I joined the Navy so if I went to Vietnam I would be

on some nice big ship sitting off the coast. Then I became a cook, thinking that cooks are in the galley and it's very hard to get shot there, while on duty. No one told me the navy had cooks on riverboats in Vietnam. Ooops –oh well! As I unpacked my gear I had no way of knowing what was ahead. I had a feeling I wasn't going to be bored! It could have been worse; I could have been drafted.

After catching a ride over to the Tien Sha Annex and the Sand Ramp where the boats stayed in DaNang, I walked up the bow ramp of 1499. The boat was in the process of being loaded with barrels of asphalt. Yes, the 1499 was definitely living up to it's name as a "tar baby". As the forklifts ran up and down the bow ramp with the pallets of barrels, the boat would go up and down in the water from the weight of the load. Some of the barrels were leaking from either heat expansion or punctures in the sides. The whole well deck was sticky and black with tar. As I approached the hatch to the living quarters the crew had built a makeshift wall of large railroad ties about a foot high. This was done to try to hold the tar back from the living quarters. The operative word here was "try" since there was plenty of tar that had flown past the makeshift barrier. All I could think of was how was I going to keep the galley clean? After a while I realized I would have to live with the problem.

The boat was painted battleship gray since it didn't make much sense to even attempt to hide a 180 ton 118 ft long boat that would haul a couple hundred tons of ammo – or - tar. The PBR's and some other small boats were painted a flat black so they could not be seen so easily at night. However our hull numbers – 1499 - were painted in 6 ft numbers on both sides of the bow as well as on the stern. I guess that this was done so that Hanoi Hanna would know who to blame and she would periodically threaten various boats and their crews over the radio. I don't recall any of those call-outs by Hanoi Hanna actually resulting in a boat loss during my tour but I do know that the YOG-76 was sunk at Cua Viet just down river from Dong Ha some months after I rotated Stateside after Hanoi Hanna called her out by hull number. In any event, as I walked up with my duffel, several of the guys greeted me and they were damn glad to have a new stew-burner since they had been without a cook and had been living on sandwiches and beer.



YOG-76 sunk by NVA swimmers with mines in Song Cua Viet - 1969

Now, one of the wrinkles about being assigned to a U-boat was that we were never out to sea for very long before we would head back up a river. So what's the problem with that for a cook you say? Well, this means that getting your sea legs takes a while. Typically, after picking up a load of ammo, we would go up or down the coast to a river or another small bay and drop off the load and return to Danang for

another load. Then do it all over again. Since we were only out on the ocean for 12 to 15 hours before we were up a river to calm waters, it means that it's difficult to get a good sense of balance from all the rocking and pitching of the boat. Well it took me about a month to get my sea legs. Somehow, I managed to cook meals during all this rocking and going up and down. Between the seasickness and looking at the food, the smell of the cargo, the heat and lets not forget the diesel fumes, I lost a little weight. Not that I couldn't afford to lose weight, I was always a little chunky anyway. Most sailors get their sea legs in about three to four days when assigned to a real ship, but most ships stay out for more than 12 to 16 hours at a time. Since the U-boats were all flat-bottomed craft not really made for coastal runs of any distance, it made our coastal runs interesting since we did not cut through the waves. Instead, we floated on top with the wave and given our lack of power or speed, it was kind of like riding a giant surfboard. This all contributed to a rough ride even in relatively calm seas. When we hit a large wave, the bow would come out of water and slam back into the sea like a giant belly flop. Yes, that first month on the 1499 was fun.



DaNang Harbor – 1969

Some time later after I had gotten my sea legs on the 1499, we were on our way to Dong Ha again with a load of napalm canisters. The sea was starting to get pretty rough and some of the newer crew-members were getting green about the gills. Even if you had previously been assigned to a real ship and had gotten use to the seasickness, it didn't ride like these U-boats. Some of the guys were in bad shape and I could sympathize with them because I'd been there not too long before. As it turned out, we heard on the radio that there was a bad storm bearing down and that all boats should head for the nearest bay or river as soon as possible. Well the trouble was the storm was not coming, it was already on top of us as we steamed north to the DMZ. We were almost to the mouth of the Cua Viet River, but we couldn't put into the river. Sounds ridiculous don't it? The problem was we didn't have enough power to fight the storm and the current. Being a flat bottom boat was not good in this situation because we did not cut through the water. If you looked aft, our wake was zig-zagging back and forth like a snake. This meant we were getting nowhere fast or "slow". Through the rain and sea spray, we could see about where the mouth of the river was, but it was hopeless. The ocean by this time was running pretty ugly with 10-meter waves breaking over us as we rode about a mile off the coast. The waves were not just breaking over the bow of the boat, but also over the living quarters and conning tower. We found leaks we never knew we had. The water was leaking in the port holes and hatch covers. The engines were straining one second and running free the next with both screws chewing air. Our cargo was not that heavy and that did not help either. If we had more weight in

the bow we would be cutting the water better. The storm could not sink us but we could capsize if the waves got any bigger. The bow was coming out of the water and slamming back into the ocean like a belly slam in a pool. When we slammed back into the water, the whole boat would shake and everything that was not tied down would become air-born. It seemed that we were under the water more than on top so maybe the name U-boats made sense. As we went up and down in the ocean we could see the USS New Jersey a few miles further out seeming to ride just fine through this storm. I guess size does make a difference.



YFU-1499 in DaNang Harbor - 1969

Our helmsmen was strenuously working to keep the boat on the right compass heading so we would not zig-zag , but it was not working. After about seven hours of sitting in the same spot on the radar they asked me to take the helm. By this time, I had been on the boat the longest and had the most experience on the helm. I was also a graduate of the assault coxswain school the navy had so graciously sent me to after I graduated boot camp before they made me a cook. Not that this made me an expert but I liked to man the helm. I was having a good time with this weather. I thought it was really neat to look up and see the ocean on both sides of you one minute and be on top of a mountain of water the next. I was flattered to take the helm, besides, I could not do anything in the kitchen under these conditions. It was dangerous down there with things flying all over the place. The head was a real bad place with three guys sick as dogs.

In order to keep the compass straight I had to spin the wheel back and forth as fast as I could. I had to anticipate the movement of the boat just as a big wave was about to hit us. If I remember correctly it was quite a workout, but I was young then with the energy of our youth. Whatever I was doing it seemed to be working, we were getting closer to the river. After about two hours of spinning the wheel back and forth, we reached the mouth of the river. Now it was just a matter of how good our aim was as we became the world's largest surfboard. We rode one wave all the way into the mouth of the river. It was the fastest that boat had ever traveled. We must have been doing about thirty knots when we hit the river. There were some marines on the shore watching us surf in, and probably couldn't believe what was happening.



Aerial of the Cua Viet River just south of the DMZ - 1969

I learned later that another boat – the LCU-1622 – had been in a similar predicament a year earlier. In that case, when they reached the mouth of the Cua Viet River they missed the channel as they surfed in and instead the boat wound up breached and battered by the rough surf for two days. Eventually, a salvage crew pulled her off the beach and re-floated her for a tow back to DaNang where the machinists and electricians got her back on duty in two weeks. In our case, we considered ourselves lucky for aiming the boat correctly at the mouth of the river. When we finally slowed down and moved up river far enough to avoid the coastal storm surge, we tied up alongside three other LCUs not far from the wreck of the YFU-62. The YFU-62 had been sunk by an NVA command detonated mine with the loss of eight sailors. Since it's keel had been broken, the craft had been left in the river as a reminder to the rest of us to not be careless. Inattention in Vietnam could easily bring disaster and death.



Cua Viet River with the mined YFU-62 and
PBR patrol - 1969

Initially I was unsure as to why Uncle Sam had sent me to Vietnam as a cook for a U-boat crew. However, after serving on the LCU-1499 and working with the other U-boat crews such as the YFU-79 in and about the waters of I-Corps, I developed a strong sense of duty and brotherhood that I carry with me to this day. I'm proud of what we accomplished and am still glad to say to all of those guys who were called and who went to Vietnam, my brothers in arms and we stand tall in memory of those who did not return.



YFU-79 just entering Song Cua Viet River from the South China Sea with
ammo - 1969