



By hard-travelin' a variety of rivers in Vietnam, in search of an old American patrolboat left over from the war, two Vietnam vets encounter a totally unexpected truth.  
By Capt. Bill Pike  
Photographs by Jim Raycroft

# Going Back



Marine photographer Jim Raycroft probably thought I was nuts when I hit him with the idea. But then, hey, at the time I figured we're both Vietnam veterans and presumably interested in revisiting a place that had impacted our young lives more deeply than any other on the planet. And what better way to float the whole endeavor than to hang it on a quest of sorts, a project wherein we'd travel the rivers of Vietnam—not all of them, mind you, but several—looking for an old



PBR (Patrol Boat River, in military parlance) of the type featured in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*.

"See, what we do, Jim," I explained, as we ambled the docks during last year's Ft. Lauderdale International Boat Show, "is we track down one of these babies—I mean it may be a ferry boat now, or a fishing boat, or shoot, even the roof of somebody's house. But anyway, we find the darn thing and then we interview the folks who own it, and the folks who owned it before them, and use the whole process to find out what's happened to Vietnam and the Vietnamese people during the years since the war."

"Hmmm," replied Raycroft, obviously curious. "But why the PBR thing? I mean, why are you so interested in some old patrol boat, if in fact there is one hiding over there?"

"We're talking about a quest, Jim, an adventure," I replied. "Besides, I spent a little time on PBRs. On the Cua Viet River. And the Cam Lo. Up north. Quang Tri Province. And hey, both of us are journalists after all...of the boaty kind."

"Well hey then," said Raycroft, who'd spent some time in Quang Tri himself, manning a Forward Control Post in 1970 for the U.S. Air Force's 620th Tactical Control Squadron (Detachment 3), "you can count me in, Bill."

## Vietnam Joyride

My brief but memorable encounter with PBRs in Vietnam occurred in early 1969, just a few weeks after I'd joined the first platoon, Charlie Company, 1/11th Infantry, 5th Mechanized Division, an outfit that was based in Quang Tri Province, just south of what was then called the DMZ or Demilitarized Zone. I once wrote a story about the whole thing for *Power & Motoryacht* (February, 2000), entitling it, with calculated irony, "Vietnam Joyride," mostly because my experiences onboard the boats had given me such ineffable joy, in large part because I was a naïve, somewhat oblivious youngster at the time who, unbeknownst to himself, was on track to soon see a great deal of eye-opening tragedy.

Design-wise, PBRs had two personalities. On the one hand, they were warships, despite a 32-foot LOA, and participated in any number of riverine skirmishes, battles, and firefights. But then, they were also fiberglass boats that very much resembled recreational cruisers, especially to a kid who was very much in love with recreational cruisers. And the way things turned out, it was the latter side of the PBR I got to see, almost exclusively.

And what fun it was! Every evening for an entire week, as part of one ambush team or another, I'd get to ride a boat up the Song Cua Viet or the Song Cam Lo, two tropical rivers just a few kilometers south of the DMZ, go ashore at some pre-designated spot with the team and set up an ambush site, lay in wait all night for a bunch of North Vietnamese regulars to fall by (which never happened, as luck would have it), and then, in the morning, catch another boat back down river.

The down-river trips were the best, of course. There are few things a young combat medic with boaty hankerings appreciates more, I



Street food in Hoi An (opposite page) is varied. Fancy a little cuttlefish on a stick? The Hue National School, once attended by Ho Chi Minh (top). The skyline of Da Nang now boasts many high-rise buildings, the tallest being the 37-story Administrative Center, just opened this year (bottom).



guess, than doing a 25-knot swoop down a flat, brown channel, with lush, variegated, green jungle on both sides, a set of 180-horsepower Detroit Diesel 6V-53 naturals thundering off into a broad sunshiny wake via Jacuzzi waterjets at the stern, and the prospect of a hot, bacon-and-egg breakfast at a Navy mess hall in the offing.

## The Song Thu Bon

After flying into a strikingly modern Da Nang International Airport, Raycroft and I linked up with our interpreter, a former Vietnamese soldier, Nguyen Tan Phuoc, and our driver Huynh Anh Tuan. We'd already connected with our in-country logistics guy Bill Stilwagen—he'd joined us in Los Angeles for the flight across the Pacific. Stilwagen was a former U.S. Marine corporal, a combat infantryman like myself who'd served in Quang Tri Province around the same time as Raycroft and I. In addition, he was a highly experienced "bush guide" for San Antonio-based Vietnam Battlefield Tours (see "The Best Guys To Go With," on page TK), the nonprofit company that had coordinated travel, hotel, and meal arrangements for the whole trip. Not only had Stilwagen been guiding veterans' groups around Vietnam for more than 18 years, he was, handily enough, a boat guy, with a background in commercial boatbuilding.

After exchanging a raft of pleasantries, we all took a short ride south in a Mercedes Benz van, and spent the first night in Vietnam at a little riverside hotel in Hoi An, a picturesque old town on the Song Thu Bon, a river with considerable urban development and a military facility at its mouth. Our hotel was called the Vinh Hung Resort and it had Texas-grade air-conditioning and some truly snooze-worthy beds.

I was up early the next morning, nevertheless. And when we boarded a Yanmar diesel-powered sampan behind the hotel at 8 o'clock, the first thing I did was haul out a black-and-white photo of a PBR and show it to our skipper Dang Tri, an exercise I'd repeat many times over the ensuing eight days.

"He's sorry," translated Phuoc. "He thinks we will not find one."

This did not overly surprise me. The skipper was a relative youngster—maybe in his mid-30s—and having come of age well after Vietnam's communist takeover, there was little chance he'd ever seen a PBR, in an operational state or otherwise. So, through Phuoc, I suggested we get going anyway.

Stilwagen seconded the motion while unfolding an old topographic map on his lap. For a few anticipatory moments, Raycroft, Phuoc, and I leaned over his shoulder, studying the sinuous shape of the Song Thu Bon. "We'll check out the port first," Stilwagen said, pointing with an index finger, "And then we'll proceed west into the boonies."

## How To Drive A Sampan

Shortly after we'd begun cruising a shoreline crammed with colorful houses, shops, and restaurants, while at the same time encountering a variety of fishing boats, almost all of them with long, narrow, seemingly super-efficient, virtually-wakeless hulls, a giant Fina sign appeared above the royal palms. Our skipper headed for it, soon laying our boat against a concrete pier and tying up while simultaneously stepping off, a feat of multi-dexterous athleticism that left Stilwagen and I wide-eyed.

"Whoa," I commented.

"Yeah," added Stilwagen, adjusting the brim of his "Marine Corps Utility Cover," otherwise known as a fatigue cap, to emphasize the comment.

*Left, a sampan operator on Thoi Son Island. Opposite, two ladies doing laundry not far from the Bao Quoc Pagoda on the Perfume River.*





“Hey Bill,” said Raycroft, as we prepared to go. “There are no seats in this boat!”

*Below, the corn field on the Song Thu Bon. Above, Cua Viet sampans.*



The fuel-up that followed was pretty amazing as well. As he walked toward the gas station's pumps, our skipper carried an empty 2-liter Coke bottle that, in truth, had seen better days. This he topped off with diesel rather quickly and, after coming back aboard, used it to fill the fuel tank, another jug, albeit only slightly larger, with a battered hose sticking out. Super-efficient, these Vietnamese Yanmars, I told myself. Almost like perpetual-motion machines!

“Mr. Phuoc,” I asked once we were on our way in earnest, “do you think the captain would mind if I drive the boat for a little while?”

A lesson in bare-bones navigation ensued. First off, since the buoyage system is reversed in Vietnam, I had to get used to green buoys on the right and red ones on the left when going upstream. Then I had to get used to the standard equipment on a sampan, which in our case consisted of a folding chair for a helm seat, a steering wheel seemingly purloined from an old Ford tractor, a knob-type gearshift sticking out of the Yanmar like a fork sticking out of a turkey, and a throttle control that was no more than a couple of strings, one for more speed and the other for less.

Depthsounder? Nope! VHF radio? Nope! Plotter? Nope! Radar? You gotta be kiddin', pardner!

“How's she steer,” yelled Raycroft, snapping away.

“Like a yacht,” I replied, quite truthfully.

## The Grateful Ghosts of Soldiers

A few weeks before departing for Vietnam, I'd gotten antsy. In fact, several times I'd actually hoped I'd either get sick or some emergency would obtrude so I wouldn't have to go. Better to let

*Above right, transitioning from the Cua Viet to the Song Cam Lo. Raycroft (left), the author (right), and Stilwagen (middle) seated on a board.*

sleeping dogs lie, I'd told myself. Why go back and disturb old, disturbing memories? Eventually, however, thanks to the furor that accompanied our actual departure, the anxiety had eased off. But now on the Song Thu Bon, probably because we were entering an area like the ones I used to patrol as a young man, carrying medical paraphernalia as well as machine-gun ammo and hand grenades, the darn stuff was coming back.

“I need a favor,” said Stilwagen, as we approached a bend. We were now well upriver, it was almost noon, and Raycroft, Phuoc, and I were eating a stopgap lunch of French bread, cold Vietnamese hot dogs, Laughing Cow cheese, and Coca Cola. “The place where I got myself shot—it's up here on the portside. Can we stop there for a few?”

Beaching our sampan on what the U.S. military used to call “Chestnut Island” went smoothly. Our skipper merely angled in toward the bank at a spot that synergized with the appropriate coordinates, obtained by Stilwagen through a prior search of his military records, and put to use via a nifty little Garmin GPS handheld. We all debarked, slipping and sliding in the mud. After climbing a steep rise and proceeding rather circuitously to the edge of a cornfield, we stopped.

“This is it,” said Stilwagen.

A somber, reverential stillness settled down as he began, with the group's permission, telling us the story of what very precisely had happened to him on the morning of May 4th, 1970, when a communications glitch caused his helicopter to land, not amongst Republic of South Korean allied soldiers who were expecting to be rescued, but in deep elephant grass amongst a contingent of heavily armed Viet Cong guerillas.

The story was disturbing at first. As a faint breeze wafted off toward the river, gently rustling the dried leaves on the cornstalks, the juxtaposition of the peacefulness of the place with its horrifically violent past engendered feelings of deep sadness and irony, at least in me. And then something else seemed to come. From somewhere. Offering calm reassurance, considerably diminishing the anxiety I'd been feeling all morning. Afterwards, back onboard, I asked Stilwagen about it.

“I feel it myself sometimes,” he replied, “It's a kind of gratitude, I believe. The spirits are saying to us, “Thanks for remembering.””

## A Good Guy to Have Along

Over the next few days, as our search continued, we used a variety of vessels to negotiate a variety of Vietnam's inland waterways. We checked out the Han River that flows through Da Nang, a city that is now an industrial powerhouse with immense, cleverly designed high-rise buildings, a stunningly colorful after-dark signature, and some world-class shipyards. We checked out the Perfume River that flows through Hue, a city replete with antiquities and sleek, sumptuous new hotels. And we checked out the more remote Cua Viet, Bo Dieu, and Cam Lo rivers in what was arguably the most violently contested place in all of Vietnam during the war—Quang Tri Province.

But we saw no PBRs, in any shape or form. And although I showed my PBR photo to all sorts of people along the way, nobody seemed to know much about the old boats or care much either. The darkest reaction to the photo came from a squad of soldiers guarding a small fleet of Vietnamese patrol vessels on the Han. Obviously uncomfortable with our entry into their com-





Left, our merry band on the Mekong. Right, just a few of the kids we met at a large elementary school in central Vietnam. Peace, everybody!

pound, the group of five or six studied the photo gravely while passing it around amongst themselves and shaking their heads.

“No,” the non-com in charge said finally, handing it back to me with an air of police-state suspicion. “This is from the American war—we do not see this for long time.”

Ever the good guy to have along, Raycroft attempted to smooth things over with a little gallows humor. “Hey guys,” he said with a big grin, “We just thought we’d give it a shot, although that may not be the best word to use at this particular time.”

## Flyfishing at Cam Lo Bridge

The drive from Hue to Dong Ha, in Quang Tri Province, was a long one, mostly due to the wild and crazy scooter traffic. And although, as I’ve already mentioned, none of the sampan rides we took in Quang Tri produced a PBR or even the rumor of one, the jaunt that took us up the Song Cam Lo to Cam Lo Bridge proved way more memorable than all the rest.

“Hey Bill,” said Raycroft, as we prepared to go. “There are no seats in this boat!”

I eyeballed our sampan du jour, a vessel approximately 30 feet long, 4 feet wide, and rough-hewn by any standard. Her bow was squished up on a slimey, muddy beach. At the stern, a little Chinese diesel went ca-chooga-chooka, ca-chooga-chooka under a cloud of greasy black smoke and a young Vietnamese guy and his significant other (wrapped, in accordance with Vietnamese custom, so totally in sun-proof clothing that only her eyes were visible) huddled lovingly over a tiller. And yes, Raycroft was right. There were no seats, although I noted a few narrow thwarts a passenger could perch upon, vulture-fashion, and a comfy board or two in the bottom of the vessel.

I sniffed defensively. Raycroft was splitting hairs on creature comforts, it seemed to me. And what’s more, he was now putting the evil eye on the brand-new bag of Vietnamese hot dogs Phuoc, undoubtedly with Stilwagen’s blessing, was hauling aboard, along with more French bread and Laughing Cow. Would Raycroft soon be challenging our luncheon menu too? Wisely, I let the whole can of worms slide, as did Raycroft.

But it was really strange. The day’s journey took us up the very

same river I’d traversed years before as a youngster in a PBR, yet nothing was recognizable. Instead of brown water with lush, variegated, green jungle on both sides, there were fields with cows and water buffalo, cellphone towers, and roaring public works projects. And the traffic on the river was pretty intense too, consisting entirely of fishing and other commercial vessels. I managed to do a little thinking, however, despite all the mindboggling newness.

Some days before, at Stilwagen’s behest, we’d visited a large elementary school. And the kids there had been as plentiful as they were joyful. But what was so surprising and thought provoking was the way they’d literally swarmed over Raycroft and I when given the chance, yelling questions and comments about America, as if just about any American (and indeed America itself) was fabulous, wonderful, and totally amazing. Tears had come to my eyes in the midst of the experience. And to Raycroft’s eyes as well. Why, I wondered, as the waters of the Song Cam Lo slid smoothly by, had we both reacted in precisely the same way?

The ravine just below Cam Lo Bridge was refreshingly cool when we got there. And because catching a few fish in the exact spot where, years earlier, I’d traveled onboard boats bristling with 50-caliber machine guns, seemed like a triumph of sorts, I uncapped the Sage 5-weight flyrod I’d brought all the way from home for just such an occasion, and jointed it up.

But here’s the deal. Even after our skipper had silenced the little Chinese diesel, which allowed our sampan to drift ever so invitingly over the cool, colorless water, I simply could not tie the improved clinch knot most everybody uses to join tippet and fly, although I’d tied the darn knot thousands of times before.

“Shoot,” I said finally. “I can’t tie a fly on.”

“Think about where you are right now,” Stilwagen advised, gesturing towards the thick green foliage ashore, with blue mountains beyond, “Your brain is subconsciously telling you to load a magazine with cartridges, and keep your head down. It’s saying fly fishing’s frivolous, even dangerous here—it won’t let you do it.”

## So What About Those Tears, Jim?

Maybe they were just being nice to us, but most of the people we talked to in Quang Tri told us we’d probably find an old PBR in

the south, either on the busy Mekong River or on one of its many tributaries. A former South Vietnamese soldier who’d somehow escaped the wrath of the communists in 1975 even went so far as to actually promise we’d get big-time lucky.

“They were strong machines,” he said, “You will see one, for sure.”

It was no dice, though. After taking a short flight on Vietnam Airlines from Hue down to Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon), we drove south to the town of My Tho, a jumping off point for boat trips into the Mekong Delta region. And there, as we boarded our final sampan, some 8 days after we’d jumped aboard our first, I showed my dog-eared PBR photo to a salty-looking 41-year-old skipper named Vo Tan Dat. He recognized the boat immediately, but then shook his head.

“He says he knows about them—but they have all disappeared,” Phuoc translated, “They were sold to the Thai military in 1975 and 1976 when the communists took over and they were also used to escape from Vietnam at that time. They are gone. They are no more.”

At this juncture, I’d begun to suspect as much myself. Vietnam’s progress since I’d last seen the country was stunning. Modern cities had arisen from flat, dusty military camps. Airfields had been replaced with giant modern industrial parks and hospitals. Dirt roads had been paved over with super highways with traffic lights and tollbooths. Bomb craters had been filled in. The war was a memory, it seemed, and so were the implements of destruction that had hallmarked it.

We pressed on with our boat ride anyway, though, and, after a long, windy tour of the Mekong, pulled in for lunch at Thoi Son Island where Raycroft and I sat by ourselves in an open-air restaurant for a bit, while Stilwagen did some souvenir shopping nearby. The place was crowded with Vietnamese families enjoying a holiday weekend.

“Jim,” I said, after a while, “why do you figure we both cried at that school the other day? Why did we both react in precisely the same way?”

“Well Bill,” Raycroft replied, after a thoughtful silence, “guys like you and me—Vietnam veterans—have been living with the Vietnam war for years and years now. Both consciously and sub-consciously. Maybe what we were feeling at that school was a giant exhale, a sense of relief, a sense of forgiveness. I mean, a helluva lot of people died on both sides. There was incredible suffering. Again, on both sides. But, for some reason, I don’t think there are any hard feelings here now. The war’s over for these people. They’ve moved on.”

“Huh,” I said, after indulging in a little thoughtful silence of my own, “Then maybe not finding that PBR is okay.”

“Yup,” concluded Raycroft, “Maybe we found something better.” □

## The Best Guys To Go With

Vietnam Battlefield Tours (VBT) is a nonprofit tour company consisting of highly experienced tour guides who are expert in leading veterans and their family members, active-duty military, historians, educators, students, and documentary-film crews to the battlefields of Southeast Asia. VBT’s combat-veteran founders created this all-volunteer organization as a way to help people return to places that are very important to them via reasonably priced, high quality, professionally staffed experiences. All tours are customized to the individual client’s needs.

Vietnam Battlefield Tours, 877-231-9277; [www.vietnambattlefieldtours.com](http://www.vietnambattlefieldtours.com)

