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TOTING THE DUFFLE BAG:

SENSOR OPERATIONS IN VIETNAM

By Lieutenant Commander Dwight Hughes '67, USN (Ret.)

Above: LCDR Dwight Hughes '67, USN (Ret.), left front, with his electronic ground surveillance team and a Republic of Korea captain (far right) who was along as an observer at a village near Hoi An, Vietnam.

In January 1970, I became officer in charge of electronic ground surveillance (Duffle Bag) Team 1 in Hoi An, the capital of Quang Nam province, 18 miles south of Da Nang and 4 miles from the mouth of the Cua Dai river. The team's job was to scout potential ground sensor sites, then plant and monitor sensor strings and coordinate responses, usually ambushes and artillery strikes, mostly at night.

The initial concept was to bug the banks to protect river forces—swifts, patrol boat river (PBRs) and armed junks—from ambush, but we expanded

throughout the coastal river basin. My predecessor left three active sensor strings.

We had as many as 13 out along trail, bunker and hooch complexes in free-fire zones and on village approaches. The program is scarcely documented although there is a good chapter in "The Brown Water War At 50."

I had no training, no turnover, no manuals, no instruction, but was taught on the job in the field by the leading petty officer, Quartermaster 2nd Class Petty Officer Smith ("Smitty") and I winged it from there. He was relieved that summer by Radioman

Petty Officer 2nd Class Fred Nutter, who served two tours with the river boats and received a Bronze Star with Combat "V." The team included three or four seamen and Petty Officer Third Class, usually boatswain mates, quartermasters or radiomen.

I'd go up in a U.S. Army helo or Bird Dog scout plane to recon sites. If we took small arms fire through the wing, the Bird Dog pilot liked to bank sharply around and down, drop his window, stick his M16 or M79 grenade launcher out the window and shoot back. Didn't do my stomach any good. I'd also call up one of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) artillery fire bases and prespot fire on a site for future response.

The team went out two or three times a week to plant and maintain sensor strings. A couple of swift boats or PBRs—initially U.S. Navy, but increasingly RVN Navy—or armed junks from Coastal Advisory Group 14 (CG-14) provided transportation while a security force of Regional Force/Popular Force (RF/PF) troops with a U.S. Army advisor or a contingent of the RVN Navy screened our movements. The RF/PFs were not highly professional and of suspect loyalty. We kept them at a distance from our working area.

The primary sensors were Patrol Seismic Intrusion Detectors (PSIDs), which detected footfalls and looked like a large shoe box with a short wire antenna. We planted them three or four in a line, 10 or so yards apart alongside a trail by cutting out a square of sod, digging a hole, planting the box and replacing the sod with antenna sticking up in the grass. A magnetic sensor was hidden in the bush at one end of the string and sometimes a voice-activated sensor near a hooch.

We monitored remote receivers at the Hoi An U.S. Army compound. A number would pop up on the display identifying each triggered sensor. Seismic sensors triggering in sequence indicated how many individuals were walking down the trail and in which direction. The magnetic sensor revealed probable weapons.

The acoustic sensor might give us voices, but never provided useful intelligence other than their presence. Most activity was at night. We called up the standby artillery unit to fire



The electronic ground surveillance team, also known as Duffle Bag, planted sensors in Vietnam that would provide information on enemy movements to help protect U.S. forces from ambush attacks.

on a contact or coordinated with field units on ambushes. The artillery often responded too slowly to catch targets in the sensor field even if prespotted.

We also installed infrared sensors on beach approaches to CG-14, but they did not work well. The IR beam transmitter and receiver had to be precisely lined up despite wind and weather, which was difficult to accomplish while camouflaging them in bushes. USN EOD teams sometimes accompanied us to level hooches, blow bunkers and deactivate booby traps. They would dig a deep hole in the bunker top and plant charges to collapse the roof.

We were out one day scouting potential sites. I was walking behind one of my guys near a bunker when he suddenly stopped. I bumped into him as he backed up very slowly. He had felt the ground give under his forward foot. The EOD team found a pit under the leaf litter with a 105 mm round and a trip wire across the top. We came within an inch.

We also worked on the perimeter of remote villages occupied by U.S. Marine Combined Action Program (CAP) squads. I'll never forget walking into one of these rustic hamlets and seeing a probably teenaged, scrawny, blond, blue-eyed lad sitting shirtless and sunburned on a stool,



Swift boats were agile enough to navigate Vietnam rivers and the electronic ground surveillance team used them during missions to plant and maintain surveillance sensors.



The electronic ground surveillance team would plant and maintain sensor strings to monitor enemy activity. They would use patrol boat river (PBR) or swift boats to make their way along rivers in Vietnam.

cleaning his weapon among the huts and the locals. His squad lived in the village with other squads and the company commander at nearby villages.

The Marines manned village outposts at night or set up ambushes while we would call in contacts if received. Meanwhile, the RF/PF company sallied forth periodically to sweep through an area. The Viet Cong saw them coming, pulled out and came back afterward.

Little opposition was encountered on our missions although the boats would sometimes light off the 50 calibers at suspicious movement along the banks or we'd take a few rounds from a distant tree line. We carried M16s and M79s with few occasions to use them, being loaded down with heavy gear packs.

Another day we were out working when small arms were heard in the distance. The RVN Navy lieutenant in charge of the security detail started rounding up his men and heading in that direction. I wanted to finish our work and get the guys out. He told me we could stay there if I wished.

That not being an option, we packed up and set off through chest-deep marshes loaded down with gear. The action was over before we arrived as one of their swift boats came by dragging bodies alongside.

While walking trails in Vietnam, members of the electronic ground surveillance team had to be on the lookout for booby traps.

I acquired a few remotely detonated claymore mines from the Marines. We planted them with sensors in a trail, bunker and garden complex in enemy-held territory, and then pulled back a couple clicks with our remote readouts. At dusk, the sensors triggered so we detonated the claymores, went back in, and observed several KIAs. This was our most effective operation.

On 18 October 1970, we were in another bunker complex with RF/PF troops and their advisor as security. RD2 Nutter was walking down a trail when he tripped a booby trap. I was blown over and caught a couple of shrapnel pieces. Another of my men also was concussed but not otherwise injured.

The VC opened up from a tree line across the fields. The advisor set the perimeter and returned fire while calling for help. It took the medevac helo several tries to get in until the incoming was suppressed. They finally got us out and on our way to Da Nang. Fred Nutter died in the helo. He's on the Wall now.

I was on my way home to almost full recovery, although I still carry bits of metal. The rivers reportedly carried Agent Orange down from the mountains, which the VA presumes was a factor in the cancer I contracted 20 years later.

Duffle Bag was strange work for a ship driver. I like to think our efforts helped provide relative peace and security for the good people of that lush land and perhaps saved some lives. Would that it had continued. A few years ago, I viewed a travel documentary on Hoi An and was delighted to see the town apparently thriving. Luxury tourist hotels now dominate those magnificent white beaches and bloody marshes. I would like to return but it's probably not in the cards. ⚓

LT Hughes was awarded the Bronze Star for Meritorious Service and Navy Commendation Medal with Combat "V" for Duffle Bag operations.

¹ Norman Friedman, "Igloo White and Duffel Bag: A New Kind Of War In Vietnam" in Thomas J. Cutler, Edward J. Marolda, eds, "The Brown Water War At 50: A Retrospective on The Coastal and Riverine Conflict in Vietnam" (Naval Institute Press, 2023).

