

'EVERYTHING HAPPENED AUTOMATICALLY'

SEEMINGLY CHOREOGRAPHED TEAMWORK ENABLED RESCUE AMID BATTLE CHAOS

By Gary R. Blinn '66

This story is excerpted and adapted from the 2002 book Confession to a Deaf God by Gary R. Blinn '66. Blinn served as weapons officer on BENJAMIN STODDERT based off Haiphong Harbor and as a swift boat skipper in the Mekong Delta. He was awarded the Bronze Star and the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry for his service in Vietnam. After the war, Blinn served as a vice president of the First National Bank of Chicago and ran his family's beverage company. He died in 2011.

MY KID SISTER'S BIRTHDAY

An Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam

Summer 1969 begun on a happy note. I thought of my sister, now 18. I wondered what she was planning for her birthday. Pretty, blonde, smart and young. An entire exciting life ahead.

The sun was just coming up as we left the pier. My boat and Badger's. We were scheduled to patrol adjacent areas just south of the base. At 20 knots, the sea air felt great. Badger's boat was on my port side. We ran parallel, each crew making signals and grinning at each other.

Suddenly Kid came up on my side. I could tell from his face the news wasn't good. He motioned me down into his cabin. On the radio was a frantic "May Day," the international signal for, "I am in danger." The voice was familiar. It was The Old Man. He and Red Dog and 30 Viet Marines were pinned down on the beach. I could hear heavy automatic weapons fire in the background as he spoke on the radio. They were unable to advance. Unable to retreat. Lying on their bellies in the shallow sand dunes of the narrow beach. Viet Cong bullets whizzing above them. They were dying.

I picked up the mic and said, "This is Inky Bite 97. I will be on site in 20 minutes. Hold on. We will extract you. Inky Bite 36 is with me. Do you copy?" The response was emotional. The Old Man said he had

heard the message loud and clear. He asked us to hurry. Badger joined the conversation saying he had heard it all. Our base operations officer also reported that he had heard the radio traffic and asked us to keep him posted.

From that moment on, everything happened automatically. Literally. Everything just happened without input. Kid kept upbeat radio messages going crisply, giving confidence to the two American advisors.

Inky Bite 97 turned in a giant sweeping turn to starboard hugging the coast. We didn't turn the boat. Inky Bite 97 turned her own little bow straight into the direction of the firefight. Almost 200 years before, John Paul Jones had said, "Give me a fast ship for I intend to sail in harm's way."

Our little boat raced to the coordinates at 25 knots. We didn't guide the boat; she went as instinctively as a terrier chases a rat. I simply stood in the pilothouse door sensing. I could tell from the metallic "click" that Jake had the twin .50s loaded and ready. Extra ammo boxes by his side. The GM diesels screamed as the hull rose above the water.

Kelly already had 81-millimeter mortar rounds out of the cardboard tubes, their fuses set. Kid had

automatic rifles loaded and distributed while Thompson bounced in the pilothouse with a steady hand on the wheel. His eyes were trained ahead looking for the tiny bursts of light that would indicate the muzzle flashes of the Viet Cong shooting at our friendlies. Kelly was singing, "Over the river and through the woods to grandmother's house we go." Over and over, the same phrase. It was oddly comforting, funny and appropriate. Detached amusement.

Sixteen minutes later we were in the hot spot. Bullets whizzed around us as we nudged the nose of the boat onto the shore in the center of the fight. Our twin-.50s were laying down a barrage of bullets, firing over the heads of the men pinned down a few yards in front of us. Badger was to our port side, his boat's nose also on the beach. We didn't communicate, not with the radio. It was mind to mind. The swifts shot at the enemy behind the dune. The Viet Cong shot at the swifts. Red Dog and The Old Man were pinned down with their Viet Marines between us. They had the tough job. Lying on their belly in the sand, while hundreds of bullets whizzed a few feet above them in both directions.

I didn't do anything.

It sounds ridiculous, but the firefight was proceeding as if it were all choreographed in advance.

As if my crew had been on the H.M.S. VICTORY, Admiral Nelson's flagship. As Professor Russell taught back at Navy, his crew knew what to do and when. They didn't need specific orders. They already knew Admiral Nelson's mind.

The 97 boat was taking a few hits, splashes were everywhere around us. But mostly the fire was from us to the bad guys. Kelly was perfectly on target. Jake's fire was murderous. Kid and Red were emptying clips one after the other. It was beautiful, like a perfectly functioning machine. Like a beast that had been trained to do a complex trick. Each muscle, tooth and sinew in harmony.

Slowly the friendly Viet Marines gathered the courage to run toward us. Just a few at first and then more and more. They had been under fire for almost 20 minutes. Unbelievable. We pulled them aboard like fish. Finally, The Old Man and Red Dog came, both carrying wounded. Wild eyes. Fear. Grins. Curses. And bullets. Even more. Whizzing about. Harmless splashes in the water. An occasional "thunk" as a bullet hit the aluminum of our little boat.

Badger received about as many friendlies as we had. Red Dog shouted he was confident they had left only dead ashore. To me, it was all proceeding like a slow-motion ballet. The noise was there, but I didn't hear it. To me, it was actually quite peaceful. A perfect extraction of a very screwed up operation. Most of the men should have been killed. Instead, the majority are safely aboard our two boats.

Inky Bite 97 backed off the beach at the same time as Badger's 35 boat. I was simply and quietly giving commands. No thought. No fear. Not really aware of any danger so to speak. This is the way it should be done. So it was. All in slow motion, so it was unhurried and simple. Peaceful. Directing suppressing fire, medevacs and mortar fire kept me simply busy. Not brave, just busy.

Detached, floating above it all. Lucky to be with Badger. I knew that we would be successful and that my crew would be safe. The incoming bullets didn't matter. We had it mastered. Ecstasy.

The Navy awarded me a Bronze Star with a combat "V" for heroism that day. Badger got one too. It was a mistake of course. I wasn't brave. It was all done by someone else who just floated into my body. ⚓



PHOTO COURTESY OF DIANE BLINN

Gary Blinn '66 served as a swift boat skipper in the Mekong Delta during the Vietnam War. He earned a Bronze Star for his actions while helping rescue U.S. and Vietnamese soldiers in the summer of 1969.