

## C'est la Guerre!

Warren Blake

Now there must be two and seventy ways, at least, that a Young Man can fall into Serious Trouble, and more than a few of these involve War, an activity in which getting into trouble can lead to a young man getting shot. The particular serious trouble I relate did not quite get me shot, else I would not be here writing this, but it was only through great good luck that I am. It was the plain fecklessness of Youth which got me into strife, along with a bloated measure of self-importance in the scheme of things, and a consequent sense of invulnerability.

In those days, the days of my story, the days of the American War in Viet Nam, the ancient city of Saigon lay almost solely on one side, the West and South bank, of the broad and muddy Saigon River. The other side, all rice paddies, mangrove-choked tributaries and jungle, belonged completely to the enemy, the Viet Cong, Victor Charlie in GI talk, at least at night. By day, it was widely held, especially by rash, unthinking youth, that the Americans' complete command of the air made Charlie's presence untenable, through roving heli-gunships and Puff the Magic Dragon, a C-130 aircraft crammed with Gatling guns, spouting fountains of lead into the deepest cover.

In those days, I and my partners, the other Three Friends, ran a civilian company contracting with Uncle Sam to repair his marine and riverine "floating assets": tugboats, barges, landing craft, and, an important actor in this tale, the Patrol Boat River.

The PBR was a light-weight, 30 foot, fibreglass gunboat with twin, bow-mounted, 50 calibre Browning machine guns, powered by twin Detroit Diesel 6-V53 engines (one of which model later powered our ketch FOUR FRIENDS).



*A later model, more heavily armed PBR, on patrol in the Saigon River...see the wash she makes!*

As the boat's name implies the PBR was used for patrolling the labyrinthine maze of rivers and tributaries of the deltas of S. Viet Nam, whose tangled green banks provided magnificent cover for Victor Charlie's ambushes. Of this vessel's utility in this role, a personal note in another story. With its twin 200 HP engines driving jet thrusters it was capable of cruising at thirty knots, and great fun for a foolish young man to guide at full speed along a narrow, winding jungle river. This little vessel never achieved iconic

status in John Public's eyes, although it did figure in the film "Apocalypse Now", a Hollywood approximation to Conrad's novel, where "Captain Kurtz" is conveyed in a PBR up a menacing jungle river to a true Heart of Darkness, in this case somewhere up the Mekong River into Cambodian territory. Despite lack of public notice this class of boat did great and danger-filled service in the rivers of Viet Nam, and for my part I am, in general, very proud of repairing Uncle Sam's vessels, and proud of contributing, in a very small way, to the eventual downfall of Asian Communism, despite the disdain of my generation of youth of that era....and that's enough politics for now! I am not so proud of the particular repair job on PBR 301.

Once our repair jobs were complete, all the motorized vessels required an intensive few hours of Sea-Trials, where engines and other equipment are tested to their working limits. As Operations Manager of the firm at the age of 27, a position obviously of great importance in the scheme of things, I conducted these trials myself, and completely to my own satisfaction. Of course final approval was signed for by a junior Army Contracting Officer.

By a happy coincidence, and by a bit of last-minute work on Saturday night, PBR 301 (not its real name, to protect the guilty) was finally made ready for trials at 10am the next morning, an auspicious time to invite a few friends for a Sunday outing. As none of the other Three Friends was "in-country" at the time, and none of my expatriate acquaintances was sufficiently level-headed or responsible, I decided instead to invite Mama and the Girls from the Pink Pussy Cat Bar as my guests. Since the Girls were very keen on water-skiing, I stowed a pair of skis aboard.

At 10 am sharp six of the Girls, but no Mama-San, showed up at the Cercle Nautique, in downtown Saigon. Two of the Girls arrived on a Honda 50 motorbike, already in their bikinis, with handbags over their bare shoulders. I looked up. The balcony of the Cercle was lined two-deep with Sunday revellers, agog at the sight of a gaggle of Girls in bikinis boarding a US Army war boat alongside the Club pontoon. I experienced a momentary pang of doubt about the whole business...I remembered that Captain Kraut (not his real name), our Contracting Officer, was a Member, and just possibly on leave on a Sunday, but dismissed the notion as unworthy of a Good Caper.

Away we went, the Girls and I, in PBR 301. We did a little water-skiing, with some risk of losing bikinis, and with much hilarity. I attended with diligence to the Sea Trials form, with numerous entries of engine revs, oil pressures, water temperatures, speed, etc, etc, all to my own satisfaction.

Some distance above the City, the palm-shrouded mouth of a small tributary beckoned to my exploring instincts. It was on the East bank, VC territory usually, but surely there would be some air patrols out soon, even on a Sunday? We surged up the river, our wash, at 20 knots, setting the palms and mangroves nodding and swaying in our wake.

We came around a forested bend at 22 knots, to find ourselves in a small hamlet of eight to ten houses. From both banks there projected rickety wooden jetties, each with the usual public toilet of rusty corrugated iron at its outer end. There was sufficient room between them for a PBR to pass. Now of course, a PBR at 22 knots creates quite a sizeable wake, more so than at full planing speed of 30 knots. I heard the Girls shrieking with glee, and looked back to see the jetty on our port side collapsing, from the shore end outwards. When the cascading ripple of destruction reached the toilet, it too collapsed, spilling first the door outwards, and then a little old lady, with her sarong around her ankles. Her naked, nut-brown, wrinkled body did a header into the water, her sarong streaming from her feet, in surprisingly graceful style, considering the alarming circumstances of her eviction.

I experienced another minor qualm about our expedition, but suppressed it with the thought that quite obviously the US Army would be blamed for Grandma's indignity and for the damage...after all, they were blamed for just about every mishap in the country. Some minutes later, the thought that Grandma might have an AK 47 rifle, even possibly a nephew on leave from the Viet Cong, on her balcony, plus the realization that we would certainly have to pass close under her balcony on the way out, caused another spasm of doubt...we were now somewhat up the proverbial creek!...never mind!...the dice were cast.

We surged further on up the winding creek, the surrounding jungle dancing spectacularly behind us. I worried briefly that we might be straying a bit far from the sanctuary of the main river, but with US air

patrols overhead there should be no danger?...although in truth I had neither seen nor heard any aircraft...and...if there were patrols they would surely have noticed our...somewhat unauthorised presence...all that swaying greenery, and that white bone in our teeth! For the first time I had to admit to myself that there were aspects to this caper that I had not previously considered...still, I had got away with worse before, all would be well, given my consistent good luck in evading responsibility for past disasters! The Girls, three of whom were draped over the barrels of the machine guns forward, and three who were with me in the wheelhouse, seemed a trifle bored, but definitely not apprehensive.

The Trials had gone well so far, now we were due to open up to 2800 rpm on both engines, for a theoretical full speed of 30 knots. Fortuitously at this point, we rounded a bend into a long, dead straight part of the river, more man-made canal. This was perfect for our full speed dash! It was also a wonderful opportunity to please one of the Girls, the best water-skier, who had not had a turn yet, and who had been sulking quietly. We stopped briefly to launch her on skis, and then away we went, out of the last of the jungle into the straight at full speed....well not quite full speed, with the drag of 40 kg. of Girl on skis behind, although it seemed much more in the narrow confines of the canal....great fun!

On one side there were rice paddies, the raised dikes forming the canal bank. The other side was all mangrove and jungle.

A long way ahead, I could see a group of figures, sitting on the dike...figures in black pyjamas...with conical hats. Now the Viet Cong wear such garb, almost as a uniform, but so do innocent farmers...

Our rapid approach revealed other interesting details, much faster than I can now recount them: the men, for they were all males, were sitting eating their lunch from rice-bowls in their hands. There was a distinct look of surprise, even confusion, in their faces. Their rifles, Kalashnikov AK 47's, standard VC small arms, were stacked 5 or 8 metres past them on the driest part of the dike, in incongruous, wonderfully old-fashioned, military style, leaning together, muzzle to muzzle.

Now I was surprised by their presence, but not so much that I was paralysed into inaction, instead I instinctively shoved both throttles to max, and the diesels howled away at 3100 rpm. I also instinctively hunched down with just my eyes showing over the fibreglass cowling.

The VC were also surprised at the sight of the hated enemy, in all his khaki OD and white Stars and Stripes, bearing down on them. I believe too that they were somewhat confused by the fact that a US Army patrol boat was manned solely by Vietnamese Girls, dressed only in very skimpy Bikinis, who were draped in almost phallic style over the dreaded machine guns, and even more so by the fact that there was another Girl on water-skis dragging behind. I rather think that poor Victor Charlie in those few brief seconds must have refused to believe what he was seeing! I firmly believe that his confusion was what saved our lives at that moment, because we were virtually on top of them, at 33 knots, 60 kmph, before they started leaping for their weapons.

Now the reader will readily believe that a PBR at 33 knots, in a narrow canal, creates an enormous wave behind her. In the instant after we had passed the enemy, I heard the Girls shrieking, not so much in glee this time. I dared not look back, but later the Girls, especially the Skier, described how our wake had actually washed some of Charlie off the dyke into the flooded rice paddy, and had collapsed their stack of rifles, thus further prolonging our survival.

Of course they got to their weapons, shook the water out, and opened up on our fast retreating shape. I could hear the continuous popping of their rifles above the whine of the engines. Fortunately, the AK 47 on full automatic is not an accurate weapon, and afterwards, when we inspected the hull, there was all sorts of damage, but not one bullet hole. Most fortunately, too, the brave Girl on skis held on and stayed up, right up to the time we vanished into jungle at the end of the straight. We stopped immediately to retrieve our skier, who grinned wanly as we pulled her hastily over the side.

Her brave smile, however forced, triggered a wave of euphoria in the rest of us, with much laughter and slapping of shoulders. We had, after all, escaped sudden death through our sheer effrontery! It did not take long for me to realise that mere effrontery would not get us back to Saigon past those hardened guerilla soldiers!

We motored aimlessly on up our blighted creek, quietly, so as not to arouse any more VC patrols, and slowly, to avoid agitating the greenery in a clear sign of our whereabouts to a now aroused enemy.

I wondered if we had any options at all. In the forepeak, I knew, there were two belts of ammunition for the twin Brownings. Neither the ammunition, nor the guns should have been on board a vessel sent for civilian contract, but...they were there.

For a brief, crazy minute I contemplated figuring out how to arm the guns...I knew there was a heap of operating manuals in the forepeak. I wondered if I could teach one of the Girls, the brave Skier would be the obvious choice, to brace her bare armpits against the huge shoulder brackets, and to aim the guns at the rice-paddy dike in continuous fire as we streaked at 33 knots back past the position of our VC friends....surely a valid military manoeuvre to keep the enemies' heads down? But this was suicidal nonsense! Victor Charlie would certainly have an unpleasant surprise for us on our return down the creek. He would not still be sitting eating his lunch! He would have summoned reinforcements, and heavier weapons, and they would be deployed in the text-book way they had learned for ambushing streaking PBR's...even one with a Girl in a Bikini manning the guns!

We were now surely up the creek without a paddle!...and headed towards a true Heart of Darkness. I wandered aimlessly, and miserably on, still under the comforting cover of a green canopy, but without any clever ideas...even abject surrender? In my youthful cockiness, I imagined that I could talk my way out of captivity. I was just a young civilian, a New Zealander (not at all a neutral unfortunately, NZ had an artillery unit involved in the war...perhaps I could masquerade as a Canadian, and speak a little French?), but I worried terribly about the fate of the Girls in Communist hands...collaboratueses would not be gently treated!

Around yet another dismal bend, and a fork in the river opened up *behind* us. I came to a stop to observe the ebb current. It flowed the same way, back towards the main river, in both my branch and in the fork behind us...a *distributary*, not a tributary! Such diverging channels are not uncommon in low-lying delta flood plains. It was smaller than our main branch, but a PBR could at least start down it. With luck, it might bypass the area where the VC would right now be setting up their gleeful ambush...with even more luck it might bypass Grandma, and her vengeful ambushade!

For many hours we pushed our way grimly down that blessed, narrow gutter, forcing mangrove and palm branches aside, slithering our way, our jets blasting at full throttle, over shallow mudbanks barely awash on the dropping tide, crashing against submerged logs, but never once seeing any part of our original Heart of Darkness River, nor any sign of the enemy: VC, or Grandma and friends!...nor indeed any sign of humanity...only the never changing face of the dark jungle, and swarms of mosquitoes as the light faded, feeding on six smooth, almost bare bodies, but not on my hairy one. Several times it was "all hands over the side!" in breast deep water to coax our boat over an obstruction. Our riverine exodus was becoming more reminiscent of "African Queen" than of "Apocolypse Now"...but I reckon I had a more nubile bunch of co-stars!...forgive me Katherine!

We emerged thankfully into the Saigon River just as the sky was turning red in the sunset, with one engine seized from ingestion of mud, with railings and topsides in picturesque ruin, and with a hole forward somewhere that gushed river into our bilges, in an amount just a little more than the capacity of the newly rebuilt bilge pumps. I drove our slowly sinking wreck onto a mudflat at our drydocks, and gave the keys to our night shift foreman.

That night, at the Pink Pussy Cat, I listened, along with a couple of bemused regular patrons, to the Girls' lively account of our caper...as told to Mamasan. It was all in rapid-fire Vietnamese of course, but I could follow most of the action from their vigorous hand and bodily actions: Grandma toppling from her seat of ease and her graceful riverine entry, flabbergasted Victor Charlie with his chop-sticks still in his open mouth, the "pom pom" of his belated response, the grim determination of our Skier to stay up despite Charlie's whining fusillade around her very ears, the relentless assault of the mosquitoes. Mama expressed in turn hilarity, incredulity, concern and a glare of outraged accusation...at me., but this last was followed by what looked like a conciliatory account from the Girls...they seemed to be defending me!

Finally Mama addressed me in her stacatto version of Saigon English, “ You Number Ten Crazy Boy! You Number One Lucky, Young Man! Old Woman can swim, no ploblem!...Number Ten Viet Cong waste many bullets, my Girls no damage, you no damage...you Number One Lucky! No ploblem!” As much as I appreciated her acquittal of my crazed depredations, there a was still the minor matter of one wrecked US Army Patrol Boat, and.... my God!...I remembered belatedly then that PBR 301 was due to be handed over to the Army tomorrow, that Captain Kraut would appear, punctually as always, at 10 am with a sheaf of documents! Mamasan saw my consternation, and softening in her occasional, motherly way, she enquired, “What ploblem?”

I explained my ploblem. Mama turned to the Girls. I witnessed a reasonably accurate “List of Discrepancies, PBR 301”, mimed by my loyal shipmates.

Mama regarded her favourite Crazy Boy with a thoughtful eye. “You give Captain different boat?” she asked.

Good Heavens! We did have another PBR almost finished, ahead of schedule, due for delivery in a week... “Yes, Mama, but that one is different, with different number, 283, different guns...”

“Never mind, Captain stupid, not know different boat, change numbers! Change guns! No ploblem!”

Mama had a point! But PBR 283 had at least a day of work to be ready, more if we should attempt to change numbers...the big white ones on the hull, serial numbers on engines, guns, radios, jet drives. And Captain Kraut was due to meet me at 10 am!

Here Mama displayed her true ingenuity. “Bring Captain here 10 ‘clock! I will, what you say?, fall in love...say nice words on Captain. Captain can have all nice things in Pink Pussy Cat, free drinks all day, free Girls, all Girls, all day! I close bar for other customs! Massage many Girls all day! He no care boat late! No ploblem!”

To my gratified surprise, Captain Kraut raised no objections to meeting over morning coffee in the Pink Cat. He even seemed to be honoured that he, a mere Captain, would be invited to such a respected institution. He showed no suspicion of Mama’s leering attention, nor reluctance as he was led by both hands away to the Cubicles, and to the undivided attention of the Girls of the Pink Pussy Cat. I felt complete confidence in Mama’s ability to keep our Contracting Officer occupied for the rest of the day. “No ploblem!”

I will not bore with tedious detail of the long day of hard labour I and my men devoted to our scam...save to express my admiration for our Chief Fitter, who deftly removed the rivets securing metal plates with identifying numbers, and drilled and hammered and soldered the plates back onto different pieces of equipment. I had to wonder if he had engaged in such work on a professional basis before? By comparison, my job, the change of the white numbers on the hull was simple.

At 8pm that night I rushed anxiously to the Bar. An enfeebled and bleached Contracting Officer was assisted by two Girls to a stool at the bar. Another Girl followed behind with his briefcase. He signed each of the acceptance papers with a shaky hand, including the check boxes containing serial numbers, and was supported back to the Cubicles. It proved to be not the last time that important documents were signed upon the carefully dried surface of that hallowed Bar.

I delivered a perfectly operational “PBR 301” to an Army crew the next morning. “PBR 283” was delivered, ten days later and four behind schedule, to a sober and recuperating Captain Kraut, who was completely satisfied with its very obvious operational readiness. I believe, indeed I am sure, that both boats served their crews well in their dangerous missions.

I also believe, I think I do, that no great harm was done through our “Number Ten Crazy” caper in the jungle...except to our Company finances, and richly deserved, you might say! As Mamasan observed: “Old woman can swim”, her dignity was somewhat salvaged by the grace of her headlong dive, the jetty and toilet were easily repaired I trust; and all blame was heaped upon the broad back of the US Army. Our common enemy wasted a lot of precious ammunition that had been carried with great labour on a human back many months along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and none of us or our friends was “damaged”! Captain

Kraut, during many hilarious nights later as an honoured patron in the Pink Cat, never showed any resentment, nor even guilt, about the...er...seminal part he had played in resolving the affair of PBR 301. To no one's great surprise, he married the Girl with lots of character, Tuyet (alias Samantha, our brave Skier), and took her back to San Francisco at the end of his tour of duty, with a Major's pip on his collar. I imagine Colonel Kraut (ret'd) and Grandma Samantha will together tell the story of the Caper in PBR 301 to their grandchildren. I would love to be there to listen to their different versions! I still receive Christmas cards from the loving couple, with many family details, but no mention of what really happened.

Of course I have pondered on the consequences should we not have been so lucky that day in our jungle river. If the VC fire had ignited our fuel tanks...well, c'etait la guerre indeed. But supposing Samantha had fallen off her skis on that breakneck dash down the straight? Would I have stopped to pick her up? Of course! Would we then have all been cut down by the enemy? Would we have been able to surrender before a bloodbath ensued? I still remember noting that there was a white towel, one of the Girls', hanging beside the engine controls...I might have been able to show a convincing white flag...but with what terrible consequences in captivity anyway? But...this Number Ten Crazy Boy was lucky...and Samantha is raising two teen-aged girls in 'Frisco...we were all lucky!

C'est la Guerre!...one might say.

55%

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