

Bringing Bodies Back along the Mekong

By Ken Kalish

[Taken from an Email Message Dated May 28, 2017.]

The remains of a lot of the missing are littered across the bottom of the Mekong branches. We had orders that whenever we encountered a floating corpse, we should look to see if it were an American uniform or wearing dog tags and if so, to try to recover it. We couldn't tell most of them, since we all turn black in the heat and so does our clothing. Those we couldn't identify we were to sink with gunfire so the corpses wouldn't wash up on a hamlet beach and spread pestilence. We sank a lot of floaters. The few we did recover had to be roped by a limb and stored on our aft step. We would steam back to base very slowly because the limbs would separate from the bodies at anything other than absolute slow. That's how we recovered a number of 9th ID troops. That's a black part of life on the river. Rotting corpses releasing gas and groaning on the way "home." It gave me a great respect for the supply types who had to bag them and take them up for ID.

The Nightmare of the Mekong

A book by Terry Sater, 1968

Received in a message from Ken Kalish, May 17, 2018

"The monsoons were in full swing, by May 1st, adding to our daily misery. On combat missions during the day, we'd be in our gun mounts, wearing heavy, sweaty, stinking flak jackets, soaked to the skin, with rain blowing into the well deck, coxswain's flat and dripping into the gun mounts. During the night, it brought a wet chill.

Around dawn, on Wednesday, May 1st, the Viet Cong fired twenty-five rockets at the ships of the MRB. The Colleton, APL-26 "The Apple," "Tom Green County," and the repair ship, "Askari," all reported near misses. There were no casualties. The attack was launched minutes after Dong Tam was hit by five 180MM mortar and seventy-five recoilless rifle rounds, wounding six. The ships returned fire. A helo strafed the enemy positions.

Later that day, a five-man "Bushmaster" ambush team of the 3/47th Infantry was conducting operations, about four miles from My Tho. At 0145, they were approaching to board ASPB's, to return to the MRB. Suddenly, they were attacked by Viet Cong. As the soldiers hurried to get to the boats, wading diagonally from the bank, with their weapons, gear and ammo, the river bank suddenly dropped off and they disappeared into deep water. The body of one of the soldiers was found that morning, at 1028. The bodies of the remaining four brave men were recovered by PBR's, on May 3rd. Once again, the Mekong claimed the lives of our men. At times, it seemed the Mekong was more deadly than the River Styx, the river of Greek mythology, a deity that formed the boundary between Earth and the Underworld."