Bormann's BANDITS

Team 5

"We heard a loud explosion and saw a geyser of water about a quarter of a mile away, then another about 50 yards closer, and another 50 yards closer. We were under attack."

Stephen W. Doak, ship fitter, Petty Officer 3rd Class; 2nd Class Navy diver 1968-72. Harbor Clearance Unit One, Subic Bay, Philippines and later Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Attached to Mobile Dive Team 5, rotated from Subic Bay to South Vietnam on four separate 89-day TDYs.

US Air Force September 1979 to March 1997 special agent (major) Air Force Office of Special Investigations, retired

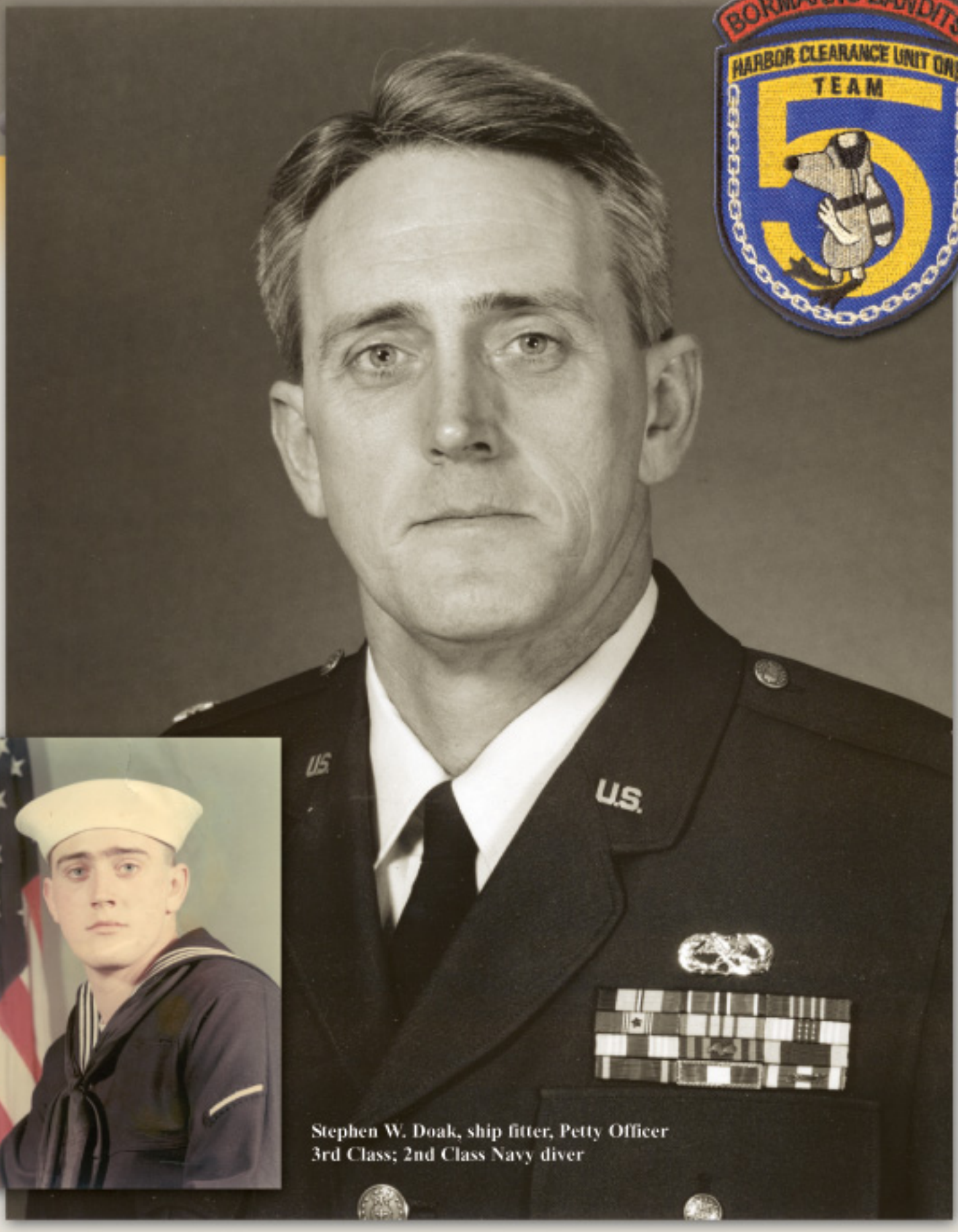
After surviving Navy boot camp at Great Lakes, Ill., and the Navy's Salvage Diving School at Subic Bay, Philippines, I found myself sitting at anchor on a riverboat in the middle of one of the many wide, muddy rivers in the Mekong Delta of South Vietnam. Perhaps 19 years of age and just a short time removed from a sheltered life spent in Central Illinois, I grew up more interested in girls, sports and cars than with the thought of ever serving in Vietnam. Hell, I couldn't even find Vietnam on a map!

So much for being aware! The river's name escapes me, as do the names of the numerous LSTs we used for re-supply, the hundreds of Vietnamese villages we traversed en route to the next wreckage site, and ditto for the many firebases we stopped at, to beg for a hot meal and perhaps a hot shower.

I was attached to Dive Team 5 of Harbor Clearance Unit One. We came in from Subic Bay and stayed for 89 days and then rotated out . . . only to rotate back in-country when the requisite number of days had passed. From what I understand, the Pentagon only had to report the number of full-time soldiers to the White House. Full time meant 90 days or more. Using units like ours allowed more fighting men in the theater without alarming the public of a buildup of troops. Pretty slick, huh?

Our fleet of salvage boats was varied. Some were built from the ground up as salvage craft and included machine-gun turrets, a small galley and sleeping quarters. Others were not as fancy, such as our converted LCM-8s. They were adapted for lifting by fabricating A-frames out of large I-beams and mounting winches and other gear to the deck. Sleeping was in racks, welded bunkbed-style, on the lower deck area and eating was C-rats or LRPS, using water boiled on a stove or warmed on the diesel engines. The boats usually worked in pairs for safety, but occasionally picked up escort boats if we were traveling to areas known for ambushes or recent enemy activities, or both. On this operation, we were to be escorted by 10 gunboats manned by members of the South Vietnamese Navy. The numbers alone made me nervous. The more escort boats . . . the hotter the area.

This particular mission was to leave the main river and snake up a small tributary that held our treasure . . . a Monitor



Stephen W. Doak, ship fitter, Petty Officer 3rd Class; 2nd Class Navy diver

gunboat that had been sunk three months before during an ambush. The Monitor was a particular prize for us to recover because they were the most powerful, heavily armed craft in our inventory. A typical Monitor had a 40mm cannon turret in the front, a mortar pit amid ships and a 20mm above the con. Most had .50-calibers mounted on tripods on each side. The recovery and refurbishment of a Monitor added up to a huge savings of time and money for the Navy.

As our crew sat on deck that evening talking of the upcoming morning, I saw the armada of boats sitting at anchor around us and heard the voices of their crews as they settled in for the evening. One of the patrol boats would circle the group during the night to ensure that no one approached from the shore and to keep an eye out for explosive-laden sappers who may float down with the current, hidden in a patch of branches. Each boat would have its normal watches throughout the night, rotating every two hours to ensure fresh sets of eyes also were searching the water for sappers and to be ready to start the engines and weigh anchor in case if emergency. As we went below, we were reminded by the red-tracer fire coming from the shore that we were not alone. The tracers occasionally hit an armored boat and glanced off into the darkness.

Due to the danger of ambush, the Americans were spread out among the armada. At O dark thirty, the Americans dispersed among the South Vietnamese craft . . . usually two or three per boat. Once all were on board, we formed up and made a beeline for the tributary. The tributary was too narrow for anything but line formation and, to my dread, my boat was last in line. Now, there always has been discussion about which would be more vulnerable . . . the first in line or the last. Obviously, if the enemy could take out the first, the others would have nowhere to go to escape. On the other hand, I can tell you that being last in line really sucked! There is no feeling like being a sitting duck . . . especially when the boat developed rudder-control problems and it went into a zig-zag pattern from bank to bank as the engineer tried frantically to give it some control so we could catch up with the rest of the line. Yes, the line kept going and left us by ourselves! I recited Hail Marys galore until we eventually caught up. We got all the way to the wreckage site without an ambush or hostile fire.

Once there, we were happily surprised to see some support for our precarious situation. A covey of helicopter gunships came in and laid down a barrage of rocket and mini-gun fire . . . followed by a helicopter landing of South Vietnamese regulars to occupy and protect us from one bank, and a group of Provincial soldiers came to camp out and watch our other side. We slept soundly that night feeling sure we were well taken care of. We started the salvage operations at first light. It took us perhaps two to three hours to locate the wreckage and determine a plan of attack on the salvage. We got our two boats positioned over the wreck and sent down the first diver about midday. Within 20 minutes, we heard a loud explosion and saw a geyser of water about a quarter of a mile away, then another about 50 yards closer and another 50 yards closer. We were being targeted by someone with a mortar, and the rounds were being walked down onto our exposed position. Needless to say, the diver was brought up at the first sign of trouble as underwater explosions can be deadly to a diver. We cut all ropes holding us to the wreckage and hauled butt in opposite directions. After a long discussion among the officers, they decided to leave the wreckage and get the heck out of Dodge. Because it was obvious the bad guys knew we were there, it didn't seem real smart to go back and try again.

The trip back out was totally different from the run in. First, we left in broad daylight instead of under cover of darkness and, secondly, we had no benefit of surprise. So, we hauled butt out at flank speed. No pretense of stealth; no need for being quiet. All the boats in line were cleared to fire off the port side to rake the shoreline. This tactic was intended to deter the enemy from popping up and firing B-40 rockets. These rockets were shoulder-fired, like bazookas, and were the most effective weapon used against river boats. The rounds would skip along the water and explode against the hull, causing gaping holes. The rate of fire was constant as 12 river boats kept raking the banks. I heard a couple of loud explosions, and the volume of fire increased to a deafening roar. I could tell the stuff had hit the fan!! I heard several other explosions . . . louder and seemingly closer to us. My partner and I stood up and put our rifles on the deck to add our M-16s to the fray, but we were both knocked backward onto the lower deck as our boat took a B-40 rocket round in the side. The boat's armor took the brunt of the explosion, but my partner had taken some nasty shrapnel in the face, neck and arms . . . any place not covered by his armored vest. I spent the rest of the battle tending to his wounds and praying our boat would survive long enough to get us the hell out of there. We eventually made it to the main river where we licked our wounds and did a head count. Two South Vietnamese sailors were killed when a B-40 rocket pierced the side of their 40mm cannon turret and ricocheted around the inside until they had to be scraped out of the turret with a shovel. The only American injured was my partner who was taken by Medivac to repair his shrapnel wounds. Even he would joke later that one of the pieces of shrapnel took off most of an expensive tattoo of a black panther on his upper left arm.

Well, we didn't get our Monitor, but another wreck waited for us around the bend . . . and another after that. It has taken me many years to realize that, although I treated each wreck like a sunken, twisted piece of metal . . . a job to be done, there were real stories of life and death in each wreck. Tragic dramas of ambushes, sinking ships, stark fear, blood and death. The locations of most of these wrecks are so isolated that it is sad they may never be found and will forever hold the memories of American sailors who served and died for freedoms never realized.

One of the best things a person can have-up his sleeve is a funny bone