

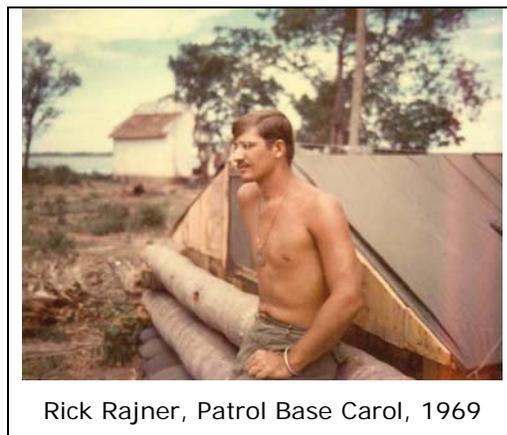
PATROL BASE CAROL

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In May 1969 the 1st Battalion (Mechanized) 50th Infantry's Short Range Ambush Platoon (SRAP) established a tiny forward base at BR965828.



Officially designated "Patrol Base Carol" the small, lightly fortified encampment on the tip of a peninsula jutting a kilometer into Dam Tra O met a number of military requirements. It placed an American unit in a strategically advantageous position with a commanding view of more than twenty square kilometers of the battalion's area of operations. It also put the Short Range Ambush Platoon near a central point in the enemy's logistics system, denying the NVA/VC in the area ready access to an important conduit connecting the base areas hidden in the inland mountain ranges with the wealth of rice and seafood supplied by Communist sympathizers in the coastal lowlands. SRAP was also charged with patrolling the lake in daytime, engaging in a continuous search for South Vietnamese draft dodgers and deserters, persons without proper documents issued by the Saigon Government, enemy soldiers attempting to disguise themselves by wearing civilian clothing during a daytime lake crossing, and smuggled weapons and equipment bound for the enemy arsenal via coastal shipping. A key component in SRAP's mission was springing surprise attacks on enemy forces, and the small unit conducted scores of day and night ambushes originating from Patrol Base Carol. SRAP operated from the base until the end of August when a platoon of airborne troopers from the 503rd Infantry assumed control of the outpost.



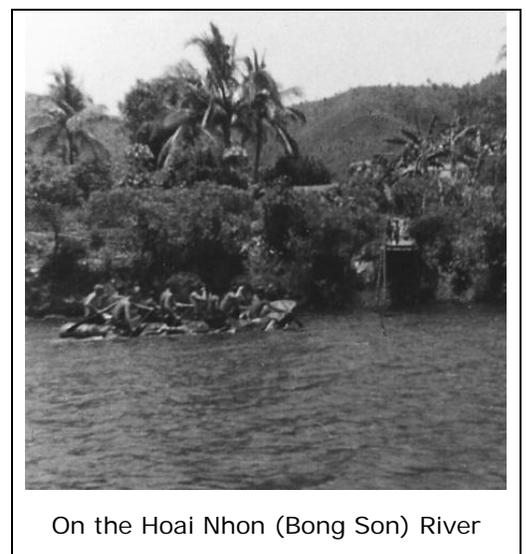
Rick Rajner, Patrol Base Carol, 1969

SRAP began preparing for amphibious operations in the Dam Tra O area a few days before helicopters delivered the platoon and its equipment to the peninsula. First, Lt. Harper briefed the unit on its new assignment, presenting an overview of the tactics, terrain, boats and objectives. Second, he reminded the platoon's volunteers that any

soldier who no longer wished to remain with SRAP could return to his parent company with no questions asked. He ended the meeting by announcing that the new gear required for the operation would be delivered to LZ Uplift the following day and the men were to assemble in front of the platoon's billet at 08:30 the following morning. A few individuals left the platoon that day. Rumor, that ancient component of Army life, alleged that some of these men could not swim and others were dismayed by anti-ballistic qualities of rubber boats. Both reasons made sense to those who stayed; the depth of the enemy's field of fire combined with the fact that SRAP, accustomed to stealth, was now conducting operations where its volunteers were frequently silhouetted against the horizon. Building upon other aspects of that reality, the boats wouldn't stop buckshot, and anyone who couldn't swim stood a fair chance of drowning before he succumbed to what might be a minor arm or leg wound on dry land.

Lt. Harper began the next day's activities with a brief lecture describing the capabilities of the rubber boats and the outboard motors that powered the watercraft. He also explained that many of our patrols would be conducted using human power to propel the boats to their destination and instructed the men on the proper techniques for paddling in a straight line, paddling against winds and water currents and making sudden turns. During a question-and-answer period that lasted more than two hours the Platoon Leader gave clear instructions on the use of outboard motors, paddles, life preservers, lifesaving procedures, tactics afloat and a dozen other topics that concerned the volunteers. After trucks delivered the equipment to LZ Uplift the platoon unloaded and stored most of the gear for future use. Next, SRAP members took two boats, some air pumps and a dozen paddles into a dusty field. After inflating the watercraft the platoon spent the afternoon familiarizing themselves with newly-established procedures in preparation for the next day's field exercise.

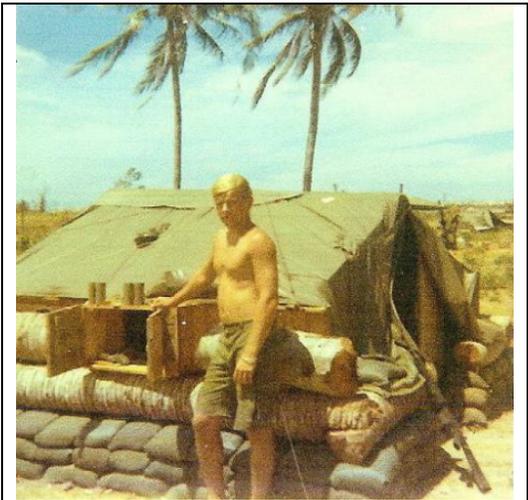
The following morning deuce-and-a-half trucks stood idle while SRAP loaded two 15-man rubber boats, twenty paddles, and twenty-two soldiers into the cargo beds for a trip to the Hoai Nhon River, a few miles to the North of LZ Uplift. A small enemy ambush a few clicks North of the LZ, which included a patch of crystallized tear gas in the road, added a little excitement to the day's activities.



On the Hoai Nhon (Bong Son) River

Aside from a few ear drums that received minor damage from the closely-packed SRAP members' return fire, no one was injured. The truck drivers accelerated out of the kill zone and delivered the platoon to the river. The field exercise, which included a lot of strenuous paddling up and down the Hoai Nhon, proceeded without further incident and the unit returned to LZ Uplift in late afternoon. SRAP devoted much of the next three days to modifying the boats, performing maintenance on the outboards and learning more about the nature of amphibious operations. The men shaped and sanded thick plywood platforms to lash to the bow of three boats as a base for pedestals which would support M-60 machine guns. After checking to assure that each platform extended just beyond the curvature of the craft, they drilled holes for the ropes that would secure the device to the boat. The team that was assigned to work with the battalion's mechanics returned from the shop areas with pedestals welded to a steel base plate with pre-drilled holes. These men secured the innovative machine gun mounts to the plywood with bolts, centering them to provide future gunners with ample space for broad sweeping fire. Two coats of paint sealed the wood and metal against the elements. When preparations were complete, the platoon deployed to the tip of the peninsula.

After unloading their boats and other gear from the helicopters, SRAP set up security for the second lift. These helicopters brought sandbags, shovels, sledge hammers, axes, barbed wire, fence posts, trip flares, heavy machine guns and a large quantity of ammunition and explosives. By day's end some wire was strung around the perimeter and a few crude fighting positions were prepared. A mortar track from one of the rifle companies drove in and set up on one side of the perimeter. Patrols began the next day and any man not on patrol or on watch spent his time building bunkers, rifle pits, clearing fields of fire or stringing concertina. Within two weeks Patrol Base Carol evolved from a brushy spit of land to an easily defended, if somewhat small, firebase.



Andy Soltis outside the "hootch" he built with Rick Rajner at Patrol Base Carol

During the three month-plus operation, SRAP conducted day and night patrols both water-borne and amphibious in nature. Some were ambushes, some were security patrols and others were interdiction patrols. On occasion the boats and crews served as

a water-borne blocking force supporting a rifle company sweep near the lake shore. Most of the patrols consisted of a sortie from Patrol Base Carol aboard one or more boats that lasted several hours and produced nothing more than a tired group of soldiers and a brief "no contact" summary radioed to the 1/50th Tactical Operations Center. A few patrols had a memorable aspect, like a detainee with a recently-healed bullet wound or a small amount of contraband seized during the search of an intercepted Vietnamese boat. A small number of sorties received sniper fire or other brief excitement. One boat struck an underwater explosive device, shearing off the lower portion of the outboard motor and inflicting minor injuries on its occupants. Less than a dozen patrols engaged the enemy for more than a minute, but the tedious everyday actions were the very essence of the operation; to deny the enemy free use of Dam Tra O and its tributaries.

The most routine patrols were daytime search and seize missions involving one rubber boat that motored around a particular sector of the lake stopping any Vietnamese craft that caught the patrol leader's eye. On most occasions the infantrymen searched in vain, finding nothing more than evidence of the local commerce between seacoast and inland villages. In simplest terms, the men saw a lot of bananas, coconuts, fish, rice and fowl on their way to market. There was one slight advantage to these patrols; participating in the exchange. On a semi-regular basis SRAP members supplemented their rations with fish (usually Asian perch or bream) shellfish, ducks, chickens or eggs. On other occasions a bunch of bananas or a sack of rice added variety to the C-Rations and LRP Rations (Food Packet, Long Range Patrol) that were the daily fare at Patrol Base Carol. Morning and afternoon patrols motoring out from the patrol base usually consisted of three to five SRAP men in a single boat equipped with a twenty-five horsepower outboard engine and an M-60 machine gun. A PRC/25 radio lashed to the center rubber seat provided communications with Patrol Base Carol and the battalion Tactical Operations Center. Rifleman positioned on the port and starboard observed 140 degree arcs from dead astern to the M-60's field of fire from the bow platform. The final member of the patrol sat on the plywood transom piloting the craft with his M-16 slung at the ready on a strap around his neck and shoulder. Upon overtaking a Vietnamese sampan, the pilot brought the rubber boat alongside, allowing the nearest American a quick view of the local craft and its contents. Gestures accompanied by a few words communicated basic commands to the indigenous boat's occupants instructing them to uncover any containers or portions of the hull hidden by

mats or netting. Prompt compliance followed by a cursory check of the identity card issued by the Republic of Viet Nam to all adult citizens earned a smile and a wave off from the SRAP patrol. Any variation from the routine subjected the Vietnamese to a boarding and/or thorough inspection of everything.

The prospect of action made the patrol a memorable event. If anything seemed awry the patrol leader ordered the nearest rifleman to thoroughly search the craft's contents. On several occasions the rifleman found items not permitted under our rules of engagement. The list of prohibited items ranged from any object that was unmistakably useful to the enemy, to goods that were obviously pilfered from the U.S logistics chain or consigned to the black market by unscrupulous GIs. As a result, SRAP seized a wide spectrum of articles.



Inside "hooch" of Andy Soltis and Rick Rajner

In one instance, a bottle of Scotch Whiskey, two cases of American beer, several cans of North Vietnamese rations and a case of American C-Rations were confiscated and the sole person in the boat was detained for transport to LZ Uplift. Another boat contained hand grenades, some AK-47 ammunition, a few pounds of rice and some documents. South Vietnamese National Police Officers assigned to duty at Patrol Base Carol interrogated the detainees and catalogued the contraband before helicopters picked up the suspects for transport to higher authorities. Items of interest were not always shipped to the rear areas. For some odd reason most of the alcoholic beverages, food items, and enemy weapons or equipment that had value in the unofficial underground economy of the infantry never made the trip to battalion headquarters. Instead, a large proportion was either consumed by SRAP or traded to supply sergeants for extra ponchos, 30-round M-16 magazines, and spare socks, or to mess sergeants for cans of dehydrated shrimp, corned beef, or fruit cocktail. Less popular items were bartered for loaves of bread or canned vegetables. Certain SRAP volunteers who made trips to the rear en route to an R&R or a medical appointment were cautioned to conduct unofficial trading with artillery units at LZ Uplift and airmen at Phu Cat Airbase. Perhaps the battalion's sergeants had a steady supply of the frequently confiscated items through more regulated channels and might take offense at any attempts to disrupt their souvenir

collecting, or it may have been more advantageous to barter with units that had less access to captured gear.

Some Vietnamese boats were able to outrun or evade SRAP's rubber boats, suggesting that they had incentive to slip away from the patrols. The battalion countered these enemy tactics by issuing SRAP an airboat in June. This swift craft, designed for use in the Florida Everglades and modified for military use, proved to be a useful weapon in SRAP's arsenal, but placed the men at additional risk. Powered by a radial engine, the shallow-draft watercraft could reach speeds of over twenty-five miles per hour. This made the airboat an ideal solution to the problem of dispatching a reaction force to a patrol receiving enemy fire. It could speed to any position on Dam Tra O within ten minutes, but its rigid fiberglass hull made a poor machine gun platform and the obvious threat the speedy craft presented to enemy operations made it a "bullet magnet". The airboat also required considerable maintenance. The radial engine's surfaces collected rust as hot parts interacted with the salt air that hung above the briny lake. The engine burned oil at a remarkable rate and a tank of avgas was barely sufficient to fuel the boat for a routine patrol. Within six weeks the airboat's systems failed. The cause remains a mystery to this day. On its last patrol the airboat drew enemy fire on a high speed run through the Song Chau Truc, the lake's outlet to the South China Sea. One possibility is that a bullet nicked the engine, causing a loss of coolant that led to over-heating and failure. Another suggestion involved a failed seal in the engine housing that led to a loss of oil pressure. Either event could have caused one of the cylinder heads to explode, sending the evidence into the smoking mist trailing behind the boat. In any case, the air boat was picked up by a sky crane-type helicopter the next day and never returned to Patrol Base Carol during the remainder of SRAP's tenure at the outpost.

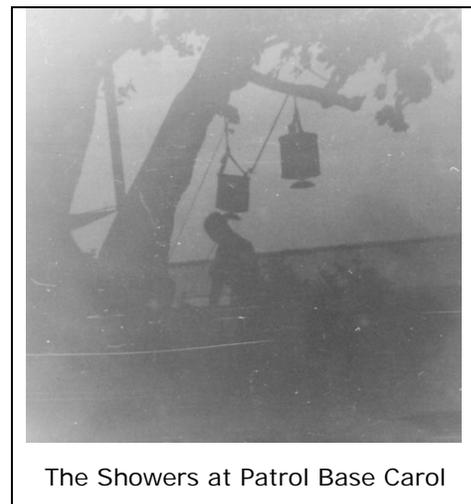
SRAP conducted a number of ambushes while operating from Patrol Base Carol. The simplest were hasty maneuvers whereby a rubber boat on patrol would slip behind one of the many fishing weirs and surprise a passing Vietnamese craft as it passed through an opening in the weir. With guns at the ready the American patrol had a clear advantage and could search the sampan without giving the occupants a chance to hide any suspicious cargo. The fishing weirs, which were constructed of reeds and bamboo, reached from the lake's bottom to about three feet above the surface. They allowed water to pass through and nets laid near gaps in the structures captured fish. The height of the weirs allowed nighttime waterborne ambushes to avoid silhouetting

against the skyline, even on moonlit nights. Waterborne ambushes produced a little bit of contraband, but only sparked a couple of engagements.

Amphibious ambushes, consisting of patrols paddling across the lake and setting up at likely locations beyond the shoreline, brought only a little more action. These patrols paddled across the lake under cover of darkness and some returned to Patrol Base Carol before daybreak. Other ambush patrols remained in position after sun-up, watching for any enemy soldiers who might risk walking back to their units in daylight. A small number of the amphibious ambushes made contact with the enemy after daybreak. A brief fire fight left two SRAP volunteers with serious injuries on 28 June 1969, but the rest of the engagements were even shorter exchanges of gunfire that produced little more than enemy blood trails and abandoned equipment.

Aside from the frequent patrols and the isolation from other units, life at Patrol Base Carol was reasonably pleasant. When soldiers are given an opportunity to improve their lot they exert considerable effort to live comfortably. Within a month of arriving on the peninsula the platoon enjoyed a number of amenities not normally available to other troops in the field. A large container filled with lake water and left to sit in the sun for a few hours assured a man a hot shower in the early evening.

For those who preferred a bath, a few pounds of explosives excavated a swimming hole in the lake near the East edge of the perimeter. An outhouse framed in planks salvaged from Bangalore torpedo crates and screened with burlap sandbags featured a real toilet seat. Of course, this meant that the duty roster assigned enlisted men to work as first cook in the flies' mess hall. This chore involved dragging the receptacle (one third of a steel drum) which rested underneath the



The Showers at Patrol Base Carol

seat, out through the hinged panel in the rear of the outhouse to a safe location, pouring diesel fuel into fecal stew and stirring with a fence post while it burned to a lump of ash. Nearly every man had an individual or dual sleeping shelter surrounded by sandbags and covered with a poncho or two. Some structures were quite elaborate. Even so, the more ambitious men made continuous improvements to their dwellings, using ammunition crates discarded by the mortar crews. The efforts invested in erecting secure shelters were well rewarded when a typhoon swept through Central Viet Nam that Summer. One

fire team on the South side of the perimeter erected an open-air kitchen near the bunker and rifle pits. A simple plank table with a plank bench along one side made it possible for three men to eat meals in a more pleasant fashion. A chair fashioned from mortar crates usually sat at the head of the table when the men gathered for a communal meal. At other times the comfortable wooden chair sat behind the .50 caliber machine gun atop the defensive position's bunker. Few other soldiers in Viet Nam that year had such a comfortable place to pass their hours on nighttime guard duty.



"The Kitchen"
(Before final remodeling!)

The number of SRAP volunteers manning Patrol Base Carol varied over the course of the operation. As some soldiers rotated home at the end of their tour, others came forth as replacements for the men who had served their time. At least one man who had previously joined the platoon and left, returned while the unit was assigned to the peninsula. There were three different platoon leaders and three different platoon sergeants between mid-May and the end of August. There were also casualties. One SRAP volunteer died while en route to LZ Uplift when the Alpha Company track he was riding on hit a mine. In addition to the SRAP machine gunner KIA, the record lists at least one other soldier killed and five wounded in the explosion. A machine gunner and an attached Forward Observer were disabled in a firefight on 28 June. A couple of others acquired illnesses that led to their evacuation to the rear area. In addition to the men of SRAP it is important to mention the mortar crews assigned to the peninsula as part of the operation. These squads from Alpha Company and Bravo Company contributed to the success and security of the operation, sharing both the hazards and benefits of the deployment.

Alas, all good things come to an end. Rumors concerning the battalion's relocation to a new Area of Operations began circulating in late July. One suggested a move to Bao Loc or Ban Me Thuot, another proposed a return to An Khe. The rumor mill generated new locations during the first three weeks of August; Pleiku, Qui Nhon, Chu Lai, and Song Mao were mentioned. Then, near the end of the month, Lt. Carter gathered the platoon for a briefing which supplied the official word: Phan Thiet. He explained that SRAP was to be disbanded when the battalion moved southward at the

end of the month and all men were to return to their assigned rifle companies. A few days later the platoon packed its rucksacks and prepared to depart the patrol base. Most of the platoon maintained security while two boats made a trip across to the eastern shore to

pick up the advance party of airborne troopers who were ordered to assume control of

Patrol Base Carol. When the boats returned to the peninsula Lt. Carter called for extraction and SRAP departed from the place that the platoon had built, improved and defended for more than three months.

There were rumors that the patrol base was attacked a few weeks after SRAP left the peninsula. While this is quite possible, it may be a product of the rumor mill...if the rumor is true.



Nightfall at Patrol Base Carol



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