Friendly Fire

by Captain Alex Larzelere (Ret), '58

"Friendly Fire" is an excerpt from ***The Coast Guard at War in Vietnam 1965-1975,*** *the first book devoted to the Service's role in Vietnam.*

USCGC Point Welcome (WPB 82329) came about on the morning of 11 August 1966 and headed south, away from the line dividing the waters of North and South Vietnam. The cutter was on the second day of a three day patrol in the northernmost coastal area, 1Al. She ran without lights, making turns for eight knots. Black seas were calm; a warm breeze blew from the east.

Point Welcome's executive officer, LTJG Ross Bell, watched the green glow of the coast rotate on the scope of the relative-bearing radar as the cutter turned. He spent most of his time watching the Cua Viet River. Two unlighted contacts loitered just inside the mouth of the river, four and a half miles to the west. Bell waited for the suspicious vessels to clear the river and head south along the coast. At 0300, one of the contacts returned upriver--the other remained at the mouth.

Bell glanced at his watch; it was 0330. He looked forward to being relieved and getting some sleep. Suddenly, two illumination flares popped in the sky off the port beam, 500 yards to seaward. With the United States in control of skies over Vietnam, he knew that the flares, hanging above, were from U.S. or VNAF aircraft. When he heard jet engines approaching, he felt something was wrong. The engines got louder and he hit the General Quarters alarm. His hand had just reached the microphone of the radio, when .50-caliber slugs came ripping through the aluminum pilothouse. Above the sound of tearing metal, Bell yelled into the microphone, "Article. This is Article India. Am being illuminated and attacked. I believe Vietnamese aircraft. We have received hits." Then, a bullet tore off the front of his left foot and the windshield blew out in front of him. With equipment shattering around him, he heard the Coastal Surveillance Center (CSC) acknowledge his message. The radio went dead.

On the first pass, two cans of gasoline for the cutter's small boat were set ablaze on the stern. Bell said, "I was absolutely amazed at how the crew responded. It was 0330 in the morning and they were up and at their stations in ninety seconds. They had the fire out in less than a minute. It was so fast." Engineman second class Jerry Phillips, who had been on deck getting some air before going on watch, was hit on the first pass. He died while Seaman O'Connor tried to stop the blood flowing from a gaping abdominal wound.

The second plane roared in a minute after the first, firing 20mm cannons. Bell said 20mm guns did the most damage. LTJG) David C. Brostrom, the cutter's commanding officer, made it to the bridge. He was reaching for the Aldis lamp to signal the aircraft when he took two 20mm rounds in his midsection; he died instantly. Bell said, "I remember getting hit again. I was picked up, spun around, and then dropped to the deck. I reached up for the chart table. My shoulder went up, but my left hand stayed in my lap. I remember thinking to myself, 'You're really screwed up.' Still, I felt no pain." There was smoke in the pilothouse from detonating 20mm rounds. Bell said, "There was a heavy smell and my ears were ringing, but I don't remember seeing any flashes."

On the second pass, Point Welcome's bridge was hit and all three men on watch were all wounded. All communications and navigation equipment was knocked out, but the engine controls and steering continued to function.

Chief boatswain's mate Pat Patterson, next senior in command after Bell, made it to the bridge and took control of the cutter. Pushing the engine controls forward, he began evasive maneuvers at full speed. He spun the wheel, twisting and turning to avoid the attacking aircraft. Patterson tried to get out from under the illumination, but the forward air controller, call sign "Blind Bat," in an Air Force C-130 Hercules high above, continued to drop flares. A B-57 Canberra and two F-4C Phantom IIs attacked repeatedly, sending bullets and armor-piercing rockets ripping through the cut-

ter.

Bell was lying on the deck in a pool of blood, drifting in and out of consciousness. A large part of his upper left arm was shot away, a round had sliced open his thigh, he had a three-inch gash from shrapnel in his back over his spine, his head was hit, and part of his left foot was gone. He said, "When I heard the aircraft coming around for another attack, I would bat Patterson on the leg and he would cut the wheel hard. Old Pat really did a number. I remember telling him, 'Take us down to the junk base (South Vietnamese Coastal Group).'" During the attack, the bridge was wiped out; all three men on watch were hit. All communications, lights, and navigation equipment were destroyed, but steering and engine controls continued to function. The engines never stopped and none of the hits penetrated the hull below the waterline. The ferocious attack by the three aircraft continued unabated.

The first two divisions of 82-foot Coast Guard cutters sailed from Subic Bay in the Philippines to Vietnam in July 1965. They commenced patrolling immediately.

Bell said, "We were under attack for almost 50 minutes. They fired thousands of rocket, 20mm, and .50-caliber rounds at us." All during the attack, the U.S. flag continued to fly from the mast of the 82-foot cutter.

At 0415, *Point Welcome* grounded on the sandbar off the junk base and heeled over to one side. Patterson got all the wounded on deck and into life jackets. Every one of the cutter's eleven-man crew, the South Vietnamese Navy liaison officer, and Tim Page, a British journalist, had been hit. Patterson paired up lesser wounded men with more seriously injured and ordered the cutter abandoned. Survivors went over the side in an attempt to swim to the beach. "When we got in the water," Bell said, "They opened up on us from the junk base. Then the VC on the other side of the river began firing at us. We were caught in a cross fire. Then it all stopped at once. Everything just stopped."

When *USCGC Point Caution* (WPB 82301) heard *Point Welcome's* brief transmission to the CSC, she left her patrol area and headed north at full speed. Bell said, "I remember trying to swim with my one good arm. Then *Caution's* boat picked me up. I knew I was messed up, but I didn't know how bad. The last thing I remember was *Caution's* XO giving me shots of morphine in my thighs." Junks from Coastal Group 11 came out to help pick up survivors and the base fired illumination rounds from mortars to assist in recovering the men in the water. The wounded were taken to the junk base where they were evacuated by helicopter. *Point Welcome* was riddled. She had nine rocket holes in her main deck, five to nine inches in diameter, but her hull was intact and her main engines were still running. At 0630, *Point Welcome* sailed back to Danang under her own power.

Bell woke up in the Marine Corps field hospital at Phu Bail "I don't know how many days later," he said. "I had over 200 wire sutures holding me together. I looked like a porcupine. I have no idea how many regular stitches I had."

It took three months to repair *Point Welcome* When the cutter was ready for operations, members of the crew repainted their emblem, "Wile E. Coyote," on the wing of the bridge. Only this time, the coyote had a broken and bandaged tail.

"Friendly Fire" is an excerpt from *The Coast Guard at War in Vietnam 1965-1975*, the first book devoted to the Service's role in Vietnam. The author, retired Coast Guard Captain Alex Larzelere, combines action narratives with historical detail to describe the varied missions of the nation's smallest armed force during the War. Coast Guardsmen served with the Navy, Army, Air Force and State Department in Vietnam. The book, written from scores of personal interviews, extensive research, and author's Vietnam experiences, is published by Naval Institute Press and may be ordered by calling (800) 233-8764.

Cutters, attached to the Navy in Operation Market Time, interdicted infiltration trawlers and junks, disrupted enemy supply lines on rivers and canals, and supported actions ashore with naval gunfire. Explosive Loading Detachments and Port Security personnel assigned to the Army ensured an uninterrupted flow of arms, ammunition, and supplies through Vietnamese ports. A Coast Guard Merchant Marine Detail was attached to the Embassy to resolve merchant ship problems. Helicopter pilots flew rescue missions behind enemy lines with the Air Force's Jolly Green Giants.

At the request of the Pentagon, the Coast Guard constructed a LORAN navigation system to provide accurate positioning data for air operations over North and South Vietnam. The electronic system--stations and towers constructed in remote areas of Vietnam and Thailand--was on-air in eight months. Buoy tenders and aids to navigation details ranged the length of the South Vietnamese coast, providing navigation support for military and merchant shipping. The book describes the Coast Guard's initial involvement, in-country operations, and turnover of missions and resources to the Vietnamese.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CAPT Alex Larzelere is a 1958 graduate of the Coast Guard Academy. He commanded two patrol boats with the Coast Guard's first deployment to Vietnam. During his career he commanded five cutters and served as the first Coast Guard Aide to the President. He is also a graduate of the Naval War College, and the National War College. While a Senior Fellow at the National Defense University, he wrote a book about the 1980 Cuban Boatlift. His awards include the Legion of Merit from the President and the Bronze Star Medal with Combat "V."