

The Harbor Tug with more lives than a Cat by Matty (Vanuci) Veneziano MV1949@aol.com

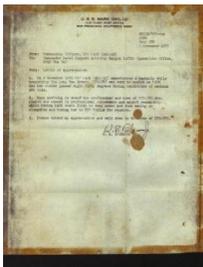


Not sleek and fast like many of today's modern warships, Navy tug boats are very much like the old men that served upon them (short, bulging in the mid section, and slow moving). The Carriers, Battleships, Subs, and Cruisers, get all the accolades and photos ops. But who are you going to call, when transiting a tidal river at maximum ebb tide and find that you have lost all rudder control on your 180 foot Cargo ship the SVNAC South Vietnamese Auto Club?

Well in one instance, if your William Robinson Jr. Commanding officer of the AKL-12 USS. Mark, you reach for your radio and call Enormous 85, aka Bacardi Sierra, when she operated with the MRF Mobile Riverine Force. I often wondered why it wasn't the much more fitting Bacardi & Coke, but that could be a story for another day.

On November 3, 1970 that is exactly who Commander Robinson called. Enormous 85 as she was known, was the call sign of the YTB-785 USS. Winnemucca, her along with her sister ship YTB-784 the USS. Kalispell, call sign Glennhill Foxtrot were the Navy's version of AAA in South Vietnam. They were both large harbor tugs and were assigned to the MRF Mobile Riverine Force, and operated in all AOs over the Mekong Delta.

That day the Mark was traveling up the Long Tau River, when she lost all rudder control, luckily the YTB-785 was returning to Nha Be from Vung Tau at the time and was only a few miles from the unmaneuverable cargo ship, when they got the call for assistance. Unfortunately, even as close as the 785 was, by the time she reached the Mark, she had already run into the soft muddy river bank, but the little tug sent over a line, and first pulled the Mark off the bank, and then made up alongside, and towed her to the ARG-4 Tutuila the internal combustion engine repair ship for repairs. This was all in a day's work for the crew of the YTB-785, pushing or pulling was its job and with 2,000 h.p. under the deck plates there wasn't much she couldn't move.



YTBs are named after Indian tribes and in this case, also after a city in northwestern Nevada situated on the Humboldt River. Winnemucca was a Natick class large harbor tug, laid down in September of

1965 and launched in Dec. She was delivered to the Navy in May of 1966, placed into service in June and assigned to the 5th Naval District in Norfolk, VA, where she operated until December of 1966. The 784 & 785 both getting orders to serve in Vietnam, made the long journey (13,000 miles) from Norfolk to Saigon In the winter of 1966, It has been estimated that this may have taken anywhere from 90 to 120 days, and that they both arrived in-country on or before June 10 1967. Here they both came under MRF control, CTF Commander Task Force 117, River Assault Flotilla 1, Commander River Support Squadron 7, and the 785 received her first Craft Master BM1 William Posey and crew of 12 sailors in Vung Tau. While based in Dong Tam, both tugs were painted green, instead of the Navy's normal haze gray, and to this day are still the only two YTBs that were ever painted green while part of the United States Navy.

Her main mission in support of MRF operations was towing non-motorized APL Auxiliary Personnel Living 26 & 30 and YRBM Yard Repair Berthing Messing 16-17-20-21, to areas throughout the delta, and to assist in similar instances that the USS Mark had experienced. They were the workhorse's of the MRF hauling ammunition, towing artillery barges for the 9th Infantry, and on occasion even troops.

Bristling with armament four M2 Browning 50 Cal. machine guns and four M60s, assorted M16's, M72 LAWS rocket launchers, and M79 Thumpers were her main means of defense. Even with all these weapons, Charlie tried several times, to take the little tug out. The first attack was in TET of '68 on the My Tho River, just past the entrance to Dong Tam, when she was struck in the stack by a B-40 Rocket. The rocket passed clean through the stack, but exploded as it exited and the explosion blew out the windows on the starboard side of the pilothouse. Craft Master BM1 Posey was sitting just below the window and jumped up to grab the wheel, thinking that the helmsman had been hit, and it took a few moments to get the tug back under control. Luckily nobody was hurt, but it certainly got the crews attention, and General Quarters underway took on a whole new meaning after that. Years later, the constantly revolving crew in Vietnam, always knew the story of the attack. Two round patches were welded over the holes, and many of the sailors that served on her later when she returned to the states, questioned what those perfectly round holes were caused by.



BM1 Posey was relieved by BM1 (Pappy) Blanchette, in June of 1968 until March of 1969, when BM1 Hardiman became the Craft Master. During this time the 785 operated mainly on the larger rivers like the Long Tau, My Tho, Mekong and Bassac. But there were times when supply runs up the Mekong to Tan Chou, or the upper Bassac to Chau Doc when the width of the river, especially in the Parrot's Beak area, was so close one could spit to the river bank. In January 1969 the Philippine tug MV Kangaroo was hit in the same area that the 785 came under attack back in 1968. The tug was hit by several RPGs rocket propelled grenades, and quickly became engulfed in flames, the 785 already docked in Dong Tam got underway, raced to the scene and quickly helped to get the fire under control. Unfortunately the Kangaroo had two crewmembers killed and several others severely injured, which were transported back to Dong Tam by the 785. The Kangaroo returned to Subic Bay for repairs, and about 4 months later, the 785 was

PL-30 on the My Tho River, when a member of the 785's crew looked up and said "Hey that looks like the Kangaroo coming up the river" as it turned out, it was indeed the Kangaroo, and they were looking for the YTB-785. They pulled alongside her and dropped off 25 cases of San Miguel beer as a thank you, for helping put out the fire and getting her casualties medical treatment on that fateful day. Can you say Happy Hour underway?

The 785 also played a major role in the SEALORDS (South East Asia, Lake, Ocean, River & Delta Strategy) program. In May of 1969, Adm. Elmo Zumwalt Jr. devised the concept of Sea Float, a (SMATSB) Strategic Mobile Advanced Tactical Support Base, located just below the intersection of the Cua Lon & Bo De Rivers, across from the town of Nam Can. This base would be set up in the middle of the river, and use the river itself as a perimeter defense. With the U Minh Forest to the north, and the Nam Can Forest to the south, this was certainly Charlie's backyard. So in preparation for the move, both tugs returned to Dong Tam to be refitted with extra weapons. Two more M2 50 Cal. machine guns were positioned on the fantail, and surrounded by 55-gallon drums filled with water to offer more protection, and two more M60 mounts were added in the pilothouse on both the port and starboard sides. Scuttlebutt was, casualties were expected to be heavy, Charlie wasn't going to take this lying down, and they could lose at least one tug, and some of the crew of the other tug in the positioning of Sea Float.

On June 25th 1969, together the 784 & 785 towed the nine Ammi pontoons that were built in Nha Be, down the Long Tau River to the South China Sea where they were loaded on LSD's Landing Ship Docks, and taken to the mouth of the Bo De River. There the tugs towed the sections up into the Cua Lon, where they were moored in the middle of the river. The move up the winding, and treacherous Bo De River was, long, but uneventful.



Because Nam Can was overrun during TET of '68, Sea Float was a statement to the VC Viet Cong there was a "New Marshal in Town." It was only after the tugs and all the support ships left that Sea Float came under heavy attack by the VC. The first attack was repulsed with the help of air support, and for most of her short existence Sea Float was harassed on a regular basis. It continued to operate until October of 1970, when all operations were moved on land and later called "Solid Anchor," the pontoon base was disassembled and the 785 towed her remnants back to Vung Tau. Solid Anchor received very much the same treatment, harassment and interdiction fire, and probing raids by the VC was a common practice, until the base was turned over to the SVNN South Vietnamese Navy in April of 1971.

When disbanding of the MRF began in October of 1969, the 785 was tasked to tow the APL-30 to Nha Be. Rumor was BM1 Hardiman got into a heated discussion with the OIC Officer in Charge of the APL-30. Hardiman tried to explain to him that the river mouth was too shallow to leave at the time the OIC wanted to, as Hardiman wanted to cross the area at the mouth of the river at high tide. The OIC failed to understand that while the APL only drew about 6 feet, the 785 drew close to 12 feet at the stern. The 785 got underway towing the APL astern at about 10 knots, when all of a sudden the 785 ran into the muddy bottom and was stuck. The APL was about 300 feet behind, but making up ground quickly, and it

slammed into the stern of the 785, and then continued to slide on down the starboard side. The steel towline parted, and the 2-inch shackle shot back like it was shot out of a cannon, it hit the gear locker door and caved it in, cracking the bulkhead of the locker itself. The APL had continued on past the 785, and now the 10-inch towline took a strain and started to roll the 785 on its side. With water pouring over the bulwarks, the towline finally parted before it rolled the 785 completely over. The APL was on its own now and continued on for about another mile, before they were able to drop her anchor and get her secured. The 785 spent the next few hours working her way closer, until they could get a line across to the APL, and once the tide raised enough, they reconnected and towed her to Vung Tau, and then finally back to Nha Be. It seemed that the OIC had very little to say after that and never questioned the Craft Master's judgment for the remainder of the trip.

After the positioning of Sea Float, the 785 began experiencing problems with low main oil pressure and was sent to Singapore for repairs. During the trip they lost the main engine completely, and an ocean going tug was sent to bring her back to Vung Tau. Later the same tug got the task of towing the 785 to Singapore. Repairs to the main and other supporting systems took almost 6 months before the 785 was placed back in service. Under her own power now and while returning to South Vietnam, the 785 was towing an Army tug behind her, when they hit very rough seas. The plywood they had placed over the pilothouse windows was blown off, and the windows broke causing her to take on water. It wasn't long before the Army tug started to flounder and go under, and the crew of the 785 had to scramble with axes to cut the 2½ inch stainless steel towline before the tug pulled them under too. The Army tug was lost just off the southern tip of South Vietnam. BM1 Hardiman finished his tour on the 785 and was relieved by EN1 Lewis in January of 1970. It was sometime later when a member of the 785's crew was in contact with BM1 Hardiman, and told him the Navy was bringing charges against him for losing the Army tug, but was never advised of the final outcome.

EN1 Lewis was relieved by BMC Robert Falardeau in February or March of 1970. The Chief himself, was quite a character, tough, but fair, and a big fan of liberty in Nha Be. On one of his many missions into the village, a young shoeshine boy came up to the Chief carrying a small brown puppy. He immediately took a liking to the small pup and could only imagine the dog's fate, if he didn't rescue it from this young boy. So he gave the boy a few hundred Piasters for the small dog. Later the Chief spotted a crew member BM3 Sanders out in the village and asked him to bring the dog back to the boat. Once aboard, he quickly won over the rest of the crew, and the pup had the run of the boat. He went without a name for a few days, while we debated what to call him, the crew finally agreed on "Rivets" as he was always chewing on this small metal rivet he found while repairs were being made to the boat.



While just a mutt, Rivets was now the official mascot of the YTB-785, at less than 30 pounds, he had the heart of a much bigger German Shepherd, and it was not uncommon for him to hold a 200-pound man at bay trying to come aboard, until the watch or a crew member could respond to his barking. The Chief soon realized that he had gotten more than his money's worth, with Rivets.

This story was documented by CS2 Swenson, but it's humorous enough to include. Stew Burner was very fond of Rivets and made sure that he ate as good as and sometimes even better than the crew. The 785's reefer was very small, and the crew was always begging for food from the Ts, and other ships with large stores. The Stew Burner being a pretty savvy horse trader was able to get his hands on some canned dog food, and he added some ground up leftovers from one of the crew's meals. Later that evening, the Stew Burner was about to give Rivets a special treat when BM1 Posey, having just returned from a long visit to Nga's Laundry in Nha Be, walked into the galley, and noticed a large container of a pate like substance on the counter. BM1 Posey being a little bit hungry from being on the beach for so long asked, if he could have the leftovers on the counter. Stew Burner Swenson, just couldn't resist and said sure you can finish the rest.

BM1 Posey got some bread and made a sandwich; later the Stew Burner shared the late night story with the rest of the crew, but didn't have the heart to tell old Bill, what he just ate. The crew chuckled for days about the dog food, and Craft Master Posey never caught on. It wasn't until 37 years later when the crew from the 785 gathered in Oakland, California, for its very first reunion, sans CS2 Swenson, that SN Matty Vanuci Veneziano was instructed to explain the story to old Bill, and his only reply was "Must have been pretty good, as he was still alive."

Because the 785 had worked in the shallow and muddy waters of these rivers for so long, they began to experience problems with a leaky strut bearing, and in May of 1970 had to be towed to Subic Bay in the Philippines by the ATF 105 Fleet Ocean Tug USS Mactobi for repairs. The 785 was placed in dry dock, and the repairs took about 3 weeks to complete. After her years in Vietnam, the crew enjoyed a much deserved liberty in Olongapoe City, and Manila, seven days R&R in Sidney, or 21 days in the PI. "You do the math."

After 3 weeks in the PI, the crew now penniless and exhausted was towed by an ocean-going tug, back to the calmness of Vietnam. It didn't take long for Charlie to realize the 785 was back in-country either, because in just the second week of June of 1970 she was moored alongside the APL-30 in Nha Be, just aft of the anti-swimmer net, when the 0400-0800 watch on the 785 noticed a 55 gallon drum stuck in the net. He woke up Chief Falardeau and contacted the watch on the APL. They in turn contacted EOD, and shortly afterwards an LCM-6 arrived and gently snagged the drum, and towed it out into the middle of the river. The drum was cast off and the EDO team shot at the drum with small arms fire, when it exploded. It was later determined that the sapper who swam it down river, either lost control of it while he was placing it, or he might have been hit by a concussion grenade and just got lucky when it snagged the anti-swimmer net. In any case, it seems another attempt by Charlie was foiled.

It was late June of 1970 when BMC Chief Falardeau was relieved by the 785's first Craft Master BM1 William Posey again, it seems Bill missed the little tug so much, he returned for a second tour. On July 5, 1970, one of the 785's first jobs under BM1 Posey was to return to Sea Float with two more ammis to augment the size of the current river complex. After securing the ammis, the 785 continued north up the Cua Lon River, past the Sea Float base, where the ARL-38 Krishna Auxiliary Repair Landing Craft was anchored, and we tied up to her portside amidships. The Cua Lon is a tidal river, with an average 7 to 10 knot current, the Krishna was moored mid-river by both her anchors and was facing down river as the tide was heading back out to sea. The watch on the 785 noticed large heaps of floating debris coming down the river and accumulating between the 785 and the Krishna's hulls. EN1 England the chief engineer suggested that the 785 get underway and reposition itself to the starboard side of the Krishna forward to provide shelter from all this floating debris.

Just after 2200, both ships were rocked to starboard by a massive explosion. The Krishna was hit by a mine estimated to contain between 250 and 500 pounds of explosives; she had damage to nine compartments and was beginning to list to port. Sea Float scrambled Sea Wolves (the Navy's version of a helicopter gunship) and PBRs River Patrol Boats were sent to rake the banks with gunfire, and the Krishna unloaded with its 4-mm guns and 50 Cals. It seemed like an hour, but was probably only a minute or two before the order was given to "Cease Fire." By this time the Krishna was listing heavily to port, and many wondered if they would have to abandon ship. Working through the night, the damage control team was able to shore up and seal off the damaged compartments. Miraculously no one on the Krishna was killed or hurt, and the only casualty was QM2 Lanny Burkoff a member of one of the Swift Boats, who was stationed on the forward barge.

In the morning, they had the flooding under control, and the 785 made up to the Krishna's portside to act as her port engine. Here is where we all got to see the 20-foot gash torn in her side, and we wondered if it wasn't for the engineer's suggestion to move the 785, she would have been right where that 20-foot gash was located. Sir Charles tried once again to get the little tug and failed.

The 785 began towing the Krishna back to Saigon for repairs, and once underway Sea Float provided us with Sea Wolf and PCF Patrol Craft Fast escorts to the South China Sea. It wasn't long before the PCFs suddenly went to full throttle and headed down river raking the river banks with machine gun fire; the Sea Wolves also joined in pounding the area with rockets. We waited patiently as a SEAL Sea, Air, Land team was dispatched to the area and once receiving the all clear, the 785 continued back down the Bo De River to the South China Sea. There she detached from alongside and rigged an open sea towing bridle and towed her just off the coast through the South China Sea and up into Saigon, where she was repaired. Later in 1971, the Krishna was sold to the Philippine Government, renamed the Narra AR-38, and became part of the Philippine Navy.

In May of 1971, BM1 Posey was relieved by BMC Binkley, and the 785 was on a supply run to Tan Chau. About 2 hours out, they blew a cooling hose on the generator, and EN2 Ball rushed to the pilothouse to tell BMC Binkley; they had to shut down now to repair the leak. It appears that the Chief took exception that an EM2 told him he had to shut down and not ask his permission, so a heated discussion ensued. During this discussion, the generator overheated and froze up solid, with illumination gone the 785 was lucky to make her way over to the shoreline, and nestled into some dense cover. Here they were able to radio a civilian tug for assistance, but the tug couldn't get to them until the morning, needless to say it was a very long night for the crew of the 785.

At first light the civilian tug arrived and the luck of the Winnemucca for being in the right place at the right time continued as she surely dodged another encounter with Sir Charles in the Tan Chau area. The civilian tug now had the task of towing the 785 up the winding river to the anchored YRBM-21. Once in sight of the YRBM, it was pretty evident that things were not normal as a CH-47 Chinook tandem rotor heavy lift helicopter was on the deck, removing some of the 21 wounded from a rocket attack at 03:30 in the morning, when NVA North Vietnam Army and VC Viet Cong troops fired nine 57-mm rockets in a 5 minute period at the YRBM-21. A Sea Wolf helicopter was destroyed on the flight deck of the YRBM and shrapnel from that attack rained down the side of the 21 in the same location that the 785 would have been moored to had they reached the YRBM-21 on schedule and not lost their generator. A definite pattern here, or just a coincidence?

The following evening, Charlie was spotted moving into position for another attack, but a Bronco OV-10 light attack aircraft was called in and dispersed the enemy with its 20-mm Gatling gun; there were no further attacks on the 785 or the YRBM-21 in the Tan Chau area. As the war was winding down now,

replacement parts were very hard to come by and with one of the 785's two generators already on the ARG-4 Tutuila for repairs, the 785 was literally dead in the water. She spent the next 6 weeks moored to the YR-71, a floating workshop, sitting near the Cambodian Border without any power while they waited for generator parts. Without power, conditions below decks were considered inhumane unless you were a Navy Seal or a member of the MRF 9th infantry as these conditions would be considered an upgrade to elite first class from the conditions they normally worked in. The crew survived by fashioning hammocks under the rear awning on deck, or just nestled into a bunch of flak jackets to get some sleep. One will be hard pressed to find photos of this life, depicted in a recruiting poster for the US Navy.

The 785 continued to provide support in Vietnam until 1973, when she was assigned to the 17th Naval District and operated out of Adak, Alaska. She remained in Adak until late 1975 when she was reassigned to the 12th Naval District, working out of San Francisco. Here she operated with both a male and female crew until 1979. From 1979 to 1985, she operated with the US Coast Guard, until she was taken out of service, and placed in the mothball fleet, in Suisun Bay, CA.

After 1985 the status of the 785 on DOD records changed several times from being sold as scrap to being sold to China for reassignment. But in 2002 using the power of the Internet, it was learned that the 785 was neither scrapped nor sold to China and after 48 years continues to live on in a civilian capacity, which is another story altogether.

During her 6 years of combat operations on the rivers and swamps of South Vietnam, the YTB-785 USS Winnemucca earned the Combat Action Medal, 2 PUCs Presidential Unit Citations, 4 NUC's Navy Unit Commendations, the Coast Guard Unit Commendation with "O" Device, National Defense Medal, Vietnam Service Medal with 13 Campaign Stars, Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross Unit Citation, Republic of Vietnam Civic Actions Honor Unit Citation, and the Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal. To this day, the YTB-785 USS Winnemucca is the most heavily decorated Harbor Tug Boat in all United States Naval history.



The above mentioned recollections were all provided by actual living crewmembers of the YTB-785 and at the times stated in the article. Craft Master BM1 Bill Posey Ret., Lt. David Sanders Ret., EN2 Richard Dupont, EM2 Robert Lord, CS3 Sam Lockington, FN Martin Grooms, CS2 James Swenson, and SN Matty (Vanuci) Veneziano



I have assembled them all into the best factual timeline we could all agree upon after 44 years.
Matty (Vanuci) Veneziano rev. 10