



# River

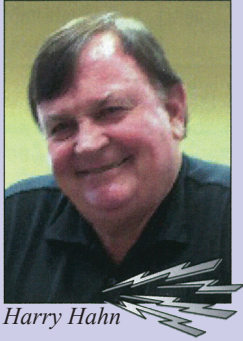
# Currents



A PUBLICATION OF  
THE MOBILE RIVERINE FORCE ASSOCIATION

VOLUME 28, NUMBER 4  
WINTER 2019

## From the Radio Shack



Harry Hahn

Hello Everyone: A very Happy New Year!! I trust you all had a great holiday!

In September, I made a trip to San Diego. My reason for the trip was multi-purposed. I attended a graduation of Special Boat Unit Class 107, along with the Combatant Craft Crewman Association Reunion. I thanked our crew who maintain the Vietnam Unit Memorial at the Coronado Amphibious Base. Also, we participated as a team in the San Diego Veterans Day Parade. Those of you who have not seen the Memorial have missed out! You will have an opportunity to do this, as we are excited about a "Gathering of the Troops" in Coronado, in September!

We just received and inked a contract for a gorgeous hotel in Coronado for a Gathering of the Troops get together of the MRFA September 9th, 10th, and 11th, 2020. Departures will be on the 12th. This is a beautiful hotel that sits right on the bay, and is about a mile from the Navy Amphibious Base. We were able to negotiate an incredible rate. We will line up a trip to the Memorial and hoping to schedule boat rides to see the San Diego Bay and shipyard with the Vietnam era Swift Boat that now resides at the San Diego Maritime Museum.

We are also busy looking at sites for our reunion in 2021. Many of you have asked where we may have it. That is still not decided, but when we choose a city, we will let you know. I have had many suggestions, but easy travel by air and personal vehicle is a must.

Harry Hahn, President,  
[SparksRivRon13@aol.com](mailto:SparksRivRon13@aol.com)

## Mobile Riverine Force Association Gathering of the Troops! September 9-11, 2020

From Harry Hahn, President, MRFA;

We are pleased to inform you that there will be a "Gathering of the Troops," as we have done in the past, this September, 2020, at the Loews, Coronado Resort in San Diego, California. San Diego is an exciting venue as it offers the Gaslight District with its restaurants and pubs, plus the exciting waterfront in San Diego. Access to downtown Coronado is a hotel bus ride away. The hotel we will be at is a phenomenal resort and the nightly rate is an incredibly low price for this gorgeous place. The \$179 per night rate is also extended to those who want to come up to three days early and stay up to three days late. Book early to get these great rates!

**Loews Coronado Bay Resort**  
4000 Coronado Bay Road  
Coronado, CA 92118



Arrival is September 9th. There will be activities scheduled for the 10th and 11th that include a boat ride on the Vietnam PCF "Swift Boat" for a tour of San Diego Harbor, and a trip to the Vietnam Unit Memorial at the Amphibious Base Coronado. Reunion departures from the hotel will be on the 12th.

Rooms are \$179 per night, \$15 self-parking. The normal room rate is \$400 per night. The normal resort fee has been waived!

### Activities planned for September 10th and 11th:

- Visit to Vietnam Unit Memorial on US Navy Amphibious Base, Coronado, CA
- PCF ride and tour of San Diego Harbor on restored Vietnam era "Swift Boat"
- Regular shuttle to downtown Coronado from hotel.

Additional activities and details will be outlined in the spring and summer editions of "River Currents."

We recommend Uber or Lyft from San Diego Airport to hotel. There is no airport hotel shuttle!

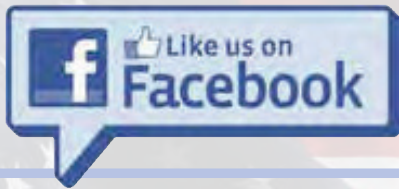
**You may book now either online or by calling the hotel at 800-815-6397 or booking online at <https://book.passkey.com/go/MRFA2020>.** Use the Mobile Riverine Force Association name to get the special rate. Also, in this issue is a form to sign up for the reunion. Get signed up with us and registered with the hotel right away as rooms will go quickly. This happened in Nashville.

As a reminder, this is not the regular (two year) reunion as we just held in Nashville, but a Gathering of the Troops on the West Coast, offering yet another opportunity for MRFA members and their families to see the Vietnam Unit Memorial in Coronado, and to get together with your friends once again in a beautiful setting!



Vietnam Unit Memorial Monument. From left to right, the MRF CCB, a PCF "Swift Boat," and a Navy PBR, or Patrol Boat, River.

**Your membership  
expiration date is  
printed on your  
River Currents just  
above your name  
and address.**



*The Mobile Riverine Force  
and 9th Infantry Division  
Vietnam Page. After you send  
a request to join the group,  
Bob Pries will approve your  
request to join the group.*



(Left) Vietnam era PCF, "Swift Boat." (Right). The last remaining boat of the Mobile Riverine Force, a CCB, or Command and Communications Boat.



**2020 MRFA & 9th Infantry Division  
Gathering of the Troops  
Registration Form**

*This is NOT your Hotel form. make Hotel Reservation  
separately*

**September 9-11th, 2020 - Loews, Coronado, CA**



Name \_\_\_\_\_

Unit in Vietnam \_\_\_\_\_ Dates \_\_\_\_\_

Street \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ or Cell \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Send my registration confirmation to me by e-mail Yes ☐ No ☐

☐ No guests

☐ First reunion

Name(s): Spouse/Guest(s) (1 at no charge)

City

State

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Registration fee: Cost includes member and 1 /spouse/girlfriend (\$55)**

**(Does not cover lodging, food, bus trips, or shuttles)**

Total number of other guest(s) \_\_\_\_\_ x \$25 ea.

Guests under 16 are free

Bus to Memorial = \$20 per person

PCF - Swift Boat Ride per person fee = \$35 per person

Nonmember registration fee (\$80)

Late member registration fee: (\$75) Non-member (\$100) Grand total enclosed \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Please send this form with your check or money order (payable to the MRFA or Mobile Riverine Force Association) to:

Frank Jones  
9 San Marino Parkway  
Fenton, MO 63026  
314-303-2730  
mrfatango48@gmail.com  
by August 1, 2020.

**Returned checks and cancellations prior to the reunion will be charged a  
\$25 processing fee.**

**Note: You will still have to check in at the MRFA registration desk to receive your name tag.**

**Mobile Riverine Force Association  
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☐ Donation ☐ CCB-18 ☐ Mobile Museum

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☐ WW-II ☐ Korea ☐ Vietnam

☐ Army Member

Unit (Division, Brigade, Battalion, Company, Platoon, Battery)

☐ Navy Member

Unit (Ship, Boat Hull Numbers, Navy Activity/Detachment, etc.)

Dates Served in Unit (mm/yr - mm/yr) \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_

**MEMBERSHIP RATES**

☐ 1 Year \$20 ☐ 3 Years \$50

**DONATION**

☐ \_\_\_\_\_

To become a member, mail your check or money order  
(payable To MRFA) to Frank Jones, MRFA Membership Chairman, 9 San  
Marino Pkwy, Fenton, MO 63026-7513



# VETERANS DAY 2019—WASHINGTON DC

*"We few, we happy few, we band of brothers, for he today that sheds his blood with me, shall be my brother."  
— William Shakespeare, Henry V*

As we do each year, members of the Mobile Riverine Force Association, their families and friends came together in Washington, D.C. to celebrate Veterans Day at the Wall - the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and the Vietnam Veteran Women's Memorial.

We placed wreaths at the Wall for the 9th Infantry Division, Naval River Assault Squadrons 9,11,13,15, the 47th Infantry Regiment, and the MRF - Army and Navy, together by members of the MRFA, their families and friends.

Each year our numbers are fewer as we are in the fourth quarter of our lives, and age and health are taking their toll. However, I am always in awe of the dedication of those that attend our wreath-laying at the Wall and who come together for several days each year to enjoy some comradeship and some fun.

Dedication is defined as the quality of being dedicated or committed to a task or purpose. Those who were in attendance meet this definition. Thank you, Brothers and Sisters, for your dedication and your friendship. Better men and women would be hard to find.

## In closing, I share the following:

War drew us from our homeland in the sunlit springtime of our youth. Those who did not come back alive remain in perpetual springtime -- forever young -- and a part of them is with us always.

As long as we speak their names, they will not be forgotten. Please speak their names often.

Never Forget - Never Quit  
Doc Pries  
Vice President



*“ As long as we speak their names, they will not be forgotten. Please speak their names often. ”*





# At War's End, U.S. Ship Rescued South Vietnam's Navy



Reprinted from NPR, September 1, 2010  
Joseph Shapiro and Sandra Bartlett

On April 30, 1975, North Vietnamese troops entered the deserted streets of Saigon. Tanks crashed through the gates of the presidential palace and soldiers hoisted the yellow and red flag of the Viet Cong.

Just hours before, the last Americans had been evacuated, rescued and flown on Marine helicopters to U.S. Navy aircraft carriers waiting off the coast.

The Vietnam War was officially over. Now those Navy ships were steaming away from Vietnam.

There was one exception. That night, the captain of a small destroyer escort, the USS Kirk, got a mysterious order to head back to Vietnam.

## South Vietnamese Navy: 'We Forgot 'Em'

Paul Jacobs, the captain, received the directive from Adm. Donald Whitmire, commander of the evacuation mission — Operation Frequent Wind. He was aboard the USS Blue Ridge, the lead ship of the Navy's 7th Fleet.

Jacobs recalls Whitmire's surprise message: "He says, 'We're going to have to send you back to rescue the Vietnamese navy. We forgot 'em. And if we don't get them or any part of them, they're all probably going to be killed.'"

The Kirk was being sent to an island off the Vietnamese mainland — by itself. And there was one more odd thing, the admiral told Jacobs: He'd be taking orders from a civilian.

Richard Armitage came aboard the Kirk late at night, wearing a borrowed sport coat. Years later, Armitage would become second in command to Colin Powell in the Bush administration's State Department. But on that last day of April 1975, he was on a special assignment from the secretary of defense. He'd just turned 30 that week.

Armitage recalls coming aboard the ship and quickly being escorted to the officer's mess where he met with Jacobs and Commodore Donald Roane, commander of the flotilla of Navy destroyers.

"Commodore Roane said something like, 'Young man, I'm not used to having strange civilians come aboard my ship in the middle of the night and give me orders,' "Armitage recalls." I said, 'I am equally unaccustomed, sir, to coming aboard strange ships in the middle of the night and giving you orders. But steam to Con Son.' And so they did."

## Secret Plan To Rescue More Than Just Ships

The Kirk and its crew of about 260 officers and men were ordered to Con Son Island, about 50 miles off the coast of South Vietnam and not yet occupied by the North Vietnamese. Con Son was the site of a notorious prison. Now, its harbors were the hiding place for the remnants of the South Vietnamese navy.

Armitage had come up with the plan for them to gather there.

Armitage, a graduate of Annapolis, had been a Navy intelligence officer, assigned to Vietnamese units. He gained respect for the South Vietnamese as he worked alongside them and became fluent in the language. Then he resigned his commission and left the Navy in protest when the Nixon administration signed the Paris peace accords. That 1973 agreement between all warring parties in Vietnam ended direct U.S. military involvement in the war. Armitage felt the U.S. had sold out the South Vietnamese.

But as it became clear that the South Vietnam government was about to fall, a Pentagon official asked Armitage to fly back to Vietnam with a dangerous mission. His assignment: to remove or destroy naval vessels and technology so they wouldn't fall into the hands of the Communists.

A few weeks before Saigon fell, Armitage had shown up at the office of an old friend, Capt. Kiem Do, deputy chief of staff for the South Vietnamese navy. Together, they came up with the secret plan to rescue the Vietnamese ships when — as was becoming clear would happen — the South Vietnamese government surrendered.

Do remembers warning Armitage that they'd be saving more than ships.

"I told him, I said, 'Well, our crew would not

leave Saigon without their family, so therefore there will be a lot of people,' " Do recalls.

He says Armitage remained silent. "He didn't say yes; didn't say no. So I just take it as an acknowledgement," Do says.

Armitage didn't tell his bosses at the Pentagon there would be refugees on those ships. He feared the American authorities wouldn't want them.

Neither Do nor Armitage, though, could predict how many refugees would turn up in Con Son.

## Chaos At Con Son Island

The Kirk steamed through the night to Con Son and reached the island just as the sun came up on May 1. There were 30 South Vietnamese navy ships, and dozens of fishing boats and cargo ships. All of them were packed with refugees, desperate to get out of Vietnam.

The ships "were crammed full of people," says Kent Chipman, who in 1975 was a 21-year-old machinist's mate in the ship's engine room and today works at a water purification plant in Texas. "I couldn't see below deck, but above deck the people were just as tight as you could get, side by side."

There was no exact count of how many people were on those ships. Some historical records say there were 20,000 people. Other records suggest it was as many as 30,000. Jan Herman, a historian with the U.S. Navy Medical Department, who is documenting the story of the Kirk, uses the higher number.

The Kirk sent its engineers to some of the boats to get them started.

"They were rusty, ugly, beat up," says Chipman. "Some of them wouldn't even get under way; they were towing each other. And some of them were actually taking on water and we took our guys over and got the ones under way that would run."

One cargo ship was so heavy it was sinking. People below deck were bailing out the water with their shoes.

*continued next page*

Stephen Burwinkel, the Kirk's medic — in the Navy known as a hospital corpsman — boarded that ship to check on the sick and injured. He saw a Vietnamese army lieutenant helping passengers leave the sinking ship, crossing to another ship, over a narrow wooden plank. As people pushed to get off the sinking ship, one man knocked a woman who stopped in front of him. She fell off the plank and into the ocean.

The woman was quickly rescued. But Burwinkel worried that the others on the ship would panic. He says the lieutenant acted quickly.

"This Vietnamese lieutenant did not hesitate, he went right up the back of that guy, took his gun out and shot him in the head, killed him, kicked him over the side. Stopped all the trouble right then and there," Burwinkel recalls. The shooting was shocking, he says, but it very likely prevented a riot.

## Leading The Way Toward The Philippines

After fixing what could be fixed on the seaworthy vessels and transferring people from the ships that would be left behind, the Kirk led the flotilla of naval ships, fishing boats and cargo ships toward the Philippines.

The USS Cook, another destroyer escort, like the Kirk, helped out as the ships were leaving Con Son. The Cook's crew provided rice, and its corpsman helped Burwinkel and his assistant from the Kirk attend to the sick and injured, too.

As the flotilla headed out to sea, on the way to the Philippines, other Navy ships came in and out of the escort, according to Herman. Among those other ships were the USS Mobile, USS Tuscaloosa, USS Barbour County, USS Deliver and USS Abnaki.

But it's clear from the daily logs from the Kirk and the other ships that the crew of the Kirk took the lead.

"For me, the Kirk was ideal," says Armitage, who moved from the Kirk to the Vietnamese navy's flagship. "It could communicate with the rest of the U.S. fleet. They would go with us across to the Philippines and would be able to rescue any of the folks who might be in harm's way. Some had been wounded. Some were pregnant. All were sick after a while. And we needed a way to take care of those folks."

The Kirk's sailors kept busy providing food, water and medicine to people on the South Vietnamese ships.

Burwinkel spent his time moving from ship to ship treating the sick and injured. With thousands of people — many of them babies and children — he had to work almost nonstop.

"When they gave me the meritorious service medal over all this, I quite frankly referred to it as my 'no-sleep' medal," says Burwinkel, who made a career in the Navy and is now retired and living in Pensacola, Fla. "I would go out there and do my thing and at dark we would come back to the Kirk and try to get a little bit to eat and make some rounds — gather my wits about me, resupply myself and get ready for the next day."

## 'Last Sovereign Territory Of The Republic Of Vietnam'

Of the some 30,000 refugees on vessels escorted by the Kirk over six days, only three died.

But as the flotilla approached the Philippines, the Kirk's captain got some bad news. The presence of South Vietnamese vessels in a Philippine port would present the government in Manila with a diplomatic predicament.

"The Philippine government wasn't going to allow us in, period, because these ships belonged to the North Vietnamese now and they didn't want to offend the new country," Jacobs, the captain, recalls.

The government of Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos was one of the first to recognize the Communist rulers now in control of a single Vietnam, and Jacobs was told the ships should go back.

Armitage and his South Vietnamese friend, Capt. Do, came up with a solution that Marcos had to accept.

Do recalls the plan: "We will raise the American flag and lower the Vietnamese flag as a sign of transfer [of] the ship back to the United States, because during the war those ships are given to the Vietnamese government as a loan, if you want, from the United States, to fight the Communists. Now the war is over, we turn them back to the United States."

There was a frantic search to find 30 American flags. Two officers from the Kirk were sent aboard each Vietnamese ship to take command after a formal flag ceremony.

Rick Sautter was one of the Kirk officers who took command of a Vietnamese ship.

"That was the last vestige of South Vietnam. And when those flags came down and the American flags went up, that was it. Because a Navy ship is sovereign territory and so that was the last sovereign territory of the Republic of Vietnam," he says.

"Thousands and thousands of people on the boats start to sing the [South Vietnamese] national anthem. When they lower the flag, they cry, cry, cry," Do remembers.

## 'High Point Of My Career'

On May 7, the ships flying American flags were allowed into Subic Bay.

For the refugees, it was just the beginning of their long journey, which took them to Guam and then resettlement in the United States.

For the sailors of the Kirk, ending the Vietnam War by rescuing 20,000 to 30,000 people was very satisfying.

"This was the high point of my career and I'm very proud of what we did, what we accomplished, how we did it," Jacobs says. "I felt like we handled it truly professionally and that was kind of a dark time."

Armitage says he "envied" the officers and men of the USS Kirk. The ship had not seen combat on its tour to Vietnam. But it ended with the rescue of tens of thousands of refugees, one of the greatest humanitarian missions in the history of the U.S. military.

Says Armitage: "They weren't burdened with the former misadventure of Vietnam."



"Courtesy of Adam Lawrence Twigg, son of Richard Twigg, posted to our Facebook page. BMCM Richard E. Twigg (USN Ret.) passed away on February 25, 2011. While in Vietnam Rick served with River Assault Squadron 13 – River Assault Division 131. He was Boat Captain on Tango-131-1 from March 1968 to March 1969.

"Soldiers from the 9th Division's Second Brigade look forward to a hot shower and chow at the Mobile Riverine Base after fighting the Viet Cong in the Mekong Delta."

*Official U.S. Navy photo (XFFV-2824-E-6-68)*



## The Mobile Riverine Force and 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division Vietnam



Hey Brothers, check out our Facebook page, "The Mobile Riverine Force and 9th Infantry Division Vietnam" Facebook group at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/195572170458597/>

Our Facebook Group is dedicated to all Army and Navy men who served with pride and distinction in a place called the Mekong Delta. Be it on water or land, they all served their country. Whether they were on a Monitor or making a helo assault, setting an ambush on a lonely, quiet, dark night, walking through waist-deep water in a rice paddy, riding a tango boat up a narrow canal, or at anchor in the middle of a brown-water river for long hot hours. Places like Dong Tam, Tay Ninh, Snoopy's Nose, the Cross Roads, Ambush Alley, My Tho, Rach Kien, Plain of Reeds, Parrot's Beak, Tan An, Nha Be or Ben Tre and names like Colleton, Washtenaw, Windham, Benewah, Westchester, Satyr, Askari, PBR, and Swiftboat are names and places we'll never forget.

This group is to preserve a living memory of all those who served in the Mobile Riverine Force and 9th Infantry Division Vietnam.

Many friendships from days past have been renewed because of our group page. It is a great place to make connections with others who served with the Mobile Riverine Force and 9th Infantry Division.

### A few rules are in place to keep order in the group. They are:

1. Politics and religion are the fastest way to start an argument and cause hard feelings and absolutely have no place on this page.

2. We expect members to treat each other with respect.

We hope you enjoy the group.

In Brotherhood,  
Doc Pries - MRFA Vice President and Group Admin



Find us on  
**Facebook**

## A Positive Message For Every Vietnam Vet.

There was an incident, several years ago, that gave me a warm glow of gratification that we DID accomplish something, in Vietnam. I was grocery shopping, wearing my leather jacket that says "Vietnam Veteran," and has some patches from the Mobile Riverine Force. A voice from behind me said; "Thank you for your service, sir!" I turned around to see a young man of Asian descent. His hand was out, to shake mine. I shook his hand and told him that I appreciated it and that he struck me as someone who was either active duty, or a veteran, himself. He smiled and said that yes, he was active duty. He was a sergeant in the U.S. Air Force and he was home on leave from Iraq. He was in the process of helping shut the base down.

He said his name was Tom and that he always thanked Vietnam vets he met. I'll never forget his reason. He said his father was in the South Vietnamese Navy, and when Saigon fell, his father was put into a "re-education camp." While his father was in the camp, men came to their home, to take their property. His mother tried to stop them. One of the men hit his mother in the mouth with the butt of his AK-47. His voice trailed off as he told me he "saw things a boy shouldn't see." I can only imagine. When his father got out of the re-education camp, he told his family they had to get out of Vietnam. There was no future for them in the land of their birth. They made their way out to sea, going from one country to another, until they finally made it to America. He told me that because of Vietnam veterans, tens of thousands of Vietnamese people got "a taste of freedom." He said there are Vietnamese all over the world, living in freedom today, because WE gave them that taste. That is why he thanks every Vietnam veteran he meets. He went on to tell me that he told the men and women who worked under his leadership in Iraq, that they were giving the people of Iraq a "taste of freedom," today, and because of them, future generations of Iraqi people will be free.

When I returned home with the groceries, I tried to tell Judi what I had just heard, but every time I tried to tell the story, my voice broke and I was too overwhelmed to tell the story. It took hours before I could attempt to get the story out without the emotional impact of his message making me break down. Tom's message to me was the most uplifting, reassuring message I had heard since the day I came home from Vietnam. I want all of my Brother's In Arms, and their families to hear it, too. We NEED to know some good came of it.

Terry Sater  
Editor, River Currents

# The Challenge Coin Tradition: Do You Know How It Started?

(Courtesy “DOD Live”)

By Katie Lange  
Defense Media Activity

If you’ve been in the military or worked for the Defense Department, you know what a challenge coin is. They’ve been an American military tradition for a century, meant to instill unit pride, improve esprit de corps and reward hard work and excellence.

The coins represent anything from a small unit to the offices of top leaders, such as the defense secretary. There are also coins made for special events, anniversaries and even nonmilitary leaders.

Many service members and veterans proudly display challenge coins at their desks or homes, showing off the many missions they’ve been on, the top leaders they’ve met and the units for which they’ve worked.

## But how did this tradition get started?

I was curious, so I checked with the National Defense University, Pentagon librarians and historians, as well as those with the U.S. Army Center of Military History and the Naval History and Heritage Command. Those institutions couldn’t find any written records, probably because the challenge coin tradition didn’t start as an officially sanctioned activity. So I dove into the modern-day oral histories of the world – also known as the internet – to see what I could find.

## The Most Common Myth

The most well-known story that the internet produced linked the challenge coin tradition back to World War I. As the U.S. started building up its Army Air Service, many men volunteered to serve. One of those men was a wealthy lieutenant who wanted to give each member of his unit a memento, so he ordered several coin-sized bronze medallions to be made.

The lieutenant put his own medallion in a small leather pouch that he wore around his neck. A short time later, his plane was shot down over Germany. He survived but was captured by a German patrol, who took all of his identifiable items so he would have no way to identify himself if he escaped. What they didn’t take was the small pouch with the medallion.

The lieutenant was taken to a small town near the front lines of the war. Despite his lack of ID, he managed to find some civilian clothing and escaped anyway, eventually stumbling into a French outpost. Wary of anyone not in uniform, the French soldiers didn’t recognize his accent and immediately assumed he was an enemy.

They initially planned to execute him, since they couldn’t ID him. But the lieutenant, remembering he still had the small pouch around his neck, pulled out the coin to show the soldiers his unit’s insignia. One of the Frenchmen recognized that insignia, so he was spared.

Instead of being executed, the lieutenant was given a bottle of wine, probably as a form of reparation for his initial treatment. When he finally made it back to his squadron, it became a tradition for all service members to carry a unit-emblazoned coin at all times, just in case.

## Not Everyone Believes That Depiction

While that story sounds cool, Air Force Historical Research Agency archivist Barry Spink isn’t buying it.

He said he’d been told in the 1990s that the tradition started in Vietnam, when an Army infantry-run bar tried to keep non-infantrymen away by forcing “outsiders” to buy drinks for the whole bar if they couldn’t prove they had been in combat. The “proof” started with enemy bullets, then got a little out of control with grenades, rockets and unexploded ordnance. So a coin-sized item emblazoned with the unit’s insignia became the accepted form of proof.

This tradition – now known as a coin check – continues today, hence it being called a “challenge” coin.

## One More Possibility

Spink also sent me an article called “Coining a Tradition” that was printed in a 1994 edition of *Soldiers Magazine*. It offered a similar version of the Vietnam story, the World War I tale and one other option, which dates back to the early 1960s:

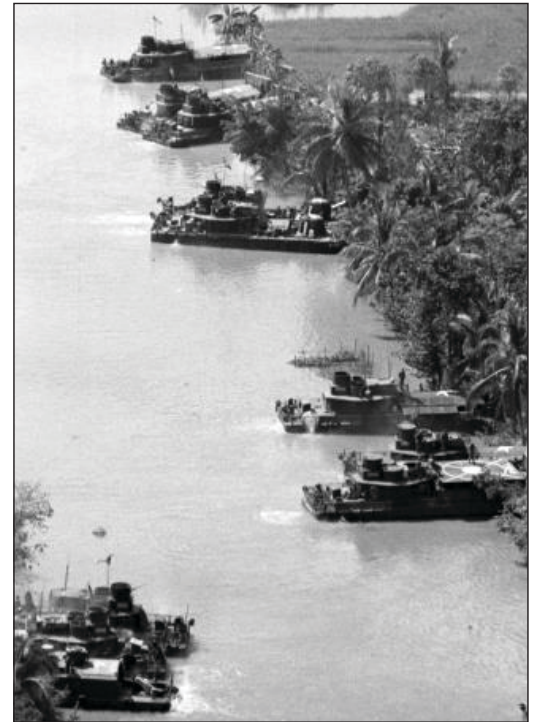
“A member of the 11th Special Forces Group took old coins, had them over stamped with a different emblem, then presented them to unit members, according to Roxanne Merritt, curator of the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Museum at Fort Bragg, N.C. A former commander of the 10th SFG picked up on the idea, becoming the first to mint a unit coin for the U.S. military unit. The 10th group remained the only Army unit with its own coin until the mid-1980s, Merritt said, when ‘an explosion took place and everybody started minting coins.’”

So if you’ve ever wondered how the challenge coin came about, you can take your pick of which story to believe!

*Follow the Department of Defense on Facebook and Twitter!*

# Sniper starts river battle, but allies end it.

By Stars and Stripes, Published: December 14, 1967



Boats are beached near where Americans from the 9th Infantry Division’s 2nd Brigade Riverine Force and South Vietnamese from the 5th Vietnamese Marine Battalion battled the Viet Cong along the My Tho River, 65 miles southwest of Saigon. JOHN OLSON/STARS AND STRIPES

The battle began when it sniper gave away Viet Cong positions by opening fire on a river assault force of U.S. infantrymen and Vietnamese marines moving up the My Tho River.

It ended at nightfall with 235 Viet Cong dead and the river banks in the hands of the Americans and Vietnamese marines.

Troops of the U.S. 9th Inf. Div. and 5th Vietnamese Marine Bn. had boarded armored troop carriers of the Mobile Riverine Force before dawn and were steaming up the My Tho River 65 miles southwest of Saigon.

About 2,000 meters up river, the lead Vietnamese marines came under sniper fire. The allied force returned the fire, landed the troops and the battle was on.



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B004 Member  
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(2" diameter)



C004 Purple Heart



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*From the Membership*

## The Misperceptions, Myths and the Realities of the MRF

I asked our members "What are the erroneous perceptions people may have about what you did in Vietnam, and what your daily life was like?" Here are some of the responses we could print.

**Marvin Raffler.** "Some people back in the states may have thought that we hated the Vietnamese people and one thing is for sure we loved those kids."

**Rodney Muggs Steed.** "Oh! You were in the Navy in Vietnam, a nice big ship!"

**John Patrick Descoteaux.** "It wasn't like you were in Danger."

**Charles Davis.** "When I speak at a local school about Vietnam, I start with the lack of roads in the Delta and how Riverine operations were based on the riverine operations in Civil War and how monitors and specially built armored troop carriers were used to take confederate held islands."

**Don Holt.** "Go for a ride on an LST loaded with ammo on the main and fuel in the tank deck. Then talk to us about not being in any danger. Ride that same LST at 5 knots max along the coastline to deliver that crap."

**Wally Nichols.** "Ya. When asked what branch I served in, I always start off with "I joined the Navy to avoid combat. Guess what I got!"

**William Frede.** "The Navy were only on Ships out in the ocean. Everybody in the states thought sailors were on ships out in the ocean, when in fact thousands and thousands of sailors were on support ships and river boats in the Mekong Delta plus all throughout Vietnam, I myself was on the River Boats T-112-2 in 1967, and on a Destroyer off the coast in 1969, so I saw the perspective of the Vietnam War from two different views."

**Bob Pries.** "Oh, you were a medic and must have worked in a hospital so that couldn't have been too bad. You were lucky you weren't in the Infantry."

**Ben Felix.** "I encounter so many ignorant comments, not all medics/ corpsman were in hospitals they were in hospitals as well as ships and in the bush along the River wherever they were needed."

**Dan Andrews.** "Another version, you were only in the Army. The Marines did all the fighting."

**Michael Hoks.** "Nobody knows what a Tango boat is, not even Medals of America or Military Issue Catalogs."

## Our Favorite USO Show Entertainers

On the MRFA Facebook page, I asked the question; "Which entertainers stand out to YOU, the most? We owe them ALL a debt of gratitude!" Here are some of the responses I received;

**John Gerard Organ Jr.** "The beautiful and talented Marilyn McCoo stopped at Tan An in 1970 and I got to talk with her. Also, the New Christy Minstrels did a show at Tan An Airfield."

**Bruce Harness.** "Gary Merrill and Susan Oliver visited Tan Tru in 70 had a beer and a chat."

**John Crooker.** "Joey Bishop and his wife visited us at Tan An in 1968."

**Robert Hoelle.** "Johnny Cash, June Carter, Carl Perkins, Jimmy Stewart, and Rocky Marciano."

**Bob Deissig.** "I was with 3/47th from 68-69 at Tigers Lair. Jimmy Stewart came to us with his wife, Gloria, and Greg Morris who was a cast member for the T.V. series "Mission Impossible." It was a thrill to shake their hands and spend some time. Stewart was a true war hero, and humble, amazing man."

**Lloyd Edwards.** "George Peppard. Saw him in Dong Ha 1970, just as we were preparing to back out to the field."

**David Howington.** "I met Janis, Chuck Connors & Reymond Burr T-92-13 1967. Remember Chuck was very tall."

**Jerry Smith.** "Lou Brock came out to the boats while we were aboard the Benewah while trying to track down my pay records. Got to shake his hand and visit with him for a few, but I had a more pressing issue; we were to head to Taiwan in 2 days for R&R and I needed some moohla."

**Ron Mason.** "We had this band on Tango 131-12. They sang "Order in the court, here comes the judge." This photo is signed by them. One says make it home, the judge. Thank god it wasn't war every day."



## Letters to the Editor

If you have questions,  
stories, or comments for "River Currents,"  
please e-mail Terry Sater, at  
[terry.s8er@yahoo.com](mailto:terry.s8er@yahoo.com)



## TAPS Tribute to a Fallen One

**David P. "Pappy" Meritt** passed away on October 24, 2019. While in Vietnam he served with B-3, 3rd Battalion, 47th Infantry, 9th Infantry Division from January 1967 to February 1968.

I received the following message from Diane Thom, concerning her husband Mike; *"It is with a broken heart and great sadness to let you know Mike passed away on 10/15/2019. He overcame so much, especially in the last year, but this time he didn't come home with me, he went home with God."*



**Mike Thom** was a Gunners Mate on T-131-6, 1968-1969. It was a joy to see Mike and Diane at recent reunions. He struggled with the effects of A.O., but was always smiling and taking life head on.

**Patrick V. Riley** passed away on September 28, 2019 in Gettysburg, PA. While in Vietnam he served with Bravo Company, 4th Battalion, 47th Infantry, 9th Infantry Division during 1968-1969. Pat is survived by Virginia, his wife of 54 years.



MRFA Member **Gerald (Jerry) Weiss** Passed away from cancer September 16, 2019. Jerry served on the USS Benewah APB 35 1966-1967, as an Electronics Technician in the Ops Department. Jerry is survived by his wife and Sandra and children. Jerry lived in Little Falls, Mn. at his passing.

**Randy N. Erickson** passed away on March 12, 2018 from heart related problems. While in Vietnam he served with River Assault Squadron 15 – River Assault Division 151 as the lead Engineman on T-151-13 during 1968-69. Randy was living in Huron, SD at the time of his passing. He is survived by his wife Janet and children.



Member **George H. Sikes** passed away on August 5, 2017. While in Vietnam he served with Charlie Company, 4th Battalion, 47th Infantry, 9th Infantry Division from January to September 1969. George was living in Iberia, LA at the time of his

passing. He is survived by his wife, Joyce, and several children.

Member **Marvin Lawrence Marks** passed away on August 1, 2019. During World War II he served onboard the USS Nicholson (DD-442) and the USS Askari. The latter was originally commissioned as LST-1131. She was later converted to ARL-30 and utilized during the Vietnam War. Marvin earned the Purple Heart Medal as a gunner during WWII. He was very proud to be a Member of our association.



## In Memory Of

This section is for members who wish to sponsor the MRFA by placing a notice in memory of one of their fallen comrades. In some instances, the name of the sponsor will precede the name of the person who was KIA, or has passed on since Vietnam. It's \$25 for four issues.

Wendell Affield, for "Buddha" Ed Thomas, Boat Captain, Tango 112-11 (02/68-02/69)

William Blausner, for Thomas Gaudet, David Land, and Jose Campos, our 151 Division brothers that were KIAs.

Bill Buffie, in memory of Lyle Parin, USS Floyd County LST-762 (Vietnam)

John and Doris Chrzanowski, in memory of SP/4 Humberto Ruiz Santiago Jr. Grenadier A Co. 4th Bn., 47th Inf. Div., Died of wounds 06/27/69, Kien Hoa, South Vietnam (DC Wall Panel 21W Ln 025).

John and Doris Chrzanowski, for B Co., 6th/31st, 9th Inf. Div. Troopers. KIA, B-40 Rocket, 12/13/69, Gary M. Gryzen (DC Wall Panel W15, Line 54) David A. McIntyre (DC Wall Panel W15, Line 54) and Gary T.

Phillips (DC Wall Panel W15, Line 54).

David Wilson, 2nd/60th, KIA 08/05/69. Timothy Shelton, 4th/39th KIA 06/25/69. Steven Murrar, 4th/39th, KIA 05/26/69. Harvey Crabtree, 2nd/4th Arty., KIA 06/19/69, and Dennis Mattox, 1st/501st, 101st Abn., KIA 08/23/69.

Janice Dahkle, for son, Cpl. Randy R. Mueller, D Co. 2nd/47th, KIA 03/03/69

Fran Divilbiss, for Cdr. Dave Divilbiss, Supply Officer on Staff COMRIVFLOT ONE, USS Benewah APB-35 (1966-68)

David Donovan from Delmar & Dian Cable

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David Donovan from Harold & Beverly Bailey

Robert Flaige, for SFC Fernando Quintero, KIA 02/27/68 and SP4

Robert "Bob" Jenks E Co. 3rd/60th KIA 03/03/68

Bill Frede, for BM1 Guy Dail, BM3 Johnny Maness, and SN David

Flabburis T-112-2, 1967

Tony Garvey, for Wes Sade, Billy Olsen, and Staff Sgt. James Williams

C Co. 4th/47th, 9th Inf.

Regina Gooden, for Sgt. Lloyd Earl Valentine, B Co 3rd/47th, KIA September 5, 1968

Susan Hanmer, for SFC Michael Hanmer, RivRon 13 and 153 (07/69-02/71)

Gordon Hillesland, for Pat Lawson, NSA Dong Tam (67-68), & Mike Mosey NSA Dong Tam (67-68)

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Sally Jackson, for Paul Nace, USS Colleton, APB-36 (09/68-11/69)

Bruce Jensen, in memory of Frederic Peers Webb, A-111-4 KIA,

12/21/67

Bruce L. Johnson, C Co. 2nd Plat. 4th/47th (8/67-3/68)

J. R. Johnson, 3rd/47th, 9th "Recon" (05/66-01/68), in memory of Walker, Gotch, Paredes, Nelson, Hayes, Howard, King, Twitchell and Chesnoski

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(07/69-02/71)

Richard MacCullagh, for John (Doc) Phillips, HMC, USN (Ret), RivRon

15, and Richard MacCullagh, for Chaplain Rene L. Petit, LT, CHC, RC, RivRon 13 and 15

Stella Gayle Malone, for Timothy Neary, USS Jamestown, AGTR-3, (01/69-12/69)

Kaye Marten, Travis Marten, and Tristen Marten, in memory of Monte Marten (husband, father, and grandfather) B Co. 2nd/39th 9th Inf. Div. (1968-69)

Adam Metts, for Donald L. Bruckart, T-111-2, KIA, 3/31/69

Major J. D. Nichols III, CMDR, C Co. 3rd/60th Inf. (12/66-11/67), for Alfred Cornejo, Anthony Galeno, Richard Lasher, Rudolph Melendez, Sigfredo Pinto-Pinto, and Garrett Reid, KIAs 08/20/67

Luis Peraza, for SSG Michael K. Lewis, KIA, 06/13/69, SGT Harold H. Hunter, KIA, 01/27/69, and brothers of D Co 3/60th KIA during 1968-69

Claire Siebert, for GMG3 Richard Siebert, IUWG-1 Unit 3, Qui Nhon (03/67-01/69)

All the USN and USA KIAs of the MRF (67-70)

Ken Sundberg, for Michael David Sheahan, 5th/60th KIA, 02/25/68, Robert L. Conley, 5th/60th, KIA 02/01/68, and Glenn Dean Taylor, 5th/60th, KIA 02/01/68

Okey Toothman, in memory of Sgt. Dick Arnold, A Co., 3rd/47th, Max Delacruz, and G. P. Jones, C Co. 3rd/47th

Okey Toothman, in memory of Judy Wallace

Okey Toothman, in memory of Major General Lucien "Blackie" Bolduc Henry Velez, for my fallen brothers, B Co., 2nd/39th Inf.

From your Brothers, B Co. 2nd 39th Infantry, 9th Infantry Division, in memory for John Nielsen, B Co., 2nd/39th (04/68-04/70)

Cpt. Steve Williams and Maj. Bob Bischoff, in memory of 2ndLt. David George Williams, Co A, 4/47th, KIA 9/21/67

## Contact Changes

Please send Frank Jones any changes in address, phone number or e-mail addresses so he can keep our database updated.

His address is:  
9 San Marino Parkway, Fenton, MO 63026

Frank's e-mail address is [mrfatango48@gmail.com](mailto:mrfatango48@gmail.com)





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GMGI Ricky Vice, USN (Ret.), Riv Ron 13, T-131-7 & NAG, 03/68-03/69  
David J. Vicknair, USS Washtenaw County, LST-1166, 1968-70  
Ron Wallace, B Co., 3rd Plat., 3rd/47th Infantry, 05/66-08/67  
Hank and Becky Washburn, USS Colleton APB-36, 09/66-09/68  
Bill Weidman T-111-12, 02/67-02/68  
David H. White, USN (Ret), USS Satyr, ARL-23, 08/69-08/70  
Wm. "Whit" Whitworth, Lighthouse 5 D Troop, 3rd/5th Cav., 03/68-03/69  
Rhett Wise, A Co., 3rd/47th Inf., 02/67-04/68  
Jeffrey L. Withers, RivRon 9 & 11, A-112-8 and M-112-12, 06/68-06/69  
William H. Ziebarth, 9th Signal Batt. 3rd/34 Arty., 05/66-12/67  
James Zieminski, EN2, Boat Captain RivDiv 153, ASPB-6854, 04/69-04/70  
Robert Zimmer, X.O., USS Mercer, APB-39, 02/68-07/69