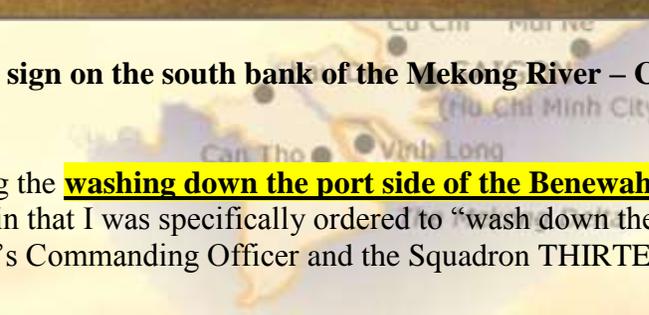


Washing Down the Port Side of the USS Benewah APB-35

This is my version of the “Incident.”

The USS Benewah APB-35 was anchored, just down river from this sign warning about the Cambodian Border, in support of the various river operations going on at that time.



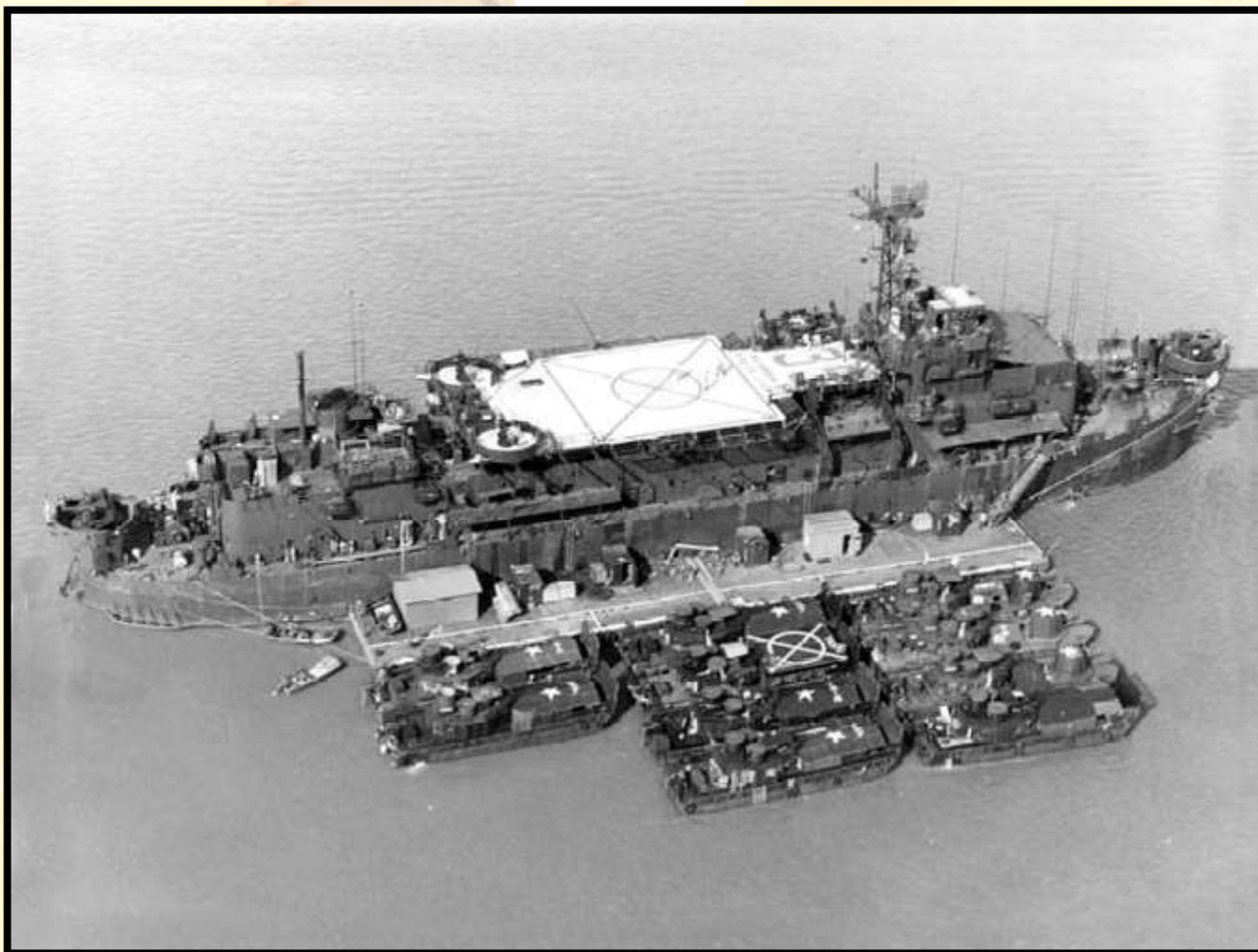
WARNING sign on the south bank of the Mekong River – Cambodian Border 5 km



Regarding the **washing down the port side of the Benewah** “incident” I plead innocent in that I was specifically ordered to “wash down the port side” by both the Benewah’s Commanding Officer and the Squadron THIRTEEN Commanding Officer.



Sa Pa ● Lao Cai ● Ba



● Nha Trang

USS Benewah APB-35 – (Great photograph by Robert Hurst)

As a Boatswains Mate First Class Boat Captain I submitted to both officers that “I understand fully your orders, however I’m going to tear your ship up.” Both CO’s looked at me and said words to the effect, “... no you wont, just wash down the port side. Specifically pay particular attention to the diesel exhaust residue on the 03 level as that is what needs to be washed off.”



Then the Benewah CO asked me if there was anything I needed and I asked for twenty gallons of liquid detergent. The Benewah CO said he’d have his Boatswains Mates bring the liquid detergent down to my boat and have one of them get underway with me for the “wash-down.”





“Aye, aye, sir,” and off I headed to my boat, “Irma-La-Douche”. That’s the way the boat was described by Officers. A douche boat. When I was first assigned to the boat after hearing the officer’s term “douche boat” I figured being a Boatswains Mate I’d “make-it-so.” In 10” high Military lettering I painted down both sides of the canvas well deck cover, “Irma-La-Douche.”



Heading down to the boat I kept running the orders through my head to first wash down the port side of the Benewah then drop off the ship’s Boatswains Mate then head to the entrance of what was called the “Grand Canal” for my next duty assignment with a river division stationed near a small village about half way into the canal. The whole time I just shook my head because I knew that I was going to tear up the Benewah with the water cannons.



I tried to explain to both CO’s that the boat put out through both [8” Stang Intelligent Water Cannons](#) 2,700 gallons of water a minute at 250 pounds of pressure at the nozzles. Possibly doesn’t sound like much unless you’re standing beside one of the streams of water and try to drive a baseball bat through the stream of water. IF the bat isn’t torn from one’s hand and one manages to hold onto the bat one WILL be yanked over the side. 2,700 gallons a minute at 250 pounds of pressure IS a lot of water. I just know this was going to be bad. Orders are orders? I guess.

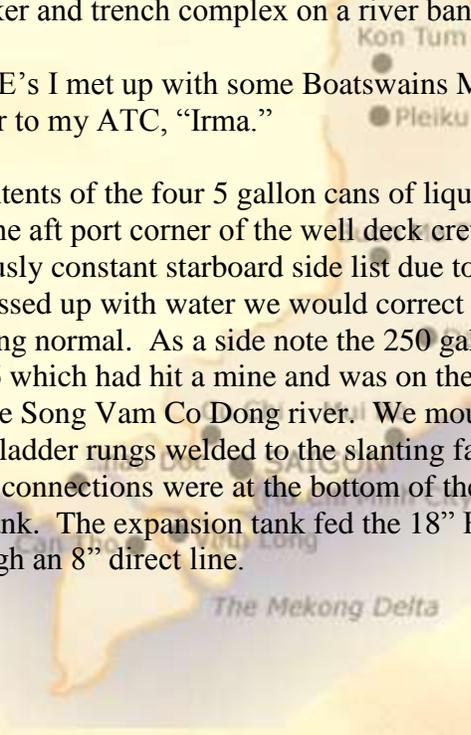


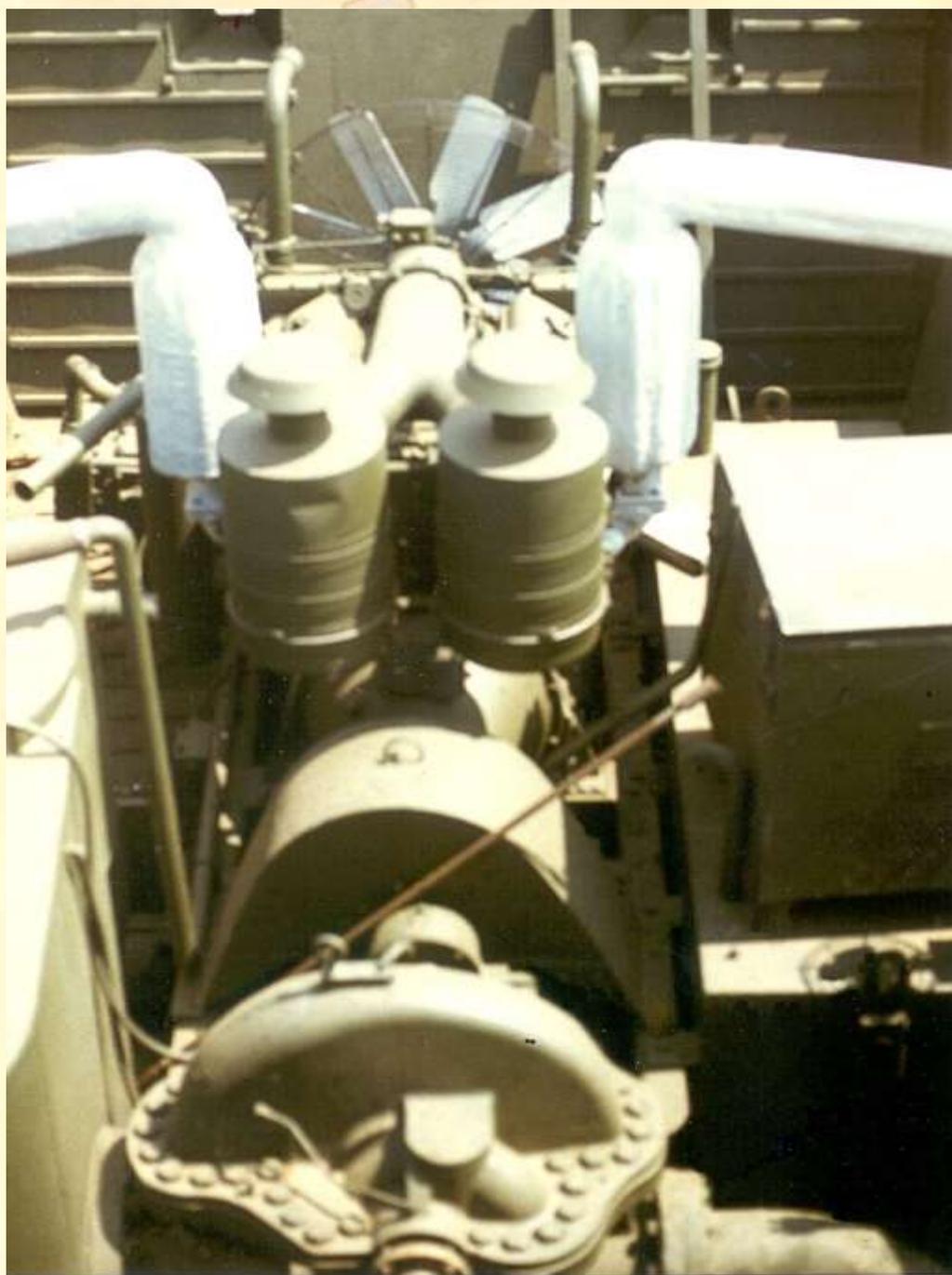


“Irma” knocking out a VC bunker and trench complex on a river bank of the Song Vam Co Dong.

On one of the starboard side AMMIE’s I met up with some Boatswains Mates carrying the 20 gallons of liquid detergent and we crossed over to my ATC, “Irma.”

I instructed my crew to pour the contents of the four 5 gallon cans of liquid detergent into the 250 gallon “Injection Tank” we’d installed in the aft port corner of the well deck crew’s compartment. The main reason was to correct for the previously constant starboard side list due to all the well deck machinery. I’d figured with the 250 gallon tank pressed up with water we would correct the list and be able to operate and maneuver better or close to something normal. As a side note the 250 gallon tank my crew and I salvaged was from the wreckage of Tango-36 which had hit a mine and was on the beach just about a mile above the Ben Luc highway bridge over the Song Vam Co Dong river. We mounted and welded the tank upside down to the well deck and installed ladder rungs welded to the slanting face of the tank for access into the pilot house. The piping connections were at the bottom of the tank with a valve and piped to an expansion tank. The expansion tank fed the 18” Fairbanks Morse Centrifugal Pump through an 8” direct line.





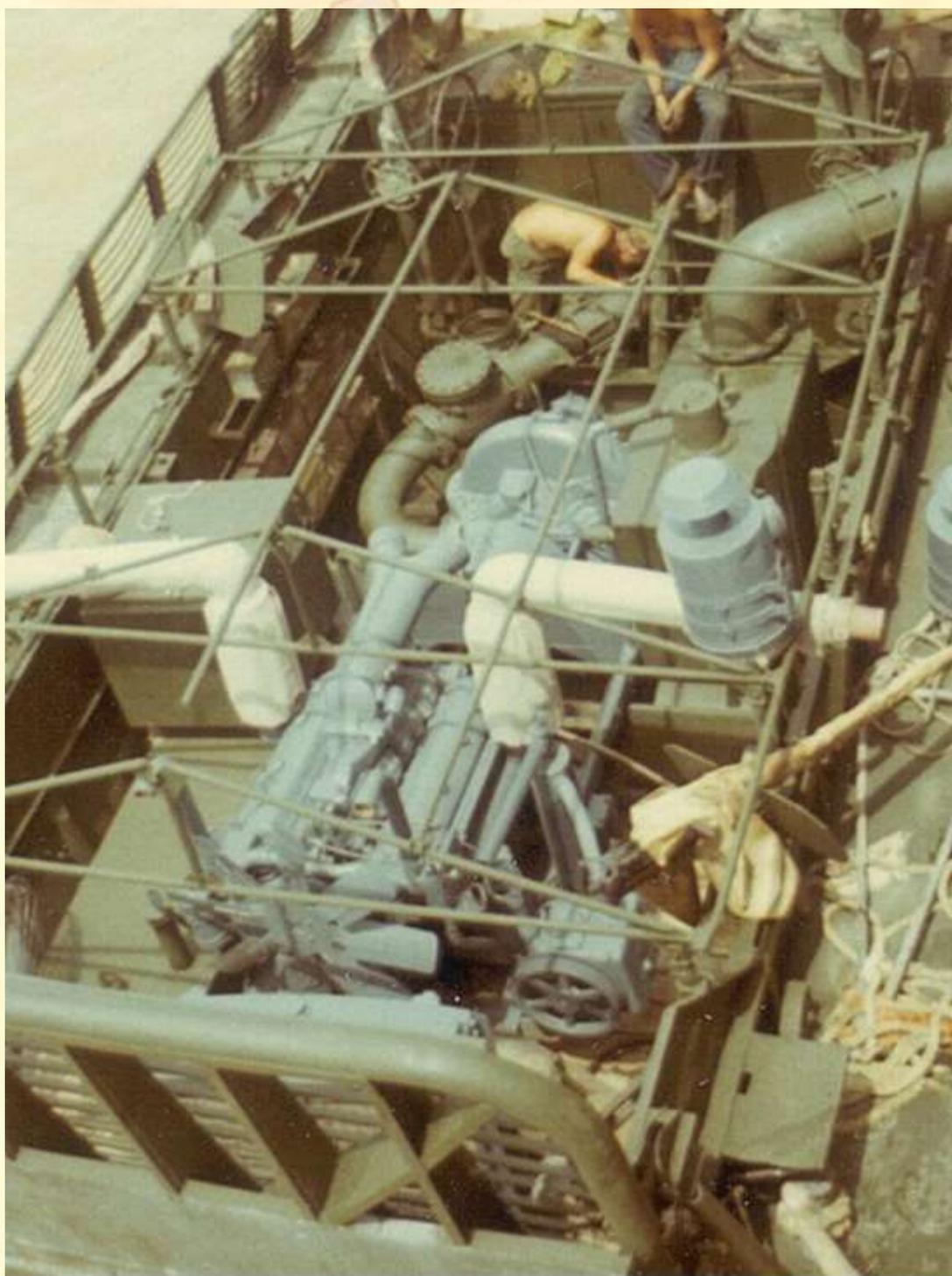
(Hu Chi Minh City)

18" Fairbanks Morse Centrifugal Pump directly in the foreground. Notice it is coupled directly into a power-take-off-transmission which is coupled directly to a 12V71 Gray Marine Diesel Engine with straight exhaust pipes with no silencers and at 1,850 rpm's what a SCREAM! The Expansion Tank is directly to the left.



This "extra detail" is provided so one understands what happens to 20 gallons of Navy Standard liquid detergent when it is mixed in 250 gallons of water then sucked into an expansion tank and rammed through a centrifugal pump turning at 1,850 rpm's.





The Mekong Delta

Top view of the machinery in the well deck of "Irma-La-Douche"



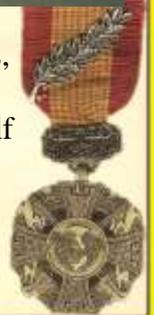
As stated, I knew that things were going to “Go-to-Hell-in-a-Hand-Basket” really quick when that 12V71 was started up and the water was streaming out of both water cannons.

The Mekong River current was ebbing at the time and I don’t have an explanation why, but the Benewah was broadside in the current, so the “God-of-Mayhem” had everything in perfect alignment for my crew and I to “wash-down-the-port-side” and I’m thinking “...I really don’t want to do this...”

My engineer lowered the 18” suction pipe on the stern into the river and one of the other crewmen stood by the Injection Tank valve in the well deck crew’s compartment.



Then I gave the engineer the start-up signal and the 12V71 roared to life, at idle. (Yes, roared.) Screaming at each other to be possibly understood was required at just this point. Important to note as when the rpm’s were increased one couldn’t hear one’s self think let alone hear anyone else.





The 12V71 pressures and temperature soon came to their normal settings and the engineer gave me a thumbs up that he was ready to engage the pump. Also, now I had the boat on station at the stern of the Benewah about 5 yards off. I had my coxswain idle the engines and maintain our position in the river current while the pumping sequence was started. The two nozzle men were at their positions at their quarter turn Butterfly Valves in the aft end of the well deck just under each water cannon. The engineer ran up the rpm's of the 12V71 to 1,850 then watched the vacuum gauge on the expansion tank. One pound of vacuum, ... 2 pounds, ... 3 pounds, ... 4 pounds, cut the rpm's to idle and signal the nozzle men to open their valves, then the engineer slammed the rpm's back up to 1,850 rpm's. Wham, two jets of water, one from each water cannon, 2,700 gallons a minutes at 250 pounds of pressure visibly shocked the [Stang Intelligent Water Cannons](#) and we're ready to start washing down the side with both streams of water. Which is to say, just like patrolling the river banks for NVA/VC mines, booby traps, spider holes, bunkers and trenches the inboard water cannon aimed low and the outboard cannon aimed high.

I tapped the coxswain on his left shoulder and he commenced to conn the boat to the left and we were moving towards the stern for our first run from the stern to the bow of the Benewah. I jumped down into the pilot house and signaled the crew man at the Injection Tank filled with water and 20 gallons of liquid detergent to open his valve. He gave me thumbs up that the valve was open all the way.

The water cannon nozzle men were moving their nozzles up and down, back and forth on the stern of the Benewah and then the liquid detergent became visible as a whitish foam on the camouflage green paint.

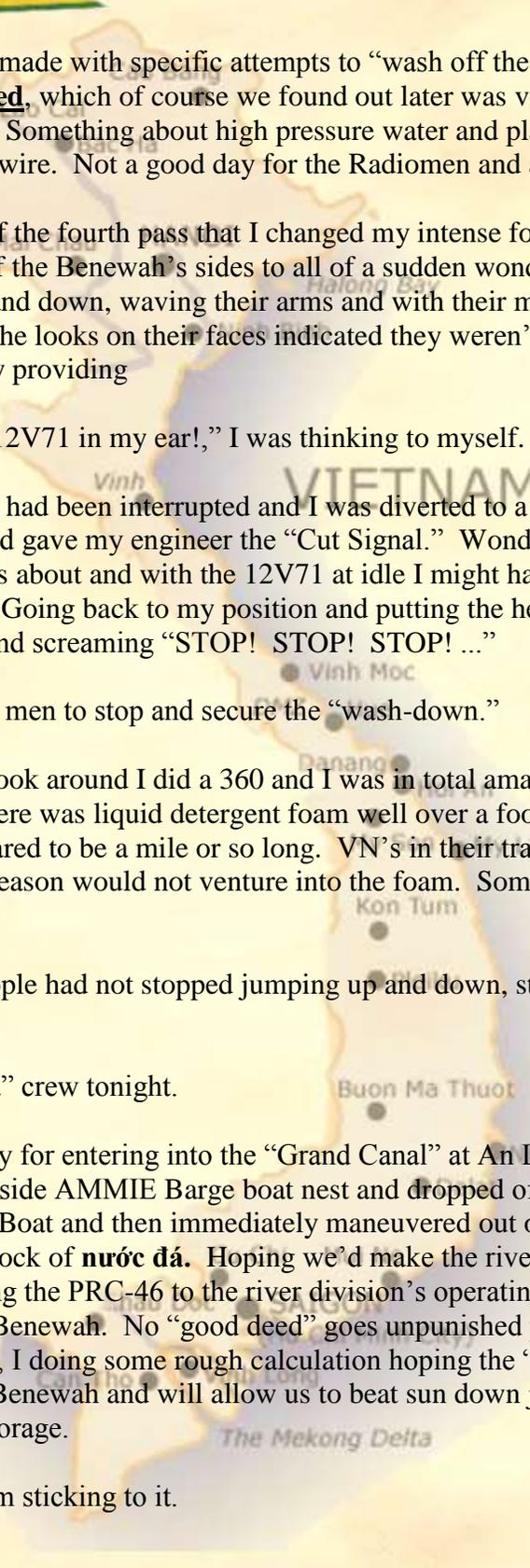
As I understand from reports later, the Benewah's Boatswains Mate of the Watch had passed over the IMC for all crew members to secure all port lights, doors and hatches on the port side while the ship was being "washed-down," which included remaining clear of the port side. At the same time, the "God-of-Mayhem" was riding "shotgun" as one of the first wayward burst of water went over the port side main deck taffrail and hit the Command Master Chief just as he was stepping onto the main deck from the stern access ladder well, knocking him down and breaking his coffee cup. (Stand clear of the port side?)

Not knowing about hitting someone with the water cannons we continued to "wash-down-the-port-side" and were moving slowly forward towards the bow.

By the time "Irma" reached the bow of the Benewah on the very first pass the score was: "Irma-La-Douche" - 4 and Benewah - 0.

Unknown to us on the "Irma" the first stream knocked down the Command Master Chief. The second stream knocked out a port light and port light cover (port hole) in an Ensign's stateroom who had neglected to dog them down properly as was ordered. To add insult to injury his stateroom had also been flooded. The third stream tore down the "long-line" horizontal radio antenna and the fourth stream inadvertently went over the bow and hit a VN sailor minding his own business swabbing the deck of his PBR knocking him over the side which of course caused a Man-Overboard Emergency. This emergency was compounded of course because he was on the starboard side of the Benewah and went over on the starboard side of his boat and was being forced underwater while alongside his boat by the ebb current.





The second and third passes were made with specific attempts to “wash off the diesel exhaust residue” on the 03 level, as ordered, which of course we found out later was very bad for the various communications antenna. Something about high pressure water and plastic antennas with internal single strand copper wire. Not a good day for the Radiomen and antennas.

It was sometime during the start of the fourth pass that I changed my intense focus from piloting the boat and directing the washing down of the Benewah’s sides to all of a sudden wondering why people on the ship were frantically jumping up and down, waving their arms and with their mouths open and moving apparently shouting something. The looks on their faces indicated they weren’t happy with the results of the “wash-down” we were intently providing

“What! I can’t hear you! I got a 12V71 in my ear!” I was thinking to myself.

So since my intense concentration had been interrupted and I was diverted to a “possible problem” I took that opportunity to look around and gave my engineer the “Cut Signal.” Wondering what all the jumping up and down and arms flailing was about and with the 12V71 at idle I might have an opportunity to hear something on the PRC-46 Radio. Going back to my position and putting the headset on someone was already on the circuit very upset and screaming “STOP! STOP! STOP! ...”

I signaled the engineer and nozzle men to stop and secure the “wash-down.”

Taking this opportunity to really look around I did a 360 and I was in total amazement that heading down river, without any exaggeration there was liquid detergent foam well over a foot thick in places, the width of the ships length and what appeared to be a mile or so long. VN’s in their traditional boats trying to cross the Mekong river for some reason would not venture into the foam. Some sort of white-man’s magic.

Looking over at the Benewah, people had not stopped jumping up and down, streaming and were now shaking their fists.

Oh, sh*t. No supper for the “Irma” crew tonight.

Figuring I was actually late already for entering into the “Grand Canal” at An Long I had my coxswain maneuver “Irma” to the starboard side AMMIE Barge boat nest and dropped off the ships’ Boatswains Mate on the first available Tango-Boat and then immediately maneuvered out of the nest and headed for the ice factory at An Long for a block of **nước đá**. Hoping we’d make the river division’s moorage before evening twilight plus I’m switching the PRC-46 to the river division’s operating channel as I don’t want to talk to anyone on the Benewah. No “good deed” goes unpunished plus I’m thinking, “I told you so.” Again, I doing some rough calculation hoping the “God-of-Mayhem” got off the boat at the Benewah and will allow us to beat sun down just as we reach the river division’s moorage.



That’s my story and I’m sticking to it.