

## **BILL NORRIS**

### **USCGC POINT LEAGUE (WPB-82304) – Jun 68 to May69 – Relieved Helman Navy Unit Commendation – 1 Jun 68 to 31 Dec 68**

#### **August 13, 2021 – Bill Carr E-mail to Bill Norris**

...My Judy came to Sasebo for 26 days in May/June of 68 while the PT CLEAR was getting overhauled. We, too, went to the museum in Nagasaki as well as a bus tour or three. Your words describing your and your Judy's time in Sasebo with your visit to Nagasaki and tours felt like they were written by me – so similar our experiences.

#### **August 11, 2021 – Bill Norris E-mail to Bill Carr**

...Sorry I haven't gotten back to you sooner. I have attached a few memories that I hope are useful to you. Please let me know if you have any questions or feel you want anything more fleshed out.

With respect to the dates of hostile fire, I was not on board on 17 May of 1968; perhaps Carl knows something about that. The three September dates are a mystery to me. As I relate in my write-up, the only hostile fire underway was several shots from the beach. That may have occurred in September but I'm not sure and certainly didn't occur three days in a row.

I do not have a tour debrief and don't even remember doing one. Also, I don't have any recollection of Bill Kurtz as he had left before I arrived, at least that's what I recall.

#### **October 20, 2018 – John Schwartz E-mail to Bill Carr**

I'm probably not much help on this task. The only thing I have to offer is that I keep in touch with Bill Norris- but, about all I know of his Vietnam experience is that he spent four months in Japan with his cutter (don't know which one) during an overhaul. Judy came to visit him while he was there.

I vaguely remember that perhaps he was the CO of the boat that ran aground in the mouth of a Delta river. I've seen a great photo of the entire crew standing on the ground / mud with the high and-dry cutter in the background. But, maybe that wasn't his boat. A good story anyway. Maybe someone can come up with a photo.

#### **April 2, 2018 – Walt Viglienzzone E-mail**

Bill Norris relieved Carl Helman on the PT LEAGUE when Carl went on Emergency Leave. ...Bill turned over PT LEAGUE to the Vietnamese in May of 1969 - the last month he was in Vietnam.

## **February 3, 2016 – Bill Norris E-mail**

Just to correct Walt's memory: i was CO of PT LEAGUE from about June 68 until I turned it over in Saigon in May 69. Rod was CO of another boat; my memory fails as to which one and whether he was CO of the other of the first two WPBs turned over to the South Vietnamese Navy. I'm sure Rod can inform on that issue.

## **Golden Journeys Booklet - 2015**

...I received orders to Vietnam and was off to the West Coast for further training. In May 1968 I arrived in Cat Lo, South Vietnam and assumed command of the PT LEAGUE. Highlights of the tour included a two month overhaul in Sasebo, Japan (where Judy joined me for one month)...and spending the last two months of my tour preparing to turn the PT LEAGUE over to the South Vietnamese Navy and, at the end, working with a Vietnamese only crew.

## **Coast Guard Awards and Medals Board – List of CG Units Coming Under Hostile Fire**

**August 30, 2004**

**Encl. (16) to COMDTINST 650.25b MEDALS AND AWARDS MANUAL**

**POINT LEAGUE – 22 Sep 68, 23 Sep 68 and 24 Sep 68**

## **WIKIPEDIA**

As a part of the Vietnamization program Republic of Vietnam Navy (RVNN) crewmen were assigned to the cutter for training purposes beginning in February 1969. After the crew of PT LEAGUE trained an RVNN replacement crew, she was turned over to the RVNN and recommissioned as RVNS Lê Phước Đức (HQ-700), 16 May 1969 at the Saigon Navy Base.

She was the first Squadron One cutter to be turned over to Vietnamese control, the second being USCGC PT GARNET which was turned over during the same recommissioning ceremony.

## **VIETNAM MEMORIES**

First, a disclaimer. During my tour, I kept no personal log or diary. At that time i was not much of a letter writer and really didn't take many pics. Thus, the following is solely based on 40- year old memories that are foggy at best. These are my memories and they may not, and probably don't, match those of others. Most dates and names now escape me. With that said, I give you the following.

Along with a number of other lucky souls, I flew into Saigon on a commercial jet with a short layover in Honolulu. A second flight brought me to Vung Tau where I was met by one of my Academy classmates who drove me to Cat Lo. My first impression of the town and base was

underwhelming. And then things went downhill.

I reported in to either my CO or XO and was informed there was no boat needing a CO and they really didn't know when one would be available. My unstated reaction was "why the hell was I there in that case?" After a couple of days, Dave Livingston took pity on me and invited me to sail with him as a supernumerary and observe operations. After two or three patrols, probably in mid June, I got lucky as Carl Helman got unlucky. He went back to the States on emergency leave and I relieved him as CO of POINT LEAGUE. Originally, he was supposed to resume command when he returned but that changed and I remained CO for the rest of my tour.

The first couple of months were uneventful; routine patrols in the Delta and north along the coast to Danang. This involved mainly inspection of vessels for contraband and draft dodgers. When requested, we also provided some gunfire support and H&I. At some point in the Fall, command of Operation Market Time changed hands and the rules of engagement were revised such that a number of areas were declared free fire zones and we no longer needed prior clearance to engage targets that we observed on the beach. Also, the pace of operations increased as we were instructed to inspect all vessels we encountered, a task that was somewhat impossible in areas where hundreds of basket boats came out of a number of villages to fish.

At some point during the Fall, POINT LEAGUE came under hostile fire, the only time that happened when I was CO. We were patrolling along a sandy beach in the Delta and what I believed to be a lone rifleman took a couple of pot shots at us. We returned fire with our 50 calibers and vacated the area with no damage or casualties.

The only other incidents of note were operational mistakes, both of which occurred while I was resting in the cabin. One, with my XO at the con, happened while chasing a sampan on the mudflats. We got too far away from the channel as the tide was ebbing and we ended up aground for about 10 hours.

We were able to walk around the boat at low tide, inspect for any damage and let our boat dog, Douche Bag, relieve himself off the boat. My recollection is that we were able to pass a line to another WPB, I think Bob Christenson was the CO, so as the tide came in we were able to move back to the channel without starting our engines.

The second incident occurred with my BM2 at the con after I had instructed him to patrol between two buoys in the Delta. Unfortunately, at one of the buoys, he turned upstream of a buoy on a strong ebb tide and we collided with the buoy with minor damage.

In October I was informed that the POINT LEAGUE would be sent to Japan for an overhaul and that we would sail to Danang where both the crew and boat would be transported to Sasebo by merchant vessel. When we arrived in Danang, we waited about a week before being loaded on the merchant vessel. During the wait, a storm came up and we were sent out to relieve a Navy Swift Boat. Leaving Danang harbor and sailing straight into the teeth of the storm was an

adventure which reminded me of several missions on my 95 footer during the New England Winter.

On arrival at the Naval Base in Sasebo, we were sent to a local Japanese repair facility that mainly repaired Japanese fishing vessels. The crew really didn't have a lot to do except observe and make sure things were proceeding appropriately. The Navy was actually in charge of the overhaul and we had an assigned officer who was responsible for the contract.

Prior to our arrival I had arranged for Judy, my wife, to meet me in Tokyo several days after our arrival in Sasebo. The next month was probably the highlight of my tour as she and I spent that month touring the island of Kyushu. Especially interesting was a visit to Nagasaki and its museum of the atomic bombing. As we were the only Americans or Europeans in sight, the visit to the museum was a little uncomfortable.

However, we were approached by a high school student who wanted to practice his English and he toured with us and provided valuable insight. We ended up spending the day with him and taking him to dinner that night. Another memorable trip was to Beppu and its Onsen district (their famous hot springs). In all our travels, we took local buses and generally didn't see any other westerners along the way. Judy left at the end of November and, other than touring with several other Coasties whose boats were also undergoing overhauls, the remainder of my time in Sasebo was generally uneventful.

In late December or early January, POINT LEAGUE was put back aboard a merchant ship for transport back to Danang but the crew was flown back instead of riding along with the boat. After arrival in Danang we immediately sailed for Cat Lo. At Cat Lo our engines were removed and put on the dock for maintenance. The next day Cat Lo came under mortar attack, as I understand it, the first and only time it was fired upon. Five or six rounds were fired and some minor damage occurred to some buildings and several people suffered minor injuries (at least that is what I remember of the incident). I also recall going up on the base security net and letting them know I was prepared to fire either 50's or the mortar if they needed any help.

For the next several months we resumed routine patrols as before. Our Division CO instituted a program during this period for a "Boat of the Month" based on number of vessels inspected, mortar rounds fired, and some other criteria that escapes me at the moment. POINT LEAGUE distinguished itself by being at the bottom of the list for this competition. I was not a fan of what I took to be making fighting a war into a game.

Lucky for me POINT LEAGUE was selected as one of the first two boats to start the turnover program and in late March or early April we started receiving our first RVN crew members. The first two included the prospective CO, a very well qualified LT who had spent 10 years as a liaison officer with the USN and spoke excellent English. This LT had grown up in North Vietnam the son of a well to do farmer in a Catholic family. When he was a teenager his father was executed in front of the family and the farm confiscated. He and his family fled to South Vietnam.

Over beers, he told me how beautiful North Vietnam was compared to the South and how much more Industrious the northerners were. He encouraged me, if possible, to visit the north sometime in the future. Obviously, he hated the Communists, but he also didn't care much for the southerners. For the next month or two we went into much more of a training mode vis a vis an operational mode. Fairly quickly we replaced, one by one, the American crew with Vietnamese until late April or early May only I remained from my USCG crew. In mid May, we sailed up the Mekong River to Saigon and conducted the first turnover of a WPB to the RVN. I flew back to California the next day where Judy met me and we spent two weeks traveling around California before returning to Massachusetts which I then called home.

In placing down these memories on paper, I have purposefully omitted some tales of adventures in Vung Tau, Cat Lo and Sasebo that are better left unrecorded, or at least left unsaid until we are sitting at the bar drinking beers.

GOL-280/Norris – People in leadership positions usually need to be very conscious of protecting their integrity...Most subordinates have a very effective bull s—t meter. Leaders who lost the confidence of their troops are unlikely to be very effective in “getting the job done.”

I learned this lesson in spades during my tour in Vietnam.

In my opinion, leaders at every level including the patrol boat commanding officers, squadron commander, the top military commanders and even the President lost the faith of many of their subordinates and, of course, many ordinary citizens as well – due to their failure to be honest and forthright about what was actually happening.

Hi Les,

12/17/18  
Bill Norris → Les

Without excuse, I'm sorry that I failed to provide my usual Christmas update last year. However, last December proved to be a little hectic as the Thomas Fire provided us with more than a little excitement. Judy and I evacuated north to Cambria after the second day, not that our house was in serious trouble, but due to the smoke and ash. Matt's family also left town while Matt remained with a firefighting friend to look after his house which was closer to the fire line. We stayed away six days and over the next several weeks we spent time clearing ash from sidewalks, paths, outdoor furniture, and patios. Compared to some of our friends we were very fortunate as we came through with no real damages. Given what has happened this Fall, we feel lucky that Ojai came through the Thomas Fire with as few loses as it did. That first night, had the wind been from a little different direction, our little city might not have been spared.

Fall  
2018

(2018)

Another event this past year provided us with several challenges. In July, Judy was diagnosed with breast cancer. It was caught very early, she has tolerated her treatments very well and her prognosis is excellent. She was operated on in August and just completed her chemo treatments. Next month she starts radiation and we expect at least seven weeks of that. In addition, she will continue to receive drug infusions every three weeks until August. She has felt very good throughout the course of treatment, has maintained a very positive attitude, and continued with most of her usual activities. Among other things she is the President of the Ojai Music Festival Women's Committee and a board member of both the Ojai Education Foundation and the Ojai Woman's Fund. She was able to continue these activities throughout her treatments. The one thing that her diagnosis did change was our travel schedule. Needless to say, we had to cancel several trips including participation in the Vietnam CO's reunion in Charleston. We also cancelled several cruises we had planned - luckily we purchased trip insurance so no real financial losses. We hope to resume our travel soon, perhaps with a couple of road trips this Spring between infusions and a more robust schedule after the Summer.

JAN 2019

2019