

Dear Family and Friends of 593,

Can it be six weeks already since our last Family Gram? Time passes by quickly when you're busy, which is a blessing, and we have been busy.

In the last letter, you will remember, you went on a day patrol with 593 crews. This time, you will enter a new area of operations with us, and start patrolling an area which has never before seen FFR's. We are actually in such a region now, and we have many interesting stories to tell.

On the 12th of December, a message came in ordering us to pack our belongings and move down the Soi Rap River western boundary of the Rung Sat, to rendezvous with USS HARNETT COUNTY (LST 821) at the junction of the Soi Rap and Vam Co Rivers. We had only a few hours to decide what to take and what to leave behind, pick up laundry from in town and take care of any other loose ends, and then we were underway in a ten boat column heading for our meeting with the "T".

HARNETT COUNTY is one of four LST's operating in Vietnam as floating bases for FFR's. The ships were taken out of mothballs in 1966 and fitted out especially for FFR support. A special mast and boom on the starboard side provides the capability for lifting a boat over the railing and then lowering it into the hold where maintenance and repair work can be accomplished. Specially built booms which swing out from the sides of the ship have lines rigged from them which serve as bridles to which the boats tie when not on patrol. Crowded but air-conditioned living quarters give welcome relief from the December heat. The main deck is also a "helo deck" as the ship has the capability of supporting a SeaWolf squadron, although there are no "Air Deles" embarked at this time. At the present time, 593 crew members are rotating back to Nha Be every eight days for a two day "R&R" period. During this time the men can have their boats worked on by the pier maintenance personnel attached to the base. Two nights of liberty give a welcome change-of-pace from the routine of patrols and life on the LST. Returning to the "T", boats leave Nha Be early in the morning, carrying mail and spare parts with them.

Our operation here on the Vam Co Dong is part of the Navy's "Operation Giant Slingshot". The Giant Slingshot area is a wedge-shape piece of land bounded by the Vam Co Dong river on the north and its southern relative, the Vam Co Tay.

The two are branches of the Vam Co River of which you may have heard in letters from the Rung Sat. The area is just north of the Mekong Delta and just below the plain of reeds. Cambodia is to our west. In the past, notably for last year's TET Offensive, the Viet Cong have been able to move men and supplies freely from Cambodian refuges to Saigon, about a two day march with a supply stop right in our wedge. Our task is to patrol the rivers, hindering enemy movement and locating his source of supplies and at the same time, to bring the people to the area closer knowledge of the Saigon government by means of Psychological Operations. We have been extremely successful on both counts. Our patrols have failed many crossing attempts and found several large caches of weapons and medical supplies. One night we even got material for VC PsyOps. There were several pounds of Vietnamese language newspapers and leaflets and two different types printed in English.

There are three rivers divisions on the Vam Co Dong, ^{2, Ben 2.1X}
We are the southernmost division with our base at Ben Luc, Tay Ninh is the top of the area patrolled by the northernmost division. The river runs in a generally northwestern direction from Ben Luc through rich, green country which supports many acres of rice paddies, pineapple and sugar cane fields. Most of the acreage was French owned prior to 1954, but the land is now largely in the hands of Vietnamese. Our area has the town of Ben Luc, a commercial center at the junction of the river and highway 4, the main link between Saigon and the Delta. The Ben Luc bridge is busy through all day light hours with traffic taking goods to the capital and finished products back to the Delta villages. The only other settlement in our area is the village of Luong Hoa, a large, clean village in the middle of the pineapple growing area. Luong Hoa was the central of several outlying hamlets until 2 1/2 years ago when the village priest persuaded the people that life would be more secure if everyone got together in one town. The village has a force of two ARVN companies for protection, and it has had very little trouble from the VC in the last few years. We gained the respect of the people quickly by preventing the VC from collecting "taxes" from the people while on their way to market. One, out of work tax collector, actually turned himself over to the government forces saying that we had put him out of business.

Our holidays over here were hot and busy, and not very different from the routine except for what each man felt in his heart or for the cards he had received. One patrol attended a feast and mid-winter Mass in Luong Hoa and came as close to Christmas at home as ¹

everyone in the area. The evening was peaceful, the singing of the children cheerful, and the food strange but tasty. "Here try some of this. I don't know what it is, but it's not bad".

As my year in Vietnam comes to an end and I look back I can vividly recall the few sad and many happy days spent here with the men of River Division 593. Having been the original Commanding Officer and watched us grow from a newly formed division into one of the most well known and talked about divisions in Vietnam, has been an unparalleled experience for me. The men, your husbands and sons are without a doubt the most professional hard working, and dedicated men I have had and most likely ever will have the pleasure with which to work.


Their devotion to duty and to God, our flag, and country is an example to me. When one thinks of their sacrifices to be here and the experiences we have lived through together it makes one wonder and the hair stand up on the back of one's neck. I'm very very proud to have been their commander and will never forget the outstanding work they have accomplished for us. I leave this command with regrets and fond memories to go to a billet, Commander Cruiser Destroyer Flotilla Four Staff in Norfolk, Virginia. My wonderful wife and three children are in our home in Virginia Beach and will be a welcome sight. Were it not for them I would elect to remain here for another tour in this billet, which is undoubtedly the most rewarding tour a junior officer could ever have.

My relief is a well qualified and enthusiastic officer who will find the job exhilarating as I have. LT Larry Bissonnette comes to us from a Destroyer Fleet Engineers job and a Military Advisory Group billet in the States. Our Operations Officer LT Keith De Clercq has been promoted to the job as Commander River Division 593, a great division in the States. We are happy for him but sad to see him go as his excellent background and hard charging work was a real asset to me. LTJG Jim Morgan has become our Operations Officer and LTJG Fred Peacey has relieved LTJG Morgan as Senior Patrol Officer/Division Officer. LTJG Pat Madden is our Awards/Training Officer and Warrant Officer I, Machinist Lynn Rishel is our Material Officer. No amount of praise that I could write would express my thanks and admiration for these officers and their outstanding work. To them our Chief Petty Officers, Boat Captains, boats crews, administrative and maintenance staffs and to you with your faith, prayers and encouragement from home I thank you all from the bottom of my heart for a job well done in the finest of Navy Tradition. It has been said before, Destroyers, Battleships, PT Boats, and Submarines have all had their time of Navy Fame.

I'm convinced our Black Peret, Brown Water sailors of the River Patrol Force will be the heroes of this conflict. I look forward to a reunion with this outfit in years to come.

A welcome mat is out at my home for each and every man and family of the division at any time. My continued prayers, good luck, and best wishes I leave with the division, my relief and you. God Bless and smooth sailing.

Sincerely,


William D. Straight
LT USN

F. S.

In relieving as Commanding Officer of a division from which one has heard so much praise even in the back water news areas of the U.S. I am left with a feeling of awe and admiration. The men of River Division 593 have gained a reputation as the most enthusiastic, hardest charging group of individuals ever assembled under one command in Vietnam. It is a great honor for me as well as a great challenge to become Commanding Officer of such a group.

I'm looking forward to meeting all of you via the postal system and hopefully some of you in person. Your husbands, sons, and fathers are carrying more than their share of the load here and each of you should be extremely proud.

With this I introduce myself, wish you all the best, and bid Bill Straight a fond farewell. If I can be of any assistance to any of the families of the men of River Division 593 please do not hesitate to write me.

Sincerely,


L. A. Eissonette
LT USN