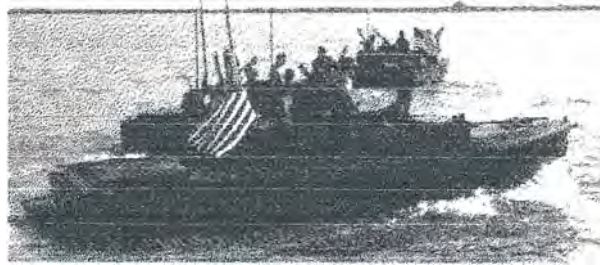


Strike Assault Boat

SQUADRON TWENTY (STABRON 20)

By CDR John Kirk Ferguson



Even though the twenty boats of Strike Assault Boat Squadron TWENTY (STABRON 20) operated in the Mekong Delta for just eleven months in 1970, the unique concept, design, and operation of these boats was an integral part of Operation GameWarden.

Soon after Vice Admiral Zumwalt took command of Naval Forces, Vietnam, at the end of September 1968, he and his staff became most impressed with the Light SEAL Support Craft (LSSC), and the concept for the Strike Assault Boat (STAB) was born. The Admiral envisioned high-speed strikes into areas not accessible to PBRs or FCFs. Admiral Zumwalt did not want procurement delayed, so they had to have an existing hull with a fast, extremely silent, very low silhouette, shallow draft, highly maneuverable, armored boat transportable by helicopter, and a speed of 35 knots. A new type of LSSC was ideal and it was already in the final design states.

Under a \$2.2 million dollar U.S. Navy contract, the Grafton Boat Company, Grafton, Illinois, built 22 STABs. These boats had three unique characteristics no other boat in the Republic of Vietnam had: (1) fast acceleration and high speeds of 40 to 45 knots, (2) very quiet operations at slow speeds due to sound-proofing of the engine compartments, and (3) a very low silhouette, since there was no canopy. Frequently, the slap of the water on the hull would identify the location of the boat before the noise from the engines would be heard.

The boats were 26 feet, 2 inches long, with a 10 foot, 4 inch beam, a 3 foot, 9 inch draft, and each boat weighed about 15,000 pounds. The aluminum hull had an inner liner of ceramic armor which stopped small caliber bullets and caused larger projectiles to fragment inside the crew's cockpit was a flak blanket of many layers of nylon, on both port and starboard sides, for the shrapnel to embed itself.

Each STAB was completely Styrofoam-filled from bow to stem to prevent capsizing if damaged. The boat, if holed, would sink to the gunwale and no further.

Unlike the LSSC, each STAB had two 325 horsepower gasoline powered Mercruiser III, 427 cubic inch engines

located in nearly sound-proof, separate, watertight compartments; each engine had an outdrive and propeller. The STAB could accelerate from dead-in-the-water to 40 knots in about 15 seconds. Each boat had two 150 gallon, foam-filled, self-sealing rubber bladders located under the floor plate in the crew's cockpit, below the waterline.

All boats had a Pathfinder, LN 66, relative bearing radar and fathometer. The fathometer provided accurate depths even with only one foot of water under the keel.

The normal armament consisted of two M-60 aft or one M-60 machine guns on the forward pintle mounts and either two M-60's aft or one M-60 and one MK 20 automatic grenade launcher (firing 40 MM low velocity grenades). Occasionally, .50 caliber machine guns were substituted for one or both of the M-60's forward.

All STAB crews also took a Starlight Scope (night vision device) on every night patrol. Boats were also equipped with FM radios with frequencies both in the clear and secure voice.

Soon after LCDR Ferguson's arrival at NIOTC, as the Officer in Charge of the Strike Assault Boat Squadron, four Patrol Officers and thirty five enlisted personnel reported to NIOTC to form the personnel nucleus of STABRON 20. The remaining contingent of personnel arrived within several weeks and boat training went into full swing.

Since there were no STABs at NIOTC, personnel completed the standard PBR and riverine assault craft courses. Several boats arrived at NIOTC just a week to ten days before the first contingent of personnel flew to Saigon in November 1969. Since none of the boats had arrived in-country, there was no mission for the personnel. As a result, STABRON 20 patrol officers and enlisted personnel augmented *PBR* and riverine assault craft operations.

Twenty Strike Assault Boats were shipped by 15T to the Naval Support Activities Detachment (NAVSUPACT DET), Dong Tam, in early January 1970; the other two boats were retained at NIOTC for training purposes. Within a week the boats were assembled and transited the Mekong River north to An Long, where the USS BENEWAH (APB-35) was anchored. The BENEWAH was designated the mother-ship for the STABs and squadron personnel.

The typical STAB crew was comprised of four sailors: a coxswain, a boat engineer, a gunner's mate, and a line handler; the gunner or coxswain served as boat captain. A patrol officer was generally assigned to every three or four STABs on patrol.

The original STAB mission of high-speed, surprise strikes against the enemy had changed with the advent of the SEALORDS campaign. The STABs went to work in Operation BARRIER REEF which was the 43-mile east-west Grand Canal, from the northern Mekong River village of An Long, on the west, eastward to Tuyen Nhon on the Yam Co Tay (river). From January until mid-June 1970 the twenty STABs were integrated into PBR and riverine assault craft night Waterborne Guard Post (WBGp) ambush positions along the Grand Canal.

As result of a U.S. Presidential Order, on 9 May 1970, ten STABs accompanied a flotilla of combined Vietnamese-American combat units that transited the northern Mekong River, across the Cambodian border to Neak Luong, a strategic ferry crossing linking Highway 1 between Phnon Penh and Saigon. Several days were spent at the ferry crossing, enough time for U.S. Navy divers to refloat a vehicle/ personnel ferry that had been sunk by Communists several years before.

During the brief six and one-half months of operations on the Grand Canal, the unique characteristics of the STAB provided an excellent vehicle for 330 Resource Control sorties and 2,172 Waterborne Guardpost sorties on BARRIER REEF operations. A total of 31 firefights between the STABs and the enemy resulted in 43 enemy killed in action. Sadly, four STAB boat crewmen were also killed during this period engagements with the enemy.

In July 1970, two divisions of STABs were formed with ten boats each. In mid-August 1970, both divisions left Operation BARRIER REEF and STABDIV 201 and commenced operations in Tran Huong Dao EIGHT out of Dong Tam. They set nighttime WBGp duties, daylight troop/SEAL platoon insertion and extraction operations along

the canals which fan out from Dong Tam. STABDIV 202's ten boats, operated out of the support activity of Nha Be. They provided security escort for deep draft shipping on the 25 mile Long Tau shipping channel between the open ocean and Saigon.

On 1 August 1970, the command of Operation BARRIER REEF shifted to the RVN Navy and was renamed Tran Hung Dao NINE.

Since the boat was unique in RVN in so many ways, including the gasoline powered engines, the decision was been made to return the boats to the United States. STABRON 20 was never involved with the Accelerated Turnover Program (ACTOV).

One night, 3 April 1970, while waiting for authorization to open fire, one of the STABs in a WBGP on the Grand Canal was preemptively attacked by the enemy. It was a smothering attack of machine gun and anti-tank (B-40) rockets which resulted in the instantaneous deaths of three boat crew members, gravely injuring the fourth member of the crew, and minor injuries to the embarked patrol officer. These sailors did not have an opportunity to return the enemy fire. The three men killed were: EN3 Edward J. Baker, USN, GMG3 George R. Crabtree, USN, and FN Joseph D. Johns, USN.

On the night of 20 March 1970, SN Daniel Case, USN, was shot while his STAB was in WBGP on the Grand Canal. A medical "dust-off" helicopter evacuated him to the Third Surgical Hospital in Binh Thuy and he was subsequently transferred to a hospital in Saigon where he died on 11 April 1970.

On 17 October 1970, both STABDIVs ceased all operations in their respective areas and returned to Dong Tam to deactivate all twenty boats. The Stabs were then loaded on board an LST for transshipment to Boat Support Unit ONE located at the U.S. Naval Amphibious Base, Coronado, and San Diego, CA. After their year in-country was completed, all STABRON 20 personnel returned to the United States for some well-deserved leave and relaxation.

The STABs were placed in storage in San Diego and their engines were removed. Many of them were eventually sunk as targets.