

Vietnam documentary features local vets

By Sgt. 1st Class Patrick McDonald
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For some, the Brown Water Navy was a way of life during the Vietnam War; for others, their first introduction to it was the movie, "Apocalypse Now." Forty years later the members of the River Division 593 are getting their just recognition thanks to the Discovery Channel and a group of recently returned, Fort Lewis-based, Iraq War vets.

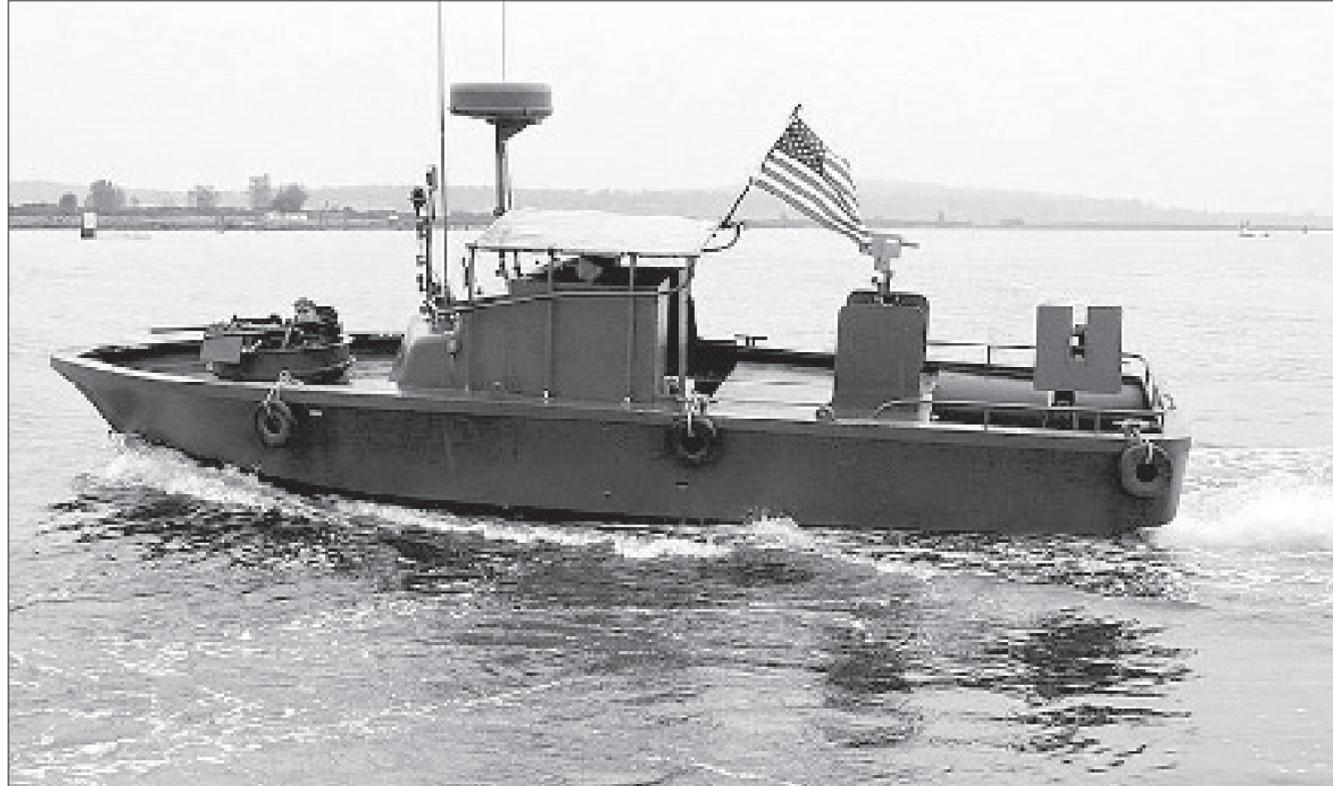
Anyone who has seen "Apocalypse Now" will remember the U.S. Navy river boats that plied the waters of the South Vietnam as part of Task Force 116's Operation Game Warden. For those who served on these boats, the movie was a double-edged sword.

"It was pure BS," noted retired Senior Chief and boat captain Heinz Hicketier, current president of the local "Game wardens" Chapter. "The only good that comes out of the motion picture fantasy is the fact that it shed light on a little-known piece of Vietnam War history, the patrol boats.

A few months ago the Discovery Channel and Military Channel were preparing a documentary on the exploits of the Brownwater Navy. They contacted the Swift Boat Association looking for an operational Swift Boat. The only operational boat they knew of was a "Patrol Boat - River" located near Everett, Wash. That PBR is one of the only intact and operational PBRs known in existence. Made of fiberglass, the small riverboat depicted in "Apocalypse Now" was used by the production crew.

The documentary producer also asked for assistance from Everett Naval Base and Fort Lewis for active-duty personnel to play members of the crew. Unfortunately, regulations did not allow for that so the Game wardens local chapter vice-president, Bob Brower contacted his neighbor, Lt. Col. Steven Ford, commander of the Army Reserve's 448th Civil Affairs Battalion, for some assistance. Six recently returned Iraq war vets from the 448th answered the call and played roles in the documentary.

Members of the Game wardens Northwest Chapter visited the 448th during their regular battle training assembly on April 15, to personally thank those who helped with the filming. They brought photographs of their time plying the waters of South Vietnam and a small-scale version of their patrol boat. Soldiers of the 448th were able to watch the documentary supplied by the visiting Brownwater Navy members and watched their own play roles sometimes to loud



Photos by Staff Sgt. Jeffrey Robinson

One of the only surviving River Patrol Boats from the Vietnam War is taken out on the rivers around Everett during filming of the Discovery Channel's portrayal of the role of patrol boats during the Vietnam War.



Staff Sgt. Lorenzo Currie, Staff Sgt. Harvey Jones and Sgt. Matthew Bissell wait in the high grass near Everett as they prepare to film an episode of the Vietnam War Experience series.

applause and other times to respectful silence.

"Being part of the filming was a great experience," noted Staff Sgt. Jeffrey Robinson of the 448th who played a Navy boat captain. "Having been to Iraq and experienced combat — everything

seemed to be the same. We prepared the same way and made decisions the same way. We were just playing different people in a different war."

For Staff Sgt. Lorenzo Currie, it was an experience that made him more aware of the contributions the Navy made to the

overall Vietnam War experience.

"Before this I did not realize the part played by the Navy during Vietnam. I think this documentary will go a long ways to commemorate that role as well as the individuals who were part of it," he said.

"With us they did not have to teach us how to handle weapons or react to enemy fire," Sgt. 1st Class Chris Dorsey said. "It just would not have been realistic with untrained civilians. I was honored to be part of this."

The appreciation was shared by members of the Game wardens Northwest Chapter.

Gunner's Mate Tom Restemayer noted "the 448th saved our bacon in coming through when they did. Without them we would not have been able to do this as realistic as was portrayed by these Iraq war vets.

"They understood what was like, and you saw that in their faces while they played their roles," he said. "They actually know what combat is."

During the Vietnam War, Navy PBR

patrols consisted of two boats; each boat had a crew of four: a boat captain (E-6), gunners mate (E-4 or 5), engineman (E-4 or 5), and a seaman. Each two-boat patrol had a patrol officer who was a chief petty officer or a junior commissioned officer.

The chief job was offensive operations against the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army: setting up night ambushes at suspected enemy crossing points, supporting the SEAL's with gun-fire and transportation, and enforcing curfew restrictions in their sector, usually no more than 35 nautical miles from the base.

Game Warden sailors boarded more than 40,000 vessels, inspecting them for enemy personnel and contraband. In the process, the River Patrol Force destroyed, damaged, or captured 2,000 Viet Cong craft and killed, wounded, or captured more than 1,400 of the enemy.

The U.S. Navy PBR patrols suffered the loss of 143 officers and men killed, and 8 missing in battle. More than 1,500 Purple Hearts were awarded to members of the Brown Water Navy.