

Sampan Shakedown

by SP4 Gerald Henkel
UpTight Asst. Editor

Photos by SP5 Peter A. Garfield
Hq. USARV

"It's unusual for soldiers to find themselves working on boats," said Platoon Sergeant Eugene Anderson, "but then our mission is also unusual. We sit on a powder keg."

The uncommon mission of 3rd Platoon, 560th Military Police Company is to patrol a seven-mile stretch of the Nha Be River by boat. The "powder keg" lies off the village of Cat Lai in the center of the mile-wide river. Rocking in the brown water at three, deep-water anchorages lie ocean-going freighters, their names and home ports showing on steel hulls: *Pacific Victory*, Los Angeles; *Hawaiian Victory*, Honolulu, and *Victory Drake*, San Francisco. Their holds are full of high explosive munitions.

At the Cat Lai ammunition discharge point, the freighters unload tons of artillery rounds, Claymore mines and grenades on to shallow-draft barges that transport the munitions up the river to the Port of Saigon. The freighters discharge nearly 50,000 tons of explosives a month.

The big ships must lie idle while they are unloaded, making them prime targets for Viet Cong saboteurs. To combat attempts at sabotage, the MP platoon constantly patrols the river. River patrol boats (PBRs), powered by two, 250-horsepower inboard diesels, carry their police crews through the water at speeds greater than 30 mph.

A Vietnamese National Policeman and a Vietnamese

Military Policeman (QC) ride aboard each patrol with the U.S. Army MPs. The National Police have traded to the Americans their familiar black berets for the patch of the 18th MP Brigade in a gesture of mutual respect. The presence and team work of the Vietnamese nationals and their American allies on board the PBRs, have shown the river travelers that the police forces can cooperate effectively. The combined authority of all three forces is seldom questioned by the sampan owners.

The MPs patrolling the river maintain radio contact from each boat to their Tactical Operation Center (TOC). When necessary, the TOC coordinates with the Army and Air Force for artillery and air strikes or infantry support from the nearby 9th Infantry Division.

Armed with twin .50 caliber machine guns on the bow, another .50 caliber machine gun at the stern and an automatic grenade launcher amidship, the PBRs patrol "at the ready." Knowing that Charlie may be watching, the MPs are careful not to allow their maneuvers to fall into a pattern that can be predicted or timed. A patrol may cruise slowly along the uninhabited stretches of shoreline looking for signs of enemy activity, then suddenly speed across to the opposite bank to inspect a sampan floating downstream.

All sampans traveling on the river are carefully checked to insure that they do not have contraband, explosives or weapons on board. The patrols board as many as 60 sampans in a 12-hour shift on the river. Sampans are also prohibited from approaching within 200 yards of the anchored ammunition freighters. The patrol boat policemen see that they don't.

The inspection can be a touchy affair. The MPs pull alongside the sampans as they travel on the river, and identification papers are checked and a thorough search made of the vessel. The soldiers are constantly alert for booby traps, false floors and hidden explosives. "Maybe I haven't been to church recently," said Corporal Don Stockwell, "but I sure have prayed a lot on those sampans."

Contraband material and products destined for the black market are confiscated. Persons who have contraband in their possession are detained and turned over to Vietnamese officials for questioning.

In addition to identifying and destroying Viet Cong

Sampans and cargo barges using waterways near Saigon are protected by U.S. flag-carrying Army patrol boats.

