



HOMECOMING—Air cushion craft return home to Cat Lo after six-day hunt. *Rt:* PACV approaches VC sampan.

Battle on the Plain

THREE MECHANICAL “monsters” skimmed across the Plain of Reeds. In their trail, the high grass of the swampy terrain lay beaten down from the air blast which seemingly carried the machines effortlessly over the marsh.

“Quai Vat!” the Viet Cong guerrilla fighters shouted, paddling their sampans away as fast as possible. (Quai Vat is the VC term for monsters.)

Some of the enemy tried to conceal themselves by submerging under the muddy surface—breathing through the hollow stems for which the Plain of Reeds is named.

The sight alone of the roaring Navy craft as they moved in convinced many of the guerrillas to surrender immediately. Others were persuaded when machine gun fire reached the location of the elusive hideouts.

Operation Quai Vat, pronounced “kwai vat,” began in mid-November

when three U. S. Navy Patrol Air Cushion Vehicles (PACVs) left their base at Cat Lo on the Vietnamese coast 35 miles southeast of Saigon. Their assignment would take them deep inland.

MOVING on a cushion of air at speeds up to 65 miles per hour, the 39-foot-long craft can travel over water or any relatively flat surface. Combining speed, maneuverability and a zero draft, the British-inspired machines arrived in South Vietnam last May for test and evaluation.

The journey from Cat Lo to Moc Hoa—a distance of 150 miles northwest—took the vehicles up the myriad rivers and canals of the Mekong Delta.

On the morning of 21 November, Operation Quai Vat began in full. It was to be a joint effort, combining Vietnamese Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) troops with U. S. Army Special Forces advisors

and Navy and Army helicopters.

The Vietnamese-American team intended to catch enemy guerrillas as they tried to escape.

FANNING OUT from the base at Moc Hoa, the PACVs worked closely with the aerial gunships—the UH-1B *Huey* helicopters. Equipped with dual machine guns themselves, the hovercraft swept across the swampy fields looking for “black pajamas.”

Routed from concealment beneath the reeds or pulled from their sampans, the captured VC guerrillas were loaded aboard the roaring monsters.

When the day’s operations were completed, 32 sampans had been damaged and various supplies, mostly rice, captured. The suspects were turned over to the province chief for questioning.

The following day, the combined forces experienced their heaviest action. Encountering what one PACV

CAPTURED CONG—Crewmen of PACV take Viet Cong prisoner aboard. *Rt:* Quai Vat roars across marsh after VC.





of Reeds

TEAMED TOGETHER—Navy copters become aerial eyes for crew of the 'mechanical monsters' as they hunt the enemy.

operator described as a "flotilla of enemy sampans," the PACVs and gunships successfully blocked the VC escape routes as CIDG/Special Forces troops were airlifted to comb the area.

Some days later, in an area some 16 miles south of Moc Hoa, the PACV Division commanding officer, Lieutenant Kenneth H. Luenser, reported a number of the enemy killed and a group of Viet Cong taken prisoner by his three craft.

At the end of the Operation Quai Vat, Lieutenant Commander Charles H. Billings, officer in tactical command of the PACVs in the operation, commented on his participation.

"It was an unusual experience directing the PACV operations—in rice paddies." As a naval officer, he added, "I couldn't help feeling a little funny about being 60 miles inland." —Bob Martin, LTJG, USN



RIDING HIGH—Patrol Air Cushion Vehicle skims across the Plain of Reeds. Below: Officers-in-charge of PACVs make plans for the day's operations.

