

Wallace, Robert; Melton, H. Keith; Schlesinger, Henry R., 2008. **Spycraft: The Secret History of the CIA's Spys, from Communism to Al-Qaeda** (pp. 277-284). Penguin Publishing Group.

Chapter 17: War by Any Other Name

TSD (Technical Services Division) became engaged in Vietnam as early as 1961, when a marine engineer was dispatched to Hong Kong to overhaul Agency-purchased Chinese junks. Although still conventional in appearance, the junks were far from ordinary by the time the engineer was done with them. The tech replaced the standard propulsion systems with Gray Marine 671 diesel engines that boosted speed from a modest three knots to impressive fifteen knots. He also added a pair of 55-gallon fuel drums lashed to the masts concealing .50 caliber machine guns and a battery of camouflaged 3.5-inch rockets on top of the wheelhouse rigged to a firing switch within the captain's easy reach. Finally, the engineer built a covered hiding place beneath the deck for a pair of crewmen armed with 9mm Swedish K submachine guns. The junks were deployed for covert patrol and infiltration operations along the Vietnamese coast north of the DMZ. If approached by a hostile patrol boat, the junk's reaction was both surprising and devastating.

A seaworthy rubber raft known as the Zodiac, which grew out of a TSS project code-named RB-12 during the Korean Conflict, became the mainstay of amphibious infiltration operations into North Vietnam. These rafts carried landing teams launched by the modified junk mother ships to the insertion points along the coast. To track the rafts after launching, the techs adapted cherry top flashers similar to those used on early police cars, lining them with Kodak gelatin filters (numbers 87, 87C, 88A, or 89B) through which light only in the infrared spectrum passed. When lit from within, the covert flashers were invisible to the naked eye, but could be seen by using a T-7 metascope—a hand-held, battery-operated infrared optical device.

Training of poorly motivated Vietnamese guerilla fighters proved problematic. "The Vietnamese government provided the requisite numbers of bodies for sabotage and harassment operations, but they were unqualified, and difficult to train," Jameson explained. "Many of the young men they supplied were just people the government wanted to get off the streets, city kids, and not country boys who understood how to hunt and shoot. We kept saying, without much response, 'give us some country boys, and don't give us these city thugs.'"

This became apparent during one covert mission that called for a CIA-trained four-man Vietnamese team to infiltrate the North and destroy a bridge on Highway 1, cutting off—at least temporarily—a major Vietcong supply route. As planned, the team would launch from the junk in a Zodiac raft, land on the beach, trek five miles inland to the bridge, plant the time-delayed charge, then hike back to the Zodiac hidden on the beach and return to the junk.

On the night of the operation, the team launched on schedule and began reporting their location by radio as the Zodiac approached the landing site. At the command post on the junk, Jameson noted the progress as the team reported reaching "point one," "point two," and "point three." The mission looked good. A few minutes later came the next report: "point three," then "point two."

Clearly, the team was returning. When the Zodiac pulled alongside the junk, one of the Vietnamese team members pointed to water in the bottom of the raft from what seemed to be a leak.

Jameson, skeptical, inspected the raft and found multiple holes— all made by knife blades. When questioned, team members admitted that after launch they had become frightened and sabotaged the mission. “Those guys went to jail,” Jameson recounted, “but we learned an important lesson. Find a higher caliber of agent. We recruited four Nungs and trained them for the operation.”

Several weeks later the Nung team launched from the same junk and encountered no trouble reaching the beach, landing, or finding the right trail to the bridge. Following the operational plan, they attached the explosive charges to the bridge support structure. Once secured, they activated the time-delay devices and departed the area using a different trail than the one used to approach the target. Overhead photos the next day confirmed that the bridge “dropped” exactly as planned.

Other high-value targets called for a more creative approach. A North Vietnamese petroleum depot that provided fuel for equipment moving into South Vietnam was one such a target. Unlike the bridge, the heavily guarded facility was surrounded by chain-link fences and unapproachable by saboteurs using conventional explosive charges. Since air strikes were not authorized at that stage of the war, the most effective option was to attack from a “stand off” position. A rocket attack could potentially take out the fuel tanks, but only if a small team could carry enough firepower close to the target. Then they would have to set up, aim precisely, and fire all the rockets for a reasonable chance of hitting the fuel tanks and elude whatever response the attack elicited.

The solution devised by TSD would later be called the Triple Tube Rocket Launcher. “The genesis of the Triple Tube Launcher, what we called the TTL, started with a single antitank rocket fired from an improvised launcher that wasn’t much more than a piece of angle iron,” said one tech who followed the development of the device. “The original concept was to fire a 3.5-inch antitank rocket by stuffing a wad of match heads and time fuse in the back end. Crude but simple, it was used in urban guerilla warfare scenarios like the Hungarian uprising with a civilian population combating tanks. We thought that if one rocket was good, then three ought to do a better job with greater chance of hitting a target. So we set the rockets with a three-degree spread between tubes and added electrical firing for more precise command and control.”

The three-tube launcher was mounted on a modified backpack frame that allowed team members to accurately sight and adjust inclination. “We tried to do all this so the saboteurs didn’t have to do any thinking,” Jameson explained. “They’d just go in there and go right to the place where they’ve been shown, aim it like this, raise it, hit two buttons, and go.” For the rockets to penetrate the tanks’ steel and ignite the fuel inside, the techs added incendiary adaptors, aluminum packages filled with magnesium, that would burn fiercely when exposed to oxygen after the initial explosion.

Time delays were attached to the launcher package, allowing the team to initiate the firing sequence and head out of the area before launch. "We didn't want to have our guys firing the rockets, then running like hell for nine miles to the boats," said Jameson. "So we adapted time-delay mechanisms that gave the team several hours to get back to the rubber boats and head downriver before the rockets went off."

To prevent spent rocket launchers from later being used against American troops, the techs added a self-destruct mechanism with half a pound of explosives to destroy the unit after firing. But that left another concern. If an enemy patrol discovered the launchers before they fired, the NVA would acquire an effective weapon. TSD engineers responded by incorporating an antidisturbance device. If tampering was detected after the safety was removed, the rockets launched automatically and 1.35 seconds later, the explosives detonated.

Another TSD innovation, the firefight simulator, resembled a collection of fireworks and other explosives, set on a timer. The device mimicked the sound of automatic weapons fire, mortars, and grenades. U.S. military units infiltrated the simulators into enemy base camps to create diversion and confusion. In one instance, when the device went off in the middle of the night, the panicked and disoriented North Vietnamese began shooting each other.