

MYSTERY OF THE MISSING SWIFT BOAT

IN A STRANGE AND CONVOLUTED ACTION DURING THE VIETNAM WAR, PCF-19 WAS LOST IN ACTION. HOWEVER, WAS THE LOSS DUE TO NORTH VIETNAMESE HELICOPTERS, USAF PHANTOMS, OR UNIDENTIFIED FLYING OBJECTS?

BY SAMUEL J. COX



PCF-94 at speed. The PCFs were certainly not the most elegant of vessels but they were some of the most effective of the Vietnam War.

During the Vietnam War, four Swift boats were lost in combat. Seven more were lost to heavy seas or bad weather and some of these were destroyed after transfer to the South Vietnamese Navy.

The four lost in combat include: *PCF-4* which was destroyed by a command-detonated mine during February 1966 that resulted in four sailors being killed and two wounded. *PCF-41* was initially damaged by heavy shore fire and a mine during May 1966 and was later abandoned (deemed unsalvageable) with one killed and others wounded. *PCF-43* came under recoilless rifle and rocket fire during April 1969 and was beached and burned when its cargo of explosives detonated, killing four sailors. The subject of this story, *PCF-19*, is a Swift boat that has remained lost in the fog of war, although an initial investigation stated the vessel was sunk by USAF aircraft.



PCF-38 heads out for patrol.

On 31 March 1968, President Lyndon Johnson unilaterally called a halt to American bombing north of the 19th parallel but USN/USMC aircraft from carriers on Yankee Station and USAF aircraft from bases in Thailand and South Vietnam continued to hit targets in North Vietnam, north of the demilitarized zone (DMZ) between the 17th and 19th parallels. This meant there were many aircraft crowded into a relatively small airspace with what some senior commanders at the time assessed as inadequate command and control.

Johnson's blundering let the communists move radar-guided missile batteries from the heavily-defended

areas of Hanoi and Haiphong into the confined space where American aircraft were still operating. To North Vietnam, this "good will" gesture on Johnson's part gave them the opportunity to destroy many more American aircraft. Thus, the sky over the southern part of North Vietnam was now more dangerous than ever.

During the spring of 1968, US Marine Corps and other observers reported on mysterious lights seen at night flying just north of the DMZ and even out over the water between North Vietnam and Tiger Island (held by the NVA). With a sense of humor, Americans referred to these as "UFOs"