SEWART YARD BUSY WITH BIG DEFENSE CONTRACT

A former South Louisiana oil field worker, recently arrived for duty with the U.S. armed services in Viet Nam, rubbed his eyes and did a double-take as he viewed a sleek gray 50-foot vessel maneuvering for a landing at an unnamed Vietnamese harbor.

"As I live and breathe," he exclaimed. "It's a Louisiana crewboat."

Then he thought for a moment and asked himself. "But what on earth is a crewboat doing 9,000 miles from home?"

Numerous other Louisianians familiar with the crewboat and now serving in Viet Nam have probably been equally mystified.

Somber gray paint and briskly stirring armament are the only outward indications that these boats are not the traditional workhorses of the offshore oil industry.

The hulls and cabins are identical to those of many crewboats, and so is their blistering speed. The Navy doesn't say just how fast they are, but...

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Defense Contract:

Continued from page 1. The official nickname "Swift" is a tip-off in this direction.

For the past several months, Sewart Seacraft has been busily turning out Swift boats for the Navy under more than $13.5 million contracts won in competition with several other major boat building yards.

As a Sewart executive explains, "The performance of our 50-foot aluminum crewboat was an almost precise match for the Navy patrol boat specifications. Both types of boats must offer extremely high speed, great maneuverability, be capable of operating in either deep or shallow water, and provide stable platforms in very rough water."

Sewart's experience in boat building was another important factor. The Sewart yards on Bayou Teche at Berwick have turned out more crewboats than any other manufacturer in the entire world.

Almost 90 percent of all crewboats being built by Sewart today are constructed of aluminum, so this was the natural choice for the Swift. Every integral part of the boats, with the exception of engines, shafts, propellers, rudders and steering gear, is fabricated from aluminum.

The Swift's motive power comes from a matched pair of General Motors Diesel engines, the same type of engines used to power in overwhelming percentage of Louisiana's vast crewboat fleet.

Most of the Swift construction cycle is handled under a single roof inside the new Sewart fabrication shed, a mammoth steel room measuring almost as long as two football fields laid end to end. Welded aluminum ribs made in Sewar's yards are locked into place in a unique "jig" at the beginning of the production line. While longitudinal stringers are welded into place, other workers begin cutting the huge sheets of special alloy aluminum that form the outer skin of the vessel.

These sheets are carefully bent by master shipfitters until they conform to the graceful lines of the frame. Welders take over to fasten the skin into a single watertight unit capable of withstanding the tremendous stresses and strains of high-speed operation.

The partially completed hull is then turned right side up by an overhead crane and lifted onto a specially designed self-propelled dolly that can be moved speedily to any plant location.

The next step is to weld deck plates into place. Meanwhile, the aluminum wheelhouse and cabin have been fabricated and hoisted into place on top the hull.

After the deck and cabin are completely welded up, grinders go over the entire boat with abrasive wheels to smooth out any rough spots resulting from the welding while inspectors double-check every procedure to make sure they conform to both Sewart's and the Navy's exacting standards.

The entire boat is sand-blasted to prepare it for painting, after which the big General Motors Diesels are lowered onto the engine mounts. Highly skilled mechanics line up the shafts to microtome tolerances while other workers install fuel tanks, fresh water tanks, the electrical system, and control apparatus.

The last job calls for installing radio, radar equipment, and armament and giving the entire boat a coating of regulation Navy gray paint.

At last, the boats are backed into Bayou Teche and taken down the Atchafalaya river to the Gulf of Mexico for extensive testing.

The Swift boats are being built by Sewart for the U.S. Navy Bureau of Ships under supervision of the Supervisor of Shipbuilding, Eighth Naval District.