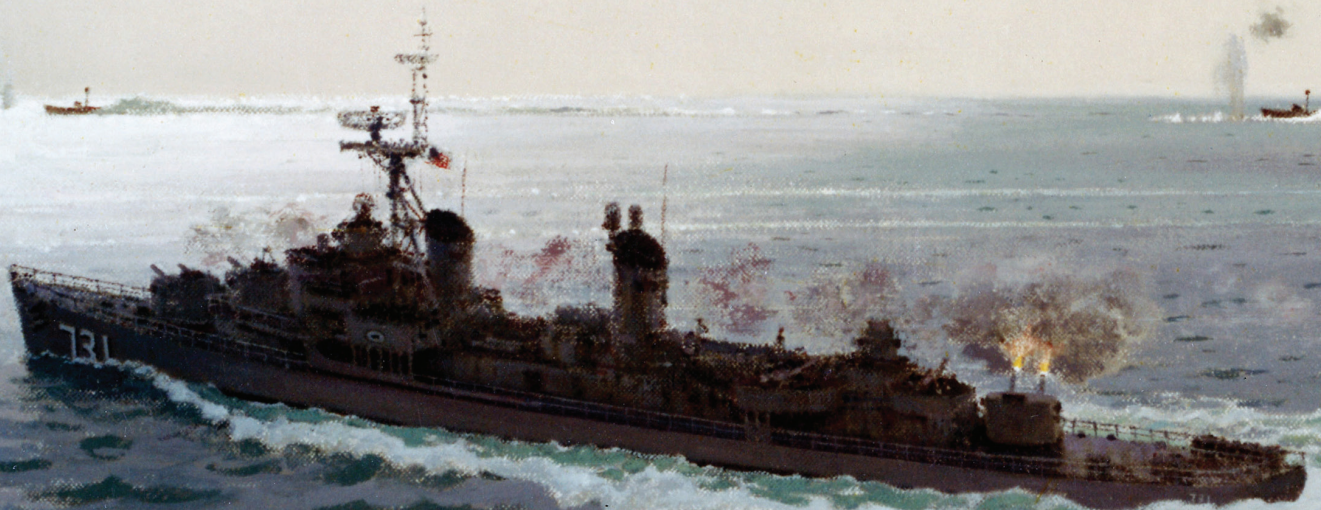


# THE DAYBOOK

A PUBLICATION OF THE HAMPTON ROADS NAVAL MUSEUM VOLUME 21 ISSUE 1





## HAMPTON ROADS NAVAL MUSEUM STAFF

### DIRECTOR

John Pentangelo

### DEPUTY DIRECTOR

Joseph Judge

### DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION

Laura Orr

### DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION

Elijah Palmer

### EDITOR

Clayton Farrington

### EXHIBITS SPECIALIST

Don Darcy

### REGISTRAR

Katherine Renfrew

### VOLUNTEER COORDINATOR

Tom Dandes

### LIBRARIAN/ADMIN OFFICER

Angelique Payne

### EDUCATION

Diana Gordon

Joseph Miechle

Reece Nortum

Anthony J. Orlikoff

### DIRECTOR,

### HAMPTON ROADS NAVAL HISTORICAL FOUNDATION

Capt. Tom Smith, USN (Ret.)

**COVER:** This oil on canvas painted by Commander E.J. Fitzgerald in January 1965 depicts the engagement between USS *Maddox* (DD-731) and three North Vietnamese motor torpedo boats on August 2, 1964. The U.S. response to the North Vietnamese attack in the Gulf of Tonkin marked the beginning of the Navy's air and surface bombardments against North Vietnam. During the course of the war, Navy surface vessels steamed up and down the coasts of both North and South Vietnam, intercepting enemy communications and raining down shells on a variety of targets. (*Courtesy of the Navy Art Collection*)

# THE DAYBOOK

*The Daybook*® is a registered trademark of the Hampton Roads Naval Museum (HRNM), Department of the Navy, an agency of the United States Government. It is an authorized publication of HRNM, ISSN 2380-4181. Its contents do not necessarily reflect the official view of the U.S. Government, the Department of Defense, the U.S. Navy, or the U.S. Marine Corps and do not imply endorsement thereof. Book reviews are solely the opinion of the reviewer.



The HRNM reports to the Naval History and Heritage Command, Museums Operation Division ([www.history.navy.mil](http://www.history.navy.mil)). The museum is dedicated to the study of naval history in the Hampton Roads region. HRNM is accredited by the American Alliance of Museums.



*The Daybook's* purpose is to educate and inform readers on historical topics and museum-related events. It is written by staff and volunteers.

Direct questions or comments to the Editor at (757) 322-3107, Fax (757) 445-1867, E-mail [hnavalnmuseum@navy.mil](mailto:hnavalnmuseum@navy.mil) or write *The Daybook*, Hampton Roads Naval Museum, One Waterside Drive, Suite 248, Norfolk, Virginia 23510-1607. The museum is on the World Wide Web at [www.hrnmm.navy.mil](http://www.hrnmm.navy.mil).

*The Daybook* is published quarterly. To subscribe, contact the Hampton Roads Naval Historical Foundation at (757) 445-9932 or visit <http://www.hrnhf.org>.





# CONTENTS



From the founding of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) after the Geneva Agreement of 1954 until U.S. military involvement in Vietnam reached a turning point following the Gulf of Tonkin Incident roughly a decade later, Coastal Force junks such as these painted by Commander E.J. Fitzgerald, manned by Vietnamese sailors and American advisors, were the backbone of the anti-infiltration effort along the South Vietnamese coastline. (Courtesy of the Navy Art Collection)

## FEATURES

### THE 10,000-DAY WAR AT SEA: A THREAT ON THE HORIZON

- 3 Part I: In Vietnam, Two Nations Are Born
- 10 Part II: U.S. Naval Forces Join the Fight

## DEPARTMENTS

- 2 FROM THE DIRECTOR: "VOICES FROM VIETNAM"
- 20 HRNM VIETNAM ORAL HISTORY PROJECT, PART I:  
THROUGH A SAILOR'S EYES: THE TONKIN GULF INCIDENT



## Voices from Vietnam

The Hampton Roads Naval Museum is proud to announce the upcoming exhibition, *The 10,000-Day War at Sea: The U.S. Navy in Vietnam, 1950-1975*. Comprising half of our permanent gallery, the exhibition will immerse visitors in the immense role played by the United States Navy in the Vietnam War. Using the U.S. Navy's rich historical collections, multi-media presentations, and interactive components, the exhibit will encourage family learning, thoughtful discourse, and recognition of the war's naval activities.



Fifty years later, Americans continue to grapple with the meaning and the legacy of the Vietnam War. Politics, protest, and patriotism are forever entwined in any conversation about this twentieth-century conflict. While war-related literature, film, music, and television are ever-present, they often neglect America's Navy.

The service of over 1.8 million Sailors empowered the United States military in virtually every aspect of the war--at sea, on land, and in the air. Their experience had lasting effects on the Navy that are still with us today. So what did the U.S. Navy do in Vietnam? This exhibit will answer that question.

To lead up to the exhibition and commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the war's high point in 1968, the next five issues of *The Daybook* will focus exclusively on the Navy's activities in Vietnam. These include the roles of the surface forces, riverine patrols, air power, logistics, and intelligence. The featured articles are edited treatments of the recently published nine-volume series:



*The U.S. Navy and the Vietnam War*. We thank the Naval History and Heritage Command and the Naval Historical Foundation for their permission and assistance.

By including the voices of local Vietnam veterans from all walks of life, *The 10,000-Day War at Sea* seeks to promote meaningful connections between these history makers and active duty sailors, other veterans, and the general public. One year ago, the museum embarked on an oral history program to capture the stories of Vietnam-era Navy veterans who reside in the Hampton Roads region. Each issue in *The Daybook's* five-part series will feature excerpts of these oral histories. Many of the veterans will be featured in the exhibition and all of the interviews will be deposited with the Veterans History Project at the Library of Congress.

Thank you to all of our Vietnam veterans who served in the United States Navy. If you or someone you know wants to participate in the Vietnam oral history program, please call (757) 322-3108 for more information.

The exhibit is scheduled to open on Memorial Day 2019. Until then, Happy Reading!





# Part I: IN VIETNAM, TWO NATIONS ARE BORN

By Edward J. Marolda

The United States emerged from World War II as a military, political, and economic colossus. American leaders were determined never to allow a return to the destructive isolationist foreign policy of the prewar years or the rise of any nation that could launch another surprise attack on the United States—there would be no more Pearl Harbors. Accordingly, the United States government prepared to exert strong influence over the course of events in postwar Asia.

At the end of the war, the American navy was the globe's preeminent naval power, operating 98 aircraft carriers, 24 battleships, 96 cruisers, 445 destroyers, 259 submarines, and thousands of amphibious and logistic ships; 24,000 aircraft; 6 Marine divisions; and 4 million Sailors and Marines under arms. Nowhere was American strength at sea more evident than in the vast reaches of the Pacific. When General Douglas MacArthur accepted the surrender of the Empire of Japan on board battleship *Missouri* (BB 63) on September 2, 1945, there was no conceivable rival to the mighty American armada. Moreover, U.S. political and economic power reigned supreme throughout the Pacific and East Asia. Navy leaders, and many Army leaders, meant to keep it that way. They were determined to sustain the monumental victory over Japan, purchased at an enormous cost in American lives and national treasure, by preventing the postwar rise of hostile Asian nations or navies.

Influential naval leaders feared that the Marxist-Leninist ideology championed by Stalin's Soviet Union, Mao Tse-tung's (Mao Zedong) Chinese Communist movement, and Kim Il Sung's Korean Communists threatened to destroy all that the United States had accomplished in the region. Meanwhile, French attempts to reassert control over their former colonial possessions in Indochina after World War II were being frustrated by nationalist insurgencies, foremost among them the Viet Minh in Vietnam under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh.

In mid-1950, convinced that Ho Chi Minh and the other Far Eastern Communist leaders were acting in concert to frustrate U.S. policies, the Truman administration moved with unprecedented vigor to reorder the strategic balance in Asia. The President endorsed a huge outlay of funds to strengthen America's military establishment. In addition to authorizing U.S. forces to join the fight against the Communists in Korea, he ordered the Navy to oppose any Chinese Communist invasion of Taiwan. Support to the French colonial authorities in Vietnam was also increased.

In September 1950, Washington established Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), Indochina, to administer aid to the French. The Truman administration wanted to establish independent Vietnamese armed forces, but almost until the end of France's struggle to retain its Asian colonies, Paris insisted that Vietnamese soldiers and sailors be led by French officers and noncommissioned officers.

In the fall of 1950, American naval advisors set up shop in Saigon and began overseeing the transfer to the French of aircraft carriers, aircraft, and amphibious vessels. During the next several years, Washington dispatched one observer group after another to find ways to bolster the French war effort. Even with this American support, however, the French failed to stem the rising tide of support for Ho among the Vietnamese. Many of his countrymen saw "Uncle Ho" as a nationalist first and a Communist second. Indeed, the Viet Minh movement included noncommunist elements.

With the end of the Korean War in July 1953, the Chinese Communists delivered increasing amounts of arms and equipment to the Viet Minh, who forced the French from much of the countryside and then surrounded major population centers. The French attempted to improve their military situation by deploying a huge force





A float depicting Chinese Communist Leader Mao and Vietnamese leader Ho appear at a rally in North Vietnam in the late-1950s (*Naval History and Heritage Command image*)

of Foreign Legionnaires, paratroopers, and other elite units into the Communist rear at the remote village of Dien Bien Phu, site of a small airstrip. The French object was to prevent a Viet Minh offensive into Laos and at the same time draw enemy forces to the area to be decimated by what was thought to be superior French ground and air power. The French readily deployed these combat forces to Dien Bien Phu in November 1953 and established a number of fortified redoubts around the airstrip.

Sensing an opportunity to destroy the flower of the French military establishment in Indochina, Ho Chi Minh and his gifted military commander, General Vo Nguyen Giap, moved the bulk of their best forces to Dien Bien Phu. Supplied liberally with guns and ammunition by the Chinese Communists, the Viet Minh ringed the French outpost with battle-hardened infantry and positioned hundreds of artillery pieces on surrounding hills. Beginning in March 1954, Ho's troops rained artillery fire on the outgunned French garrison and stormed one strong point after another. On May 7, 1954, Ho's Viet Minh forces stormed the last French-held bastion at Dien Bien Phu and marched more than 8,000 French and allied Indochinese troops off to harsh captivity.

## After Vietnam is split in two, Operation Passage to Freedom begins

In July 1954, representatives of France, the United States, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and other countries met in Geneva, Switzerland, to discuss ending the conflict in Indochina. In the final agreement, the signatories agreed to the separation of combatants and an election by Vietnamese of all political persuasions in July 1956 to determine the makeup of a unified government. President Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles considered the Geneva Agreement a disaster for U.S. foreign policy. Joint Chiefs Chairman Admiral Arthur W. Radford told Vice President Richard Nixon that he believed the Geneva agreement to be a "great mistake" for the United States, and Nixon concurred, saying "it is a black day for us." Neither the United States nor the noncommunist government in South Vietnam signed the agreement, even though Washington announced it would not undercut its provisions regarding the introduction into Indochina of military forces or material.

A separate agreement at Geneva called for the transportation and concentration of Communist forces in the Tonkin region of Vietnam at the same time as noncommunist forces that had supported the French were grouped in the Annam and Cochin China regions of central and southern Vietnam. The United States agreed to support the massive movement of noncommunist forces and, as it transpired, civilian refugees from northern to southern Vietnam. Washington ordered the Seventh Fleet to handle the operation, soon named Passage to Freedom. First, the Navy dispatched medical teams to Haiphong and other embarkation points. Lieutenant Tom Dooley and other Navy personnel constructed shelters, latrines, and other accommodations for the tens of thousands of refugees, many of them Catholics, who streamed into the ports. The refugees were deloused to prevent disease and finally helped to board U.S. naval vessels for the voyage south. Between August 1954 and May 1955, the 74 ships of the naval task force and 39 vessels of the Navy's Military Sea Transportation Service delivered 17,800 Vietnamese troops, 293,000 refugees, and more than 8,000 vehicles to Saigon. The authorities in the South constructed housing

for the immigrants, who soon became the core of the noncommunist resistance in Indochina.

With the end of French control over Indochina, political movements in Tonkin, southern Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia established separate governments. The temporary dividing line at the 17th parallel between Ho Chi Minh's Communists and the non-communist Vietnamese to the south began to take on permanence. Ngo Dinh Diem, a fervent anticommunist and reportedly celibate Catholic, took power in Saigon as the head of a new Republic of Vietnam.

Washington was determined to counter the Communists by providing governments and parties in the region with political, economic, and military assistance. There were no easy choices with regard to friendly governments or leaders. The United States helped preserve the independence of South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines during the Cold War but to do so required doing business with a succession of dictators and other odious figures. The same applied in Indochina.

Like Chiang Kai-shek of Nationalist China and Syngman Rhee of South Korea, Diem was an authoritarian Asian leader who treated opponents harshly and endeavored to manage the political process. He was not a liberal democrat. He asserted firm control of political life in the capital, exposed coup plotters, and between 1955 and 1958 dispatched troops against Communist Party cells in the cities and in the countryside in "denounce the Communists" campaigns. Government forces killed thousands of Communists and imprisoned many more. One study published in Hanoi after the Vietnam War credited Diem's campaigns with reducing Communist Party membership in the South by 90 percent during the period.

On Diem's visits to the United States and during visits to Saigon by Senator Lyndon Johnson and other American political leaders, Diem was lionized as the great hope of the Free World in Southeast Asia. Senator John Kennedy opined that South Vietnam was the "cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia, the keystone to the arch, the finger in the dike."



Four crewmen display a welcome banner for Vietnamese refugees coming on board USS *Bayfield* (APA 33) for passage to Saigon, Indochina, from Haiphong on September 3, 1954. (Official U.S. Navy Photograph, now in the collections of the National Archives)

As Diem in the South and Ho in the North consolidated their political control, American advisors worked to replace French forces (all French troops had departed Vietnam by June 1955) with a modern South Vietnamese military arm. Influenced by the Korean War experience, U.S. Army trainers prepared the new 150,000-man Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) to repel a conventional Communist invasion across the 17th parallel. Disregarding what the French had learned the hard way about warfare in Indochina, the Americans gave much less attention to preparing their charges for counterinsurgency warfare than did the French.

## Remaking a Navy

The Vietnam Navy (VNN), organized and equipped by the French, received the attention of American naval advisors who focused on developing forces for open-ocean, coastal, and river operations. During the late 1950s, the Americans handled the transfer to the VNN of landing ships and craft, trained Vietnamese sailors, and observed their operations. As with many newly formed military





Captain Cyrus R. Christensen as a U.S. naval advisor in the early-1960s. (Courtesy of the Navy Art Collection)

organizations, the VNN lacked experienced officers, adequately trained bluejackets, and suitable equipment. The French had provided the VNN with American-made vessels left over from World War II, and after years of hard use, these units were in poor shape.

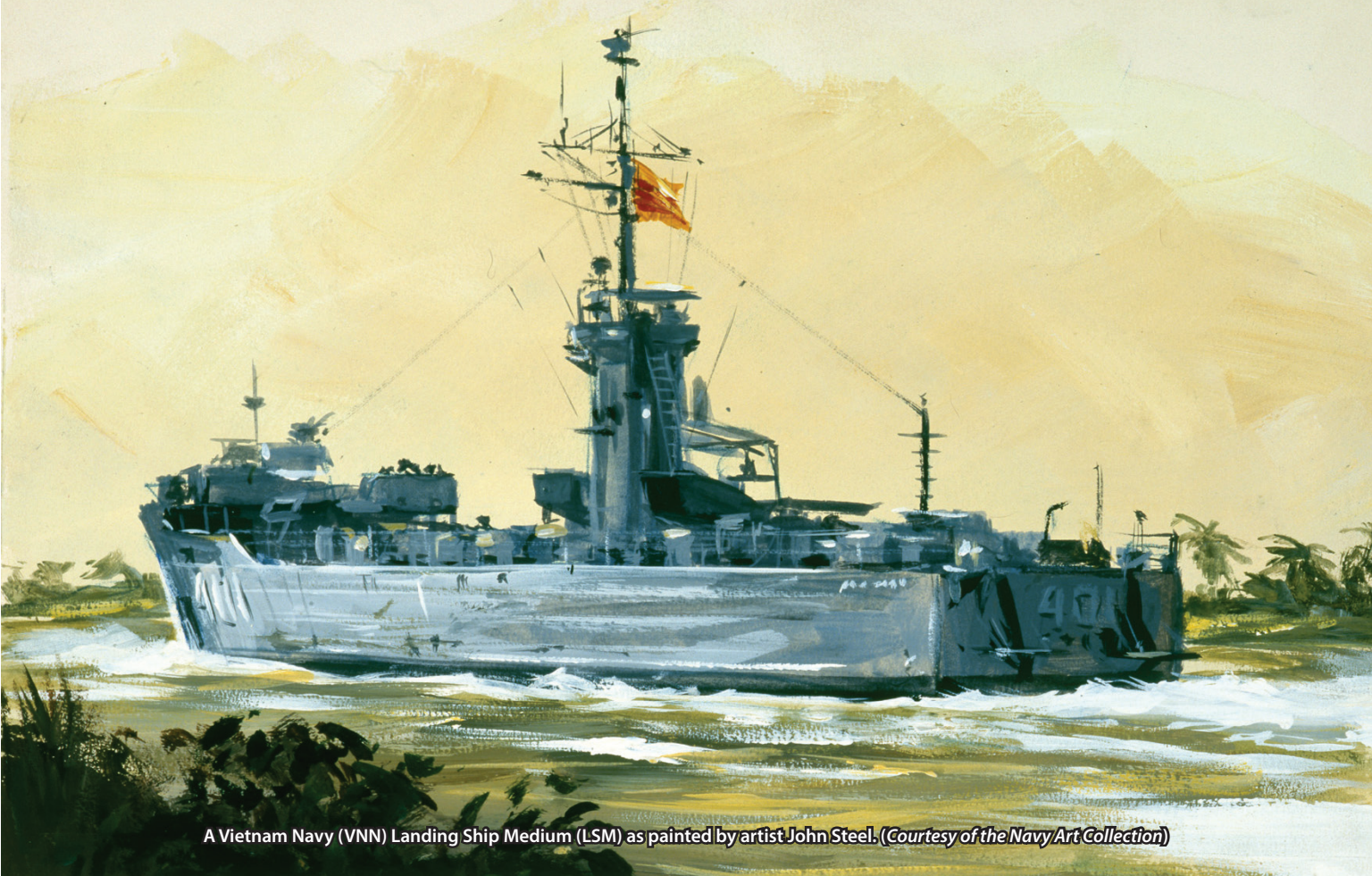
The MAAG's Navy section in Vietnam doubled in strength between 1959 and 1964, partly reflecting the growth in the Vietnam Navy from 5,000 officers and men to more than 8,000. By late 1964, the United States was supporting a Vietnamese naval arm of 44 seagoing ships and over 200 landing craft, patrol boats, and other vessels. The largest units in the VNN were Sea Force escorts (PCEs), motor gunboats (PGMs), large support landing ships (LSSLs), large infantry landing ships (LSILs), medium landing ships (LSMs), and tank landing ships (LSTs) that operated in the South China Sea and the Gulf of Siam.

The VNN inherited from the French not only combatants but a concept of river warfare built around the *dinassaut* or river assault division, which had provided the French with a measure of success against the Viet Minh. When operating with strong ground forces, the French *dinassaut* sometimes decimated Viet Minh guerrilla units prevented from escape by land or water.

Lieutenant Commander Wesley A. Hoch, USN, U.S. Advisor, left, attends graduation ceremonies for enlisted men who will join Vietnam's Coastal Force. The ceremonies took place at the unit's island-based headquarters. Photograph released in 1964 (Naval History and Heritage Command image)








A Vietnam Navy (VNN) Landing Ship Medium (LSM) as painted by artist John Steel. (Courtesy of the Navy Art Collection)

Guided by the *dinassaut* concept, the Vietnamese formed river assault groups (RAGs) of armed and armored landing craft that transported troops, escorted convoys of rice boats, swept for mines, and provided gunfire support to ground units. The 102-man, 20-boat RAGs operated from bases at Saigon, My Tho, Vinh Long, Can Tho, and Long Xuyen. The RAGs were critical not only to the Vietnamese government's military control in the almost roadless Mekong Delta south of Saigon but to the political and economic well-being of the region.

The navy of the Republic of Vietnam, with the encouragement of American advisors, established another component—the paramilitary Coastal Force. The mission of that force was to patrol the 1,200-mile coast of South Vietnam in search of vessels trying to infiltrate arms, ammunition, couriers, and other special cargo from North Vietnam. The Coastal Force consisted of a fleet of 600 specially-built wooden junks that operated from 28 austere bases established all along the South Vietnamese littoral. Vietnamese and American naval officers coordinated operations from coastal surveillance centers strategically positioned at Danang in the north, Cam Ranh on the cen-

tral coast, Vung Tau southeast of Saigon, and An Thoi on Phu Quoc, a large island in the Gulf of Siam.

From the end of the French Indochina War to 1964, the American naval advisors were most effective in facilitating the transfer to the VNN of ships, aircraft, and other equipment and establishing bases and supply depots. The convoys, as the Vietnamese referred to them, however, were much less effective at influencing their counterparts to adopt American operational and tactical approaches. Few naval advisors could speak Vietnamese or fully comprehend Asian culture. Having already led naval forces for years and expecting to fight for many more years, Vietnamese naval officers were less inclined than their short-term American counterparts to seek quick but potentially costly results on the battlefield.

Captain William Hardcastle, head of the Naval Advisory Group in 1964 and early 1965, recognized that his advisors were enthusiastic and dedicated to the mission but lacked practical experience. They came from a navy focused on defeating the Soviet fleet in major battles far out to sea, not working with small boats in the "green water" and "brown water" environs of South Vietnam. 





## Counterinsurgency Recognized as Key

"Chief Ruiz, SEAL Team My Tho," watercolor by artist James Scott, 1967. (Courtesy of the Navy Art Collection)

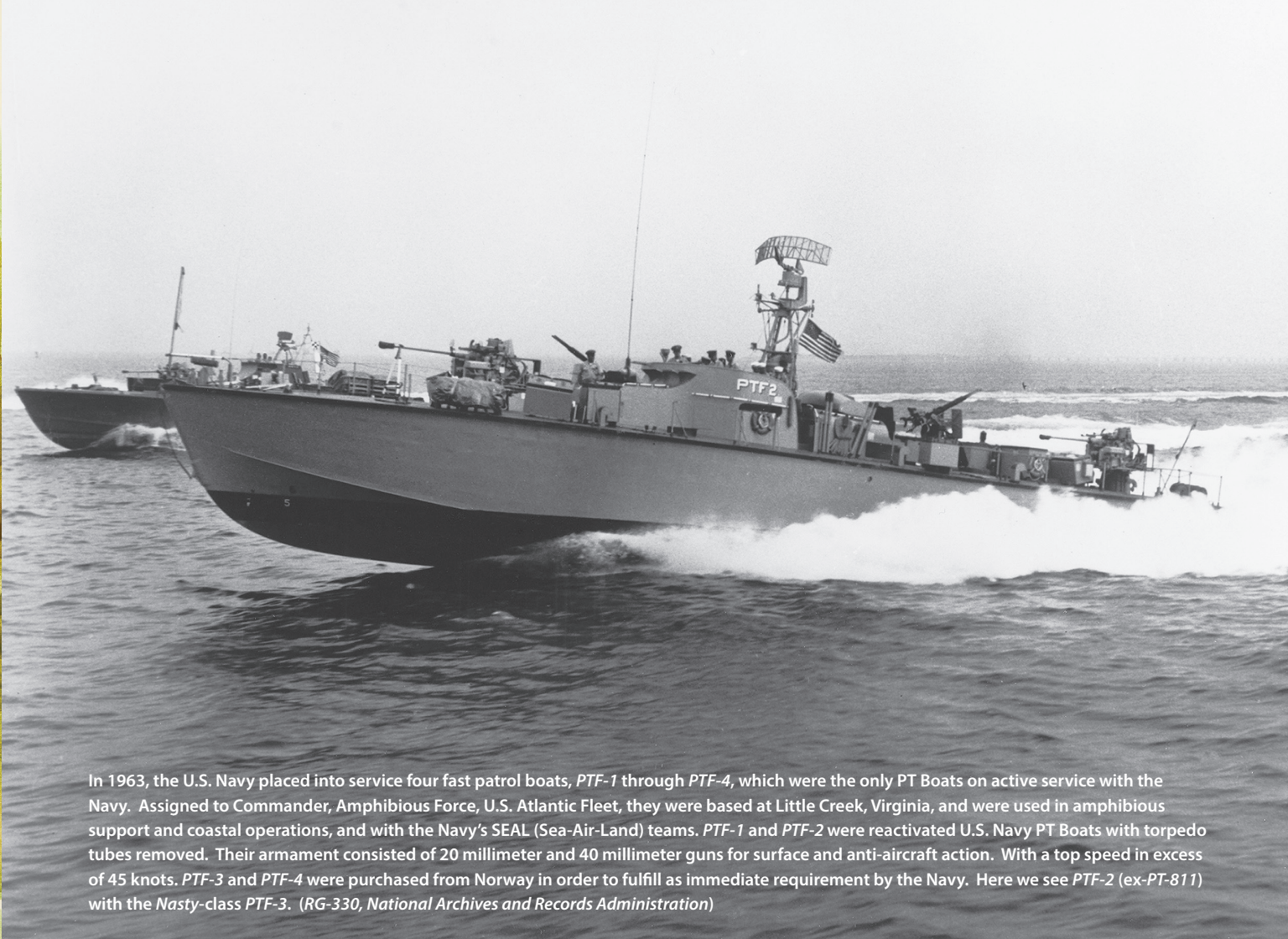
Although disappointed with the depth and pace of improvement of the VNN, in the early 1960s few American naval leaders or advisors were ready to give up. This was an era of boundless optimism in the power and influence of the United States. U.S. military leaders were confident that “counterinsurgency,” their answer to the Communist world’s “wars of national liberation,” would strengthen America’s Southeast Asian allies for the fight.

The counterinsurgency approach evolved from the U.S. national security establishment’s Flexible Response concept of the late 1950s that called for measured and appropriate responses to Communist actions. For instance, a Soviet nuclear attack would be answered by U.S. nuclear retaliation, but the action of Viet Cong guerrillas to destabilize a rural district by killing local government officials would be countered by arming militia forces to defend the people and hunt the insurgents in the jungle.

Successes during the 1950s and early 1960s by the anticommunist governments in the Philippines and Malaya against insurgent movements suggested to American leaders that counterinsurgency warfare could be a valid antidote to the challenges in Indochina. British analyst Sir Robert Thompson and other experts shared with the Americans their views of which aspects of counterinsurgency warfare worked and which ones did not, based on the experience in Malaya.

Influenced by these success stories, the Kennedy administration wholeheartedly endorsed ambitious programs to develop and deploy to South Vietnam and other nations threatened by Communist insurgencies, military personnel trained to fight guerrillas and win the support of local peoples for their governments. The U.S. Army’s Special Forces troops, the “Green Berets,” soon became recognized symbols of America’s counterinsurgency warfare establishment.






In 1963, the U.S. Navy placed into service four fast patrol boats, *PTF-1* through *PTF-4*, which were the only PT Boats on active service with the Navy. Assigned to Commander, Amphibious Force, U.S. Atlantic Fleet, they were based at Little Creek, Virginia, and were used in amphibious support and coastal operations, and with the Navy's SEAL (Sea-Air-Land) teams. *PTF-1* and *PTF-2* were reactivated U.S. Navy PT Boats with torpedo tubes removed. Their armament consisted of 20 millimeter and 40 millimeter guns for surface and anti-aircraft action. With a top speed in excess of 45 knots. *PTF-3* and *PTF-4* were purchased from Norway in order to fulfill as immediate requirement by the Navy. Here we see *PTF-2* (ex-*PT-811*) with the *Nasty*-class *PTF-3*. (RG-330, National Archives and Records Administration)

Admiral Arleigh Burke was the first Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) to push seriously for the development of Navy special forces suited to counterinsurgency warfare. Under his guidance, during 1961 the Navy studied the use of 60-man teams of naval warriors to operate at sea, in the air, and on land against Communist guerrillas and to train allied forces for special warfare. With the personal encouragement of President Kennedy, on 1 January 1962, the Navy established SEAL Team 1 in the Pacific Fleet and SEAL Team 2 in the Atlantic Fleet. During the next several years, SEALs deployed to Vietnam and worked to develop South Vietnamese naval commandos—LDNN (Lien Doc Nguoi Nhia).

The Navy also created specialized Seabee construction units to help the government of South Vietnam win the support of its people by building village fortifications, schools, hospitals, bridges, and roads. The units—Seabee Technical Assistance Teams, or STATs—also built fortified camps on the border with Cambodia for U.S.

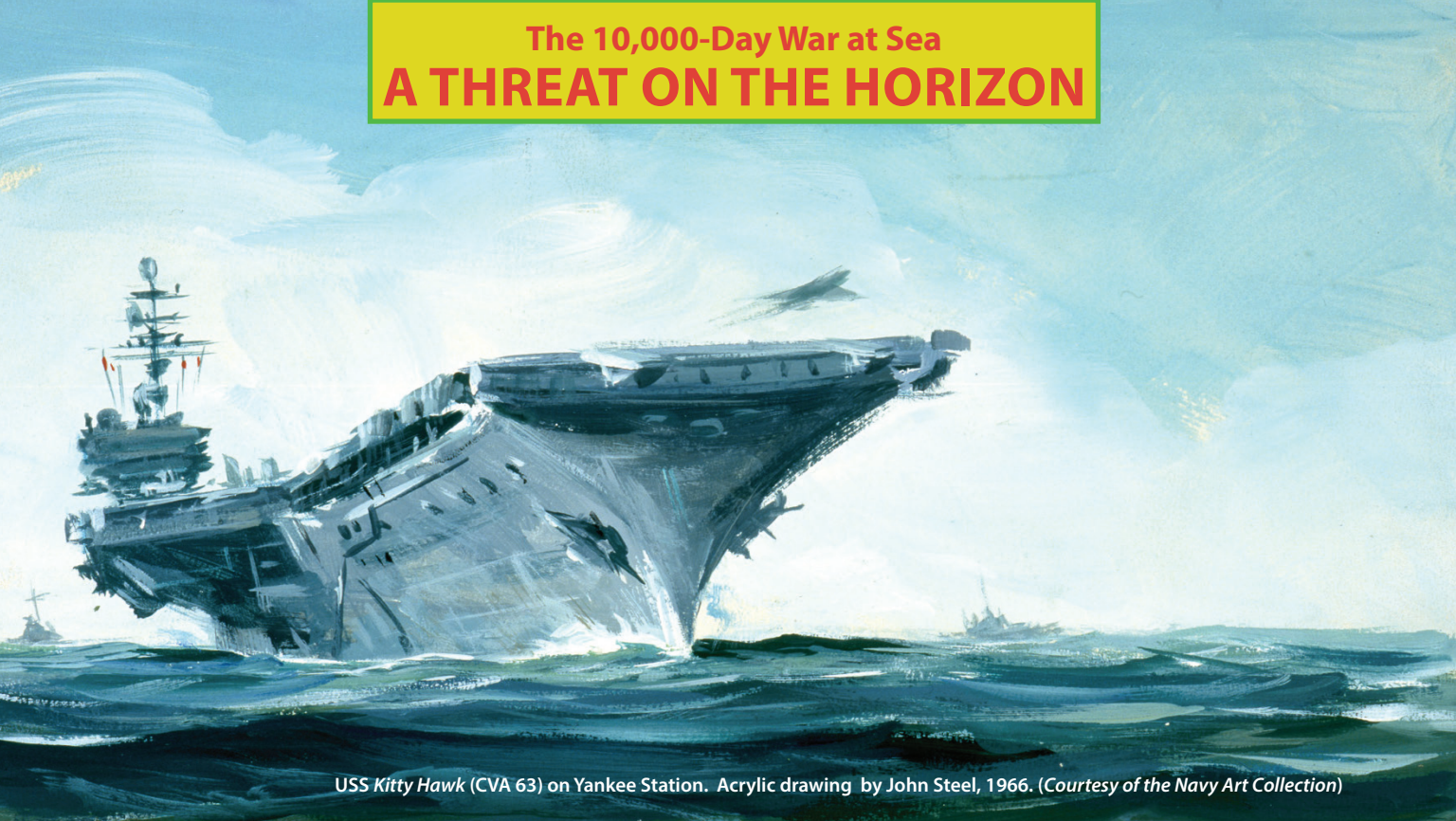
Army Special Forces A teams and affiliated Montagnard (hill tribesmen), Chinese, and Vietnamese irregular troops.

In this same vein, the Navy configured two of its Korean War-era motor torpedo boats for antiguerrilla warfare and bought from Norway six modern *Nasty*-class PT boats. The 80-foot-long *Nasty* boats, diesel-powered and fiberglass-hulled, were capable of 41-knot speeds. The American and Norwegian boats were classified fast patrol boats (PTFs), armed with 20- and 40-millimeter guns and recoilless rifles, and dispatched to the Far East. The PTF force was intended to bombard enemy coastal facilities and infiltrate saboteurs from the sea.

Finally, the naval service reconfigured submarines *Perch* (APSS 313) and *Sealion* (APSS 315) for special operations missions. The undersea vessels were readied to land SEALs, Green Berets, and South Vietnamese naval commandos behind enemy lines, gather intelligence, and rescue aviators shot down in hostile waters. 



# The 10,000-Day War at Sea A THREAT ON THE HORIZON



USS *Kitty Hawk* (CVA 63) on Yankee Station. Acrylic drawing by John Steel, 1966. (Courtesy of the Navy Art Collection)

## Part II:

# U.S. NAVAL FORCES JOIN THE FIGHT

By 1964 it was clear to many American leaders that the counterinsurgency campaign and limited American military operations would not discourage Hanoi from its sponsorship of the war in South Vietnam. Following the assassination of South Vietnamese President Diem and his brother Nhu in November 1963, the Communists launched devastating attacks against the armed forces of South Vietnam, seized control of much of the countryside, and increasingly targeted American military compounds and advisors.

Key Navy flag officers proposed various military operations by U.S. forces to temper aggressive North Vietnamese behavior. They considered coastal raids, sabotage, harassment of shipping, small-scale amphibious landings, mining of ports, coastal blockade, aerial interdiction of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and even air strikes against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. In calling for these operations, Admiral Claude Ricketts, Vice Chief of Naval Operations, observed that if the protection of South Vietnam necessitated “escalation of the war into

North Vietnam, then that must be done, because it is from North Vietnam that the vast majority of the guerrillas are coming.”

There was hardly consensus about the wisdom of these actions, however, even among military officers. Admiral Harry D. Felt, Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Command (CINCPAC) feared that a U.S. closure of North Vietnam’s ports to oceangoing commerce would prompt Chinese air attacks on the blockading fleet. President Johnson and his chief civilian advisors were equally concerned about the prospect of Chinese or even Soviet intervention. They also feared that hostile acts against the North would stimulate the Communists to increase pressure on the already beleaguered South Vietnamese government and society.

To limit the risk of major escalation but still increase pressure on Hanoi, U.S. leaders decided to focus on North Vietnamese forces operating in Laos, especially along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. By 1964, the 600-mile-long trail had become a major transit route for Communist troops



An RF-8A Crusader (BUNO 146846) Photoreconnaissance aircraft of Light Photographic Reconnaissance Squadron 63 (VFP-63), detachment Alfa, comes in for a landing, circa 1967. (*National Archives and Records Administration*)

and material heading for South Vietnam. Close to 5,000 North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao troops defended the trail that included bridges, way stations, and primary and secondary roadways. Porters carrying backpacks filled with supplies and pushing bicycles loaded down with hundreds of pounds of explosives, ammunition, and weapons pressed forward over passageways hacked from the jungle. The porters were Communist troops and mountain tribesmen involuntarily pressed into duty. Fighting disease, starvation, physical exhaustion, and torrential monsoons that often swept in from the South China Sea, the trail porters delivered their precious cargos to Communist forces in South Vietnam—or perished in the effort.

On May 17, 1964, the JCS directed Admiral Felt to initiate low-level “reconnaissance/show of force” flights by Air Force planes based in South Vietnam and Navy planes from the aircraft carrier *Kitty Hawk* (CVA 63), positioned at soon-to-be famous Yankee Station in the South China Sea. In Operation Yankee Team, the American air units photographed Communist military activity in the Plain of Jars area and along the infiltration routes through the “panhandle” of southern Laos.

The Communist reaction was not long in coming. On June 6, antiaircraft fire downed an RF-8A Crusader reconnaissance plane piloted by Lieutenant Charles F. Klusmann of *Kitty Hawk*'s Light Photographic Squadron 63. In response to the shootdown, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara ordered that subsequent reconnaissance missions be escorted by fighter aircraft and authorized them to retaliate against hostile antiaircraft sites. On June 7, three *Kitty Hawk* F-8D Crusaders escorting a photoreconnaissance plane carried out just such an attack on an antiaircraft position in the Plain of Jars, but enemy gunners damaged the jet flown by Commander Doyle W. Lynn of Fighter Squadron 111, forcing him to eject. He landed safely in the jungle south of Xieng Khouang in central Laos and hunkered down for the night.

Better prepared than they had been after Klusmann's shootdown, American search and rescue (SAR) coordinators immediately dispatched to the scene four propeller-driven A-1H Skyraiders that had been in a

Naval Forces  
*Continued on page 14*





HAMPTON ROADS NAVAL MUSEUM COLLECTION

# Coastal Force Junk

On May 15, 1964, this model was presented to Captain William H. Hardcastle Jr., chief of the Naval Advisory Group, Military Assistance and Advisory Group (MAAG) Vietnam, by the Chief of MAAG Vietnam, Army Major General C.J. Timmes. Based upon its redwood stain finish, the model probably depicts Hardcastle's Junk Force flagship. (Hampton Roads Naval Museum Collection/M.C. Farrington)





The guided missile cruiser USS *Providence* (CLG 6), seen here in a 1968 painting by artist John Charles Roach, with an ubiquitous junk passing in the foreground, was 7th Fleet Flagship from May 1962 to July 1964 and again from December 1966 to November 1968. (Courtesy of the Navy Art Collection)






An H-34 Seahorse comes in for a "touch-and-go" aboard USS Boxer (CVA 21), as depicted in a watercolor by Salvatore Indiviglia. (Courtesy of the Navy Art Collection)

standby pattern over Danang, South Vietnam. Task Force 77 sent another four Crusaders and an A-3B Skywarrior, the latter plane to facilitate communications and pick up Lynn's distress signals. Homing in on these electronic emissions and guided further by the pilot's radio directions and flares, the rescuers located him the next morning. An H-34 Sea Horse helicopter sped to the scene and tried to lower its rescue cable through the forest canopy but found the trees there too tall. Finally, discovering a small clearing nearby, the SAR team directed Lynn there, swooped down to retrieve him, and whisked the tired but grateful naval aviator to safety. Enraged by Klusmann's escape and Lynn's aerial rescue, however, the Pathet Lao guerrillas established such tight and brutal control over their prisoners that only a few other men made it out of the Laotian jungle alive in later years.

These early operations in Laos revealed what would become the norm during the Vietnam War: civilian leaders in Washington orchestrating military operations in faraway Southeast Asia. By using the advanced communications equipment of the Pentagon's National Military Command Center, developed to manage

America's nuclear readiness posture, Secretary of Defense McNamara could issue specific operational orders to commanders in the field. Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, Commander Seventh Fleet, complained privately to the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral David L. McDonald: "[O]ur total capability has not been utilized and . . . we have been restricted as to the number of sorties, have been directed as to the specific type camera to use and have had late changes in target assignments." For instance, after Lynn's loss, McNamara criticized naval commanders for how they positioned aircraft for the mission and how they armed the planes.

Frustrated by the loss of the two jets, Washington ordered future reconnaissance missions to be conducted from above 10,000 feet, well out of range of enemy antiaircraft guns. The JCS also insisted on prior approval of operation plans that would stipulate the purpose, duration, aircraft involved, tactical formation, altitude, and route to the target for each mission. This cautious application of force considerably reduced not only the risk to pilots and aircraft during the rest of 1964, but also the value of the intelligence gained, and it certainly did not send the desired signal of menace to the Hanoi regime. 



# Combat in the Gulf of Tonkin: Desoto to Pierce Arrow



USS *John R. Craig* (DD 885) underway in 1978. (Naval History and Heritage Command Image)

Washington also decided to increase military pressure on Hanoi from the sea. In January 1964, Admiral Moorer authorized the destroyers of his fleet's Desoto Patrol to conduct "all-source intelligence" collection operations closer to the littoral of North Vietnam than ever before.

Since the inauguration of the Desoto Patrol in 1962, U.S. naval vessels had been instructed to approach no closer than 12 nautical miles to China, North Korea, and North Vietnam, a distance generally recognized as the extent of these nations' sovereignty. Early in 1964, however, the State Department ruled that since Hanoi had made no official pronouncement regarding North Vietnam's territorial waters, the U.S. government considered the earlier French three-mile limit to remain in effect.

Moorer lifted the previous injunction against U.S. warships steaming closer than 20 miles to North Vietnam and other Asian Communist countries. The Seventh Fleet commander enabled his destroyer commanders to operate as close as four miles from coastal islands of the DRV. He also agreed to provide General Paul D. Harkins, Commander U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam

(COMUSMACV), in Saigon with intelligence that would facilitate raiding and sabotage operations by South Vietnamese commandos on the North Vietnamese coast as part of Operation 34 Alpha (34A). For eleven days during February and March of 1964, USS *John R. Craig* (DD 885) moved along the DRV and PRC coastlines in the Gulf of Tonkin gathering intelligence. Moorer scheduled another patrol for late July.

In the meantime, the maritime operations of the 34A program suffered numerous setbacks. The Communists defeated or frustrated one South Vietnamese sabotage mission after another. A prime factor in these failed operations was the lack of good intelligence on the enemy. General William C. Westmoreland, Harkins' successor, asked the Navy to provide him with better intelligence on North Vietnamese naval vessels, ground forces, and radar sites along the coast. He was particularly interested in enemy activity around the islands of Hon Me, Hon Nieu, and Hon Matt where the South Vietnamese intended to operate at the end of July. The new CINCPAC, Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, called for a Desoto Patrol mission with the "primary purpose of determining DRV coastal patrol activity."





USS *Kitty Hawk* (CVA 63) on the left, and USS *Turner Joy* (DD 951) on the right are refueled by USS *Kawishiwi* (AO 146) on April 23, 1964. Note the large E in a shield spelled out by crewmen on the carrier's flight deck. Photographed by (Senior Chief Photographer's Mate Brown/ Naval History and Heritage Command image)

Concerned that North Vietnamese defenses had become too robust for commando raids ashore to succeed, McNamara and military leaders directing the 34A maritime operations opted instead for bombardment missions from the sea. At the end of July, South Vietnamese-crewed *Nasty*-class PTFs followed this new approach when they shelled a gun emplacement, a communications tower, and related buildings on Hon Me and Hon Nieu. As the four PTFs returned to their base at Danang from that mission on the morning of July 31, they passed by *Maddox* (DD 731), a *Sumner*-class destroyer, taking on fuel from a Navy oiler east of the Demilitarized Zone between North and South Vietnam. The warship,

with mission commander Captain John J. Herrick on board, then steamed along a predesignated track off the coast of North Vietnam gathering photographic, electronic, hydrographic, and other intelligence. In the evening on August 1, *Maddox* reached a position five miles southeast of Hon Vat, a small islet close to Hon Me. This was the closest point the destroyer came to North Vietnamese territory during the entire mission. The North Vietnamese monitored the U.S. intelligence gathering patrol but took no action against it.

In the early morning hours of August 2, 1964, however, a communications-interception team operating on board *Maddox* picked up a transmission from North



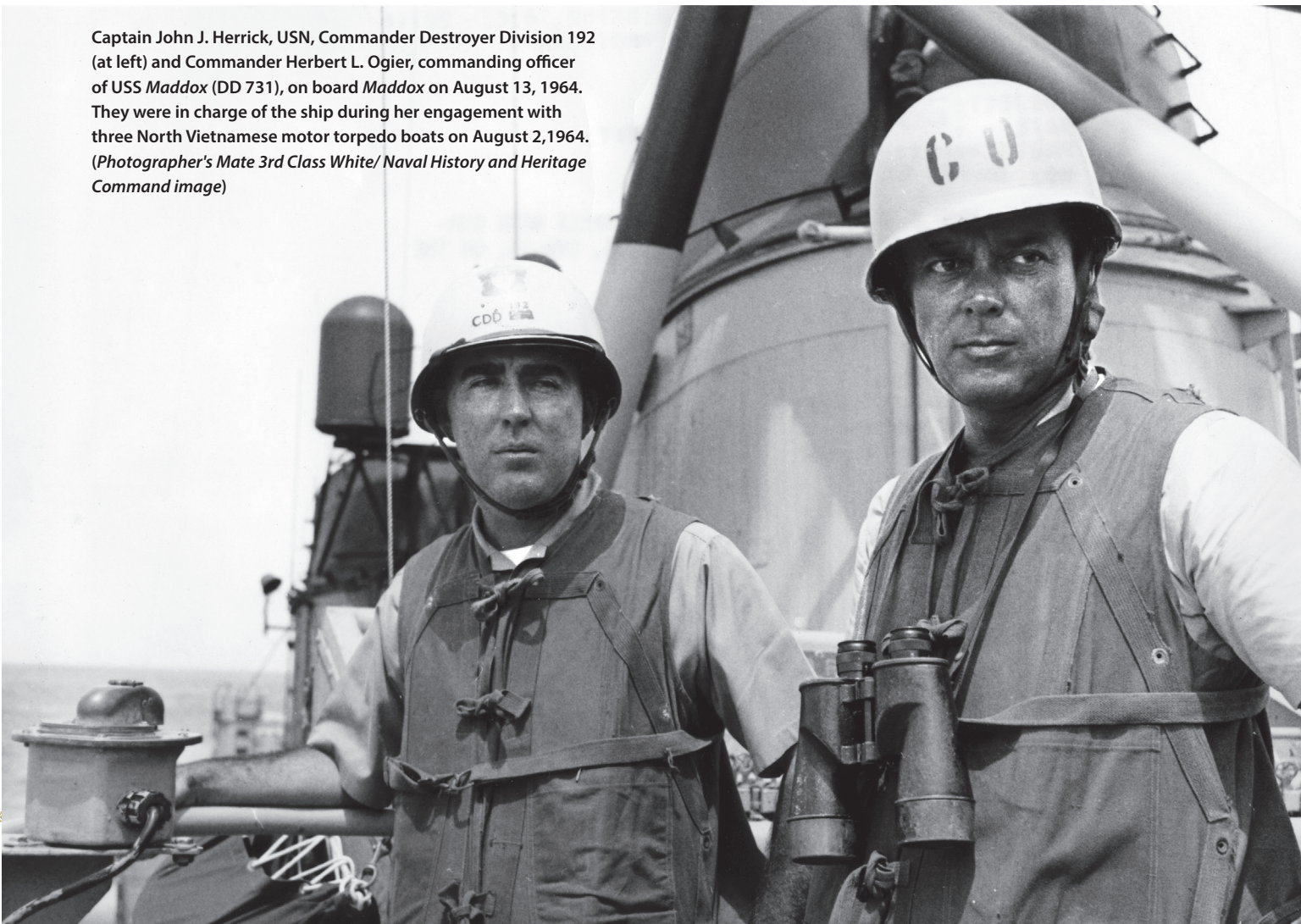
Vietnamese naval headquarters directing fleet units to prepare for battle and ordering the concentration of forces near Hon Me. Determined not to abort the mission, however, the U.S. naval command ordered Herrick to continue his patrol. Beginning at 1500 (H time, or Saigon time), as *Maddox* headed away from the coast in a northeasterly and then southeasterly direction, her surface-search radar picked up high-speed contacts attempting to close with the destroyer. At 1530, the ship's commanding officer, Commander Herbert L. Ogier, sounded general quarters, and soon afterward Captain Herrick alerted U.S. naval headquarters of an impending attack and requested air support.

By 1600, three Soviet-made North Vietnamese P-4 motor torpedo boats, moving at 50-knot speeds, had closed to 9,800 yards off the destroyer's starboard quarter. While continuing on their hostile approach, the P-4s made no attempt with radio, signal flags, lights, flares, or other means to communicate their intent to the American ship. When three warning shots from one of the warship's weapons failed to deter the North Vietnamese, at 1608

*Maddox* opened fire in earnest with her 5-inch and 3-inch guns. The enemy boats turned to port, launched torpedoes, fired their 14.5 millimeter guns, and withdrew astern of the destroyer. The North Vietnamese attackers failed to put a torpedo into the destroyer, but one round from a deck gun punctured the ship's superstructure.

Gunfire from *Maddox* shot up one of the boats, killing its commander, and soon afterward four *Ticonderoga* (CVA 14) F-8 Crusaders, one of them piloted by Commander James B. Stockdale, a future vice admiral and Medal of Honor recipient, arrived overhead. The jets raked the boats with 5-inch Zuni rockets and 20-millimeter cannon fire, leaving one dead in the water and burning from the stern. Although badly damaged, the P-4s managed to make it back to the North Vietnamese coast. *Maddox* retired to the mouth of the Gulf of Tonkin and rendezvoused with the *Forrest Sherman*-class destroyer *Turner Joy* (DD 951). President Johnson announced that the destroyer patrol would resume and that the DRV would incur "grave consequences" if the Communists made another aggressive move against

Captain John J. Herrick, USN, Commander Destroyer Division 192 (at left) and Commander Herbert L. Ogier, commanding officer of USS *Maddox* (DD 731), on board *Maddox* on August 13, 1964. They were in charge of the ship during her engagement with three North Vietnamese motor torpedo boats on August 2, 1964. (Photographer's Mate 3rd Class White/ Naval History and Heritage Command image)







A Crusader of VF-53 flies over South Vietnam in 1965. (Hampton Roads Naval Museum Collection)

# For the first time in the long Vietnam War, the navy's carrier air arm projected its power ashore.

U.S. forces. Admiral Moorer, the Pacific Fleet commander, undeterred by the attack on *Maddox* and determined to “assert [the] right of freedom of the seas,” a long-held tenet of U.S. foreign policy, ordered Herrick to continue the patrol off North Vietnam. *Maddox*, accompanied by *Turner Joy*, headed back into the gulf on August 4.

Beginning at 2041 on the dark, overcast night of August 4, radars on *Maddox* and *Turner Joy* picked up high-speed contacts to the northeast. Captain Herrick ordered the ships to move away from what he thought were surface vessels with hostile intent. At 2239, when one contact was tracked as close as 7,000 yards, Herrick directed *Turner Joy* to open fire. For the next two hours the U.S. ships, soon joined by aircraft, maneuvered to avoid what the Americans believed were enemy fast attack craft launching torpedoes against them. At the end of the confused nighttime episode, the destroyers reached

the entrance of the gulf and the safety of the fleet drawn up there.

U.S. military and civilian leaders began receiving reports of a North Vietnamese attack from the ships and from other

sources soon after the first contacts. Herrick sent one message that questioned the accuracy of some of his ships’ reports, but this information only temporarily slowed the decisionmaking process in Hawaii and Washington. Additional information from Herrick and from intelligence stations in the Far East, however, convinced President Johnson and his chief civilian and military advisors that Hanoi’s navy had again attacked American warships in international waters. The wealth of information available from national and naval intelligence sources and from naval operating forces then and for years afterward persuaded many objective observers that the North Vietnamese had attacked the two destroyers.



It is now virtually certain, however, that North Vietnamese naval vessels did not attack American destroyers on the night of August 4, 1964. The National Security Agency misinterpreted intercepted North Vietnamese radio transmissions suggesting an attack; key eyewitnesses on the ships and in aircraft overhead that night later changed their minds about spotting attacking craft; and the Navy's reports of the operation revealed that some of the information gathered was imprecise or contradictory. Moreover, the Vietnam War has been over for over 40 years and no archival records or personal

Less than an hour later, *Constellation* sent Carrier Air Wing 14 squadrons aloft. Separate groups of propeller-driven A-1 Skyraiders carrying huge loads of ordnance headed for their targets at Hon Gay and Lach Chao. Later, *Constellation* launched Skyhawk and Phantom II jets that quickly caught up with the A-1s en route to their targets.

For the first time in the long Vietnam War, the Navy's carrier air arm projected its power ashore. A strike force of Crusaders, Skyhawks, and Skyraiders under Commander Stockdale roared across the coast near Ha Tinh and headed for Vinh. The carrier force flew among



A-1H Skyraiders of VA-52 aboard USS *Ticonderoga* (CVA 14) in October 1961. (Hampton Roads Naval Museum Collection)

accounts have surfaced in Vietnam to refute Hanoi's unchanged assertion that its forces did not attack *Maddox* and *Turner Joy* that night.

Knowing that the Communists had indeed attacked *Maddox* on August 2 in broad daylight, however, and persuaded that a similar action had occurred two days later, President Johnson ordered U.S. forces to execute retaliatory air strikes—soon named Operation Pierce Arrow—against North Vietnam at 0800 local time on August 5. With operational problems and little time to prepare for the mission, aircraft carriers *Ticonderoga* and *Constellation* could not launch their planes in time. Just after noon on August 5, however, *Ticonderoga* launched F-8 Crusaders, A-4 Skyhawks, and a RF-8A photoreconnaissance plane that joined with A-1H Skyraiders already in the air. These units headed for the oil storage facility at Vinh. Other planes from *Ticonderoga* set a course for Quang Khe.

the hills that dotted the area to evade North Vietnamese radar and antiaircraft defenses.

In a well-planned maneuver, Commander Wesley L. McDonald's Attack Squadron (VA) 56 Skyhawks approached Vinh through a valley, while the divebombing A-1H "Spads" climbed for altitude before descending on the target. The Crusaders flew along the coast and then turned in toward Vinh at the river entrance to the city. No alarm was raised as the squadrons converged on the fuel tank farm there.

At 1330, the Crusaders roared over the red-tiled roofs of Vinh and let loose with their rockets and 20-millimeter guns against enemy antiaircraft positions, as did A-4 Skyhawks that emerged from the valley.

Combat in the Gulf  
Continued on page 24



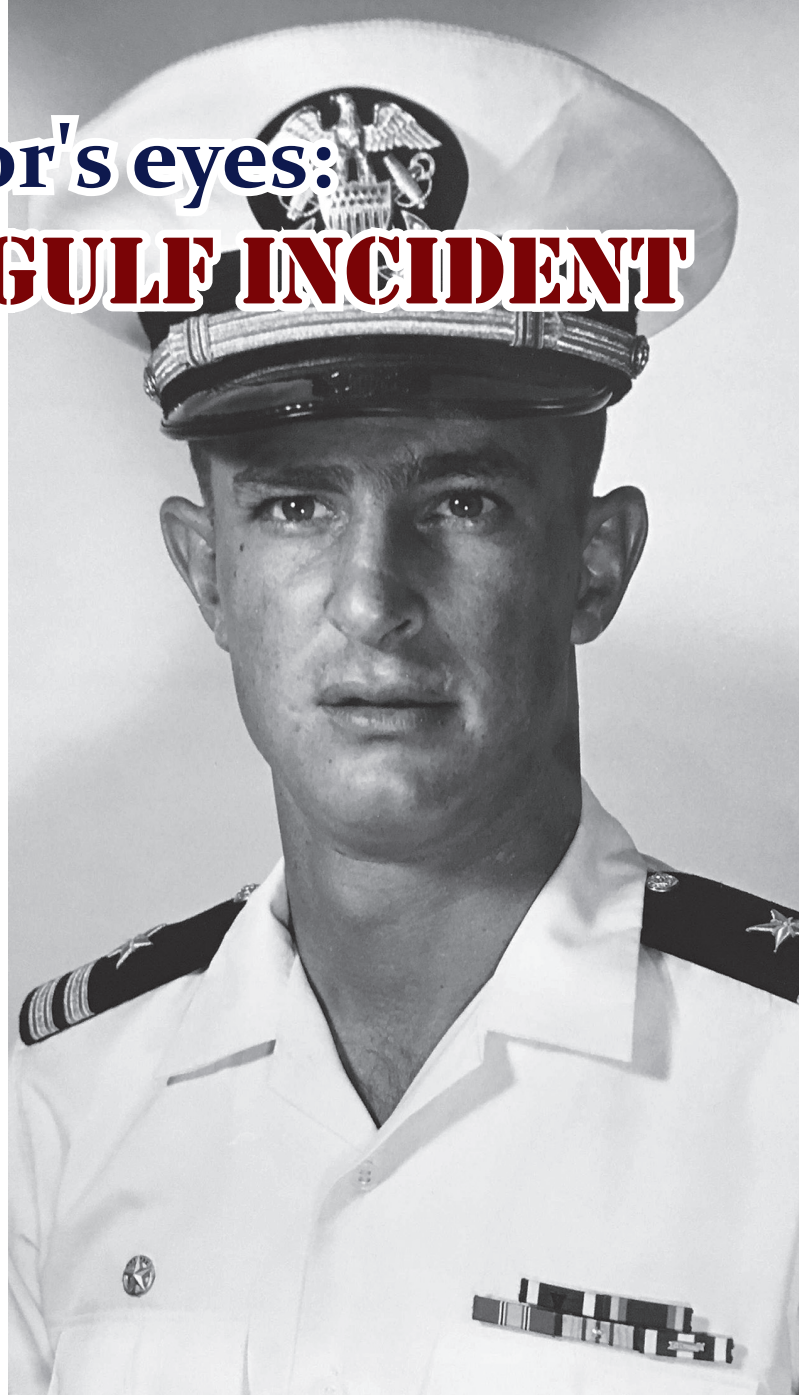
# Through a Sailor's eyes: **THE TONKIN GULF INCIDENT**

By Laura Orr

*As part of the Hampton Roads Naval Museum's Vietnam commemoration, staff members are conducting oral history interviews with Navy veterans who served in Vietnam. Those interviews will help to shape an exhibit slated to open in May 2019. In this issue of The Daybook, HRNM staff would like to share portions of an interview conducted in December 2017 with Doug Smith, who deployed three times to Vietnam. Then-Ensign Smith's first deployment was aboard USS Turner Joy (DD 951) in 1964. He spent his second deployment aboard the destroyer USS Brinkley Bass (DD 887) on the gunline from 1966-1967; and his final deployment was on the rivers of Vietnam aboard the Landing Ship, Tank (LST) USS Monmouth County (LST 1032). In this excerpt from the interview, Smith discusses his experiences aboard USS Turner Joy during the Tonkin Gulf incident, from August 2 to 4, 1964.*

**Question:** I'd like you to talk about your experiences from August 2 through August 4, including what you went through and what you saw.

**Answer:** The time that it starts for me was the 1st or 2nd of August. We were on patrol in the Tonkin Gulf. The USS *Maddox* (DD 731) was further in the Gulf, we were more the outside, on the cusp....It was a rather normal, routine time because we had done it before and nothing had ever happened. You know, one [ship] was in, one [ship] was out, after a while we'd change places and it was more of the same. During those cruises it was customary to be at sea from anywhere from 20 to 30 days before you went to another port and got the feel of land again, so we were just out there for a 20 to 30-day period. On the 2nd I remember it was a nice, sunny day and I had the 12 to 4 watch (the afternoon watch). I was the officer of the deck. It was a Sunday, so it was holiday watch, and there was a really good movie that I was missing, so I was really upset....Nothing was particularly happening until



Lieutenant Doug Smith (Courtesy of Captain Doug Smith, USN (Ret))

we got this call from *Maddox*, who was in the gulf. I've forgotten what their call sign was, but *Maddox* called on the ship radio and said that they were being threatened or they were under attack, I don't know which word they used. They had these two torpedo boats coming at them at high speed, and they had turned away and were going out of the Gulf. They requested instructions from the task group commander, who was on the carrier further out at sea. We were relaying the messages because they could not communicate directly with the task group commander.



Being the officer of the deck, I was the one doing the relay. *Maddox* would call and say, “Request instructions, what do you want us to do?” and I would say, “They want instructions, what do you want them to do?” and we would get no answer anytime soon. They were on holiday routine too—the admiral was watching a movie or whatever (who knows?), but it wasn’t instant communication. Eventually [*USS Maddox*] said, “They are still coming, they are still threatening, still high speed and unless otherwise directed, we are going to shoot a warning shot.” I relayed that and the task group commander came back and said, “What do you mean, you are going to shoot?” “We are firing a warning shot.” “We just did fire.” “They just fired a warning shot.” You can see this back-and-forth is getting to be a little bit [crazy], but in the heat of action, that’s what happens. It seemed like there was a 30-second delay between a communication from the *Maddox* and the task

group commander coming back, so it was like, “Don’t shoot yet.” “I just shot.” “Did you hit anybody?” “I don’t think so, but I’m shooting again.” And so it went.

They actually took the boats under fire for real, not warning shots. I think they did so without ever getting permission. It was a pretty obvious choice—it was self-defense....Long story short, they came out of the gulf, we went in, they came out, we met. We were about 3 hours away from where they were at the time so we met. It was now about dusk and we steamed together further out into the gulf. The task group commander, after getting a report, said, “Okay, go back in and resume your patrol as you were doing before, but do it together.” So, we did. We went in again.

Not much happened on [August] 3rd, but the next day, the 4th, was a different story....It was known in advance that we would be going into general quarters basically for

the whole day. And we did, and we sat there...at general quarters. That was not fun. It was like sitting in a metal chair with a metal bulb around you for twelve hours. Of course, one of my strongest memories because nothing was happening was that we had breakfast and lunch served while at general quarters, which meant that they brought us the food. For breakfast we had boiled eggs and ham sandwiches, and for lunch we had boiled eggs and cheese sandwiches....We secured [from general quarters] around dinnertime...and went to dinner. The conversation was very heightened, very electric. We had no idea what



Then-Ensign Doug Smith (center) stands at a radar console in the Combat Information Center of the destroyer *Turner Joy*. (Courtesy of Captain Doug Smith, *USN (Ret)*)

was going to happen next, if anything. Again, this was the first time since Korea that the Navy had been doing anything other than drilling holes in the ocean.

Shortly after [dinner] we went to general quarters... because there had been a detection of unidentified

surface contacts. My general quarters station had now been changed to inside CIC [Combat Information Center], where I was the GLO, the gunnery liaison officer. We had a radar...and when we identified a contact we could designate that contact as the targeting point for the guns. [The radar] had a lock-on device. If you saw a target—a blip on the screen—you put your little cursor on that. If it locked on and held, you could manage to have the guns all trained to that point. It was a targeting system called a TDS, targeting device system. That was what my job was. It was in CIC, and there was three of us—in fact, I have a picture of us at that radar console. Because it was a very, very dark night—rainy, no stars, no moon—the only eyes we had were on radar....We saw these contacts, and we had no idea who they were. They were unidentified, which was not unusual. When you’re in an area where you have fishing boats and who knows what else, they are



all unidentified as far as we're concerned. Unless they have a course and speed that is curious, if not threatening, then we consider them to be just normal traffic. So, in this case there were two or three of these contacts that had high speeds [and we considered threatening].

Eventually, the order was given to open fire, and we did. We shot quite a bit. I don't remember how much, but it was a lot. There are people who will tell you that they watched on the radar screens and saw contacts, and they saw shell splashes around the contacts that would light up and then disappear. But the contact would remain. And then, on one or two occasions, someone would say he saw the shell splashes and then the contact disappeared, which you would think would be a direct hit, but who knows? Of course, during this whole time, you have two ships steaming at very high speeds—25 or 30 knots—making very hard sharp turns, which created what we call “knuckles” in the water from the sharp turn. The knuckles would create bubbles that sonar would bounce off of as if it were a real contact. While we're getting these radar contacts, we're also hearing on our headsets that sonar is hearing torpedoes being launched. The first one was very scary. There is really nothing worse than being torpedoed at sea. You can imagine. But hearing it over the radio: “Torpedoes in the water! We have torpedoes we're tracking!” As soon as somebody reports that, you take defensive action. You turn away hard, which creates a knuckle [in the water], which creates another echo for the sonar. So, it eventually came to pass that it was like a self-fulfilling prophecy that you hear things, you turn, and then you hear more things.

In later days, that was cited as a reason why this attack never occurred, because there were so many of these reported torpedoes. How could anybody do that? There were more torpedoes launched than these [boats] carry. I remember the next day, our chief sonarman never really felt that any of those reports were accurate....He was always dubious that they really were torpedoes. Now, are his ears any better than anybody else's? I don't think he's had much experience, because even though he's a chief, there hadn't been a lot of torpedoes shot at ships in the last 25 years. Anyway, that was one of the issues. This went on for probably two hours, and it was very intense. It was very scary. I remember hearing a fellow up in the forward director [one of the ship's guns], who was outside and had visibility. I heard him say—now he doesn't admit this, but it's not something you forget if you hear it and you're in the middle of a darkened cave and you're listening to the outside world, like I was. He said, “Oh my God, a torpedo's coming. It's coming right at us. Oh my God, here it comes, the torpedo's coming. Here it comes...Oh God there it goes.” And we thought, “Oh, that was nice.” Of course, the voice was very real. Seriously intense. He will to this day tell you that he saw this and it was real, and this eyewitness report is one of the strong factors that identified that this event happened.

Now, this has been the subject of discussion for the last 50 years. Back then, on that night, there was no question in anybody's mind that it had been a real attack. No question. If anybody did have a question, they certainly didn't voice it—at least not to me....As you can



USS Maddox (DD-731) battles North Vietnamese patrol boats on August 2, 1964. (E.J. Fitzgerald/ Courtesy of The Navy Art Collection)



imagine, while this is going on, our squadron commander, who was a captain, was onboard *Maddox* and he was communicating with the task group commander on the carrier. The carrier wanted to know what's going on. The squadron commander was trying to tell him what he knew..., and of course it got reported to Washington that it was real....The next day, August 5th, we spent trying to find evidence. We went back to the area of the attack and looked for wreckage, any signs of anything. We never found anything. I should also mention—history does acknowledge this—that the Navy had sent aircraft (A-1 Skyhawks, I think) over to our area during the attack and they...saw nothing. What could they see at 10,000 feet, or however far up they were—even a thousand feet in the dark of night? The answer is, nothing except wakes. You could see a wake, I would imagine. They said they saw nothing. That's another data point. These data points were beginning to show some sense of confusion, which is why we spent the next day looking for evidence. That also meant interviewing the crew. What did people see? There were the eyewitness reports of the torpedo launch. Someone said he saw a searchlight. Somebody said he saw a silhouette and actually sketched what ended up looking like a PT boat....Anyway, it was a collection of evidence. [Eventually,] we left the Gulf and rendezvoused with the task group commander so there could be in-person interviews [as the Navy tried] again to discern exactly what happened.

After the 4th we looked at every inch of the ship to see if anybody had shot at us, and we found nothing. So, to

the best of my knowledge, we never found any evidence. It became a question [for the sailors] of, what did you think and what did you see? Because it was a very dark night, there was hardly any eyewitness who was credible.

**Question:** Looking back on it now, do you still believe that the attack happened on August 4th?

**Answer:** Looking back would not change my view. Reading about it has changed my view. I've read reasonably extensively about it just to learn what others have found and thought, and some of the analyses are actually quite impressive, quite detailed. The more detailed the analysis, the more they come to the conclusion that it did not happen, which puts these people in total opposition to what so many of my shipmates still believe....I have read enough to know that if this were to have actually happened, it would have been almost an impossibility based on where the Vietnamese boats were at the time. Based on the intelligence, the intercepts that had been received, and based on the tracks of the ships involved, it was just almost impossible for the two to come together....The detailed analysis won me over. At the time, we thought it did happen. Years later maybe the analysis said it didn't happen, but at the time, 99 percent of the people thought it did. They passed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution as a result.



*Laura Orr is director of education for the Hampton Roads Naval Museum*





Aboard USS *Constellation* (CVA 64), an A-1 Skyraider taxis into position for takeoff and crewmen prepare to attach a catapult cable, while in the South China Sea, August 1964. (Chief Journalist R.D. Moeser/Naval History and Heritage Command image)



Their way cleared of potential enemy opposition, the slower A-1H Skyraiders of VA-52 and other Skyhawks now dove on the 14 fuel tanks at the facility. Twenty-eight thousand pounds of bombs and Zuni rockets slammed into the target area. The fenced enclosure erupted in fire and smoke that rose thousands of feet in the air.

Minutes after this attack, the carrier force moved on to the nearby Ben Thuy naval base to sink or damage four North Vietnamese naval vessels. That same day, other *Ticonderoga* aircraft returned to Vinh to complete destruction of the tank farm and sank another pair of combatant craft at Ben Thuy.

The Crusaders attacking Quang Khe to the south also achieved surprise. The F-8s of Fighter Squadron (VF) 53, discovering enemy vessels at anchor or attempting to put

to sea, holed five boats and sank another with their guns and rockets.

At 1540, *Constellation's* VA-144 Skyhawks reached Hon Gay where they pounced on Swatow gunboats and other craft in the harbor. From shoreside positions and from the naval vessels, enemy antiaircraft gunners opened up against the aerial intruders.

Lieutenant (jg) Everett Alvarez, piloting an A-4, made one pass over the target area and when he returned for another, North Vietnamese antiaircraft fire crippled his Skyhawk. Before his plane crashed, Alvarez ejected from the cockpit and parachuted safely to earth. His squadron mates radioed an Air Force HU-16 amphibian aircraft standing by on SAR alert. When he learned that Communist troops were closing on Alvarez's position,



however, the on-scene commander called off the rescue attempt. The North Vietnamese troops marched the American pilot off to a prison cell. Until his release from captivity in 1973, the dedicated naval aviator endured long years of isolation and torture at the hands of his cruel captors.

Meanwhile, the A-1 Skyraiders of VA-145 arrived at Hon Gay and immediately joined the hunt for enemy naval vessels. When the piston-driven planes departed the scene, they left behind a half-dozen shot-up and burning Swatows and other craft.

En route to the Lach Chao estuary, the Skyhawks and Skyraiders of Carrier Air Wing 14 spotted five North Vietnamese naval vessels near Hon Me island and immediately pushed over to attack them. The enemy fought back; antiaircraft fire from one of the boats severely damaged the A-1 flown by Lieutenant James S. Hardie. The determined officer continued his attack run, nursed his shot-up plane back to *Constellation*, and made a successful emergency landing on the carrier.

One of his shipmates was not so fortunate. Antiaircraft fire from one of the boats shot down the Skyraider piloted by Lieutenant (jg) Richard C. Sather. He was the first naval aviator to be killed in the Vietnam War. Not until 1985 did the Communists return his body to the United States. Despite these losses to the strike formation, the Americans damaged all five enemy craft and left several dead in the water.

The Pierce Arrow retaliatory strike did serious damage to North Vietnamese naval forces. The 67 U.S. carrier aircraft that took part in the operation sank seven enemy naval vessels, severely damaged another ten, and put holes in all but three of the Swatow gunboats or PT boats in the North Vietnamese navy.

In addition to ordering the Pierce Arrow retaliation, the White House encouraged the United States Congress to take appropriate action. Convinced that North Vietnam had carried out a deliberate attack on American naval forces on August 2 and 4, Congress approved a resolution proposed by the Johnson administration. On August 7, the Senate, by a vote of 88 to 2, and the House of Representatives, in a unanimous vote, passed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. This measure enabled Johnson to employ the U.S. armed forces in the defense of the Republic of Vietnam and the other noncommunist nations of Southeast Asia. In essence, it served as the legal basis for fighting the Vietnam War.

The Tonkin Gulf incidents, however, worried Johnson that events in Southeast Asia might be spiraling out of control. Hence, in spite of recommendations from Admiral Sharp and other military leaders that the United States maintain pressure on Hanoi, the administration lowered the military presence off North Vietnam. Washington postponed or cancelled most of the 34A maritime operations along the North Vietnamese coast for the rest of 1964.

The last Desoto Patrol in the Gulf of Tonkin, which involved a two-day cruise by destroyers *Morton* (DD 948) and *Richard E. Edwards* (DD 950) on September 17 and 18, approached no closer than 20 miles to North Vietnam. The destroyers opened fire on high-speed contacts on the night of the 18th and reported having been attacked, but without conclusive proof, Washington questioned the validity of the report and cancelled further operations.

## Conclusion: The Stage is Set

Despite counterinsurgency actions in South Vietnam, carrier deployments into the South China Sea, 34A operations along the coast of North Vietnam, Desoto Patrols, Yankee Team and Barrel Roll operations in Laos, and retaliatory strikes against targets in North Vietnam, Communist activity continued. Armed with an increasing amount of sophisticated Chinese and Soviet weaponry, large units of the North Vietnamese army were deploying into South Vietnam for a final showdown with the South Vietnamese armed forces and their American patrons. The stage was now set for a full-blown war that would challenge the fortitude of the American people and the U.S. Navy.



*Edward J. Marolda has served as the Acting Director of Naval History and the Chief of the Histories and Archives Division of the Naval Historical Center, designated in December 2008 as the Naval History and Heritage Command. He holds degrees in history from Pennsylvania Military College (BA), Georgetown University (MA), and George Washington University (PhD). He is the author of a number of works, including The Approaching Storm: Conflict in Asia, 1945-1965 (Naval History and Heritage Command, 2009), from which the material within this issue of The Daybook was drawn, and was used by permission.*





THE DAYBOOK  
HAMPTON ROADS NAVAL MUSEUM  
ONE WATERSIDE DRIVE, SUITE 248  
NORFOLK, VA 23510-1607

Official Business

PRSR STD  
POSTAGE & FEES PAID  
REGIONAL NAVY MAIL CENTER  
PERMIT NO. 2235  
NORFOLK VA

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED



Photograph taken from USS Maddox (DD-731) during her engagement with three North Vietnamese motor torpedo boats in the Gulf of Tonkin, 2 August 1964. The view shows one of the boats racing by, with what appears to be smoke from Maddox' shells in its wake. Official U.S. Navy Photograph. (Naval History and Heritage Command Image)