

THE DAYBOOK

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COVER: In December 1969, American and South Vietnamese personnel man their weapons aboard a U.S. Navy river patrol boat (PBR). (*Naval History and Heritage Command image*)

THE DAYBOOK

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

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CONTENTS



Three ASPBs (Assault Support Patrol Boats) and a "monitor" LCM scan for danger as they lead a convoy of Armored Troop Carriers (ATCs or "Tangos") up the Mekong River as part of the Mobile Riverine Force. (Naval History and Heritage Command image)

FEATURES

THE TEN-THOUSAND DAY WAR AT SEA: TRIPLE-CANOPY CONFLICT

- 3 **The Navy's Riverine Renaissance**
- The Operations:**
- 6 **MARKET TIME & GAME WARDEN**
- 10 **THE MOBILE RIVERINE FORCE**
- THE VESSELS:**
- 14 **BROWN WATER BATTLE FLEET**



DEPARTMENTS

- 2 FROM THE DIRECTOR: "WAR ON THE RIVERS"
- 18 HRNM VIETNAM ORAL HISTORY PROJECT, PART III:
 THROUGH A SAILOR'S EYES: "I DIDN'T ASK TO GO"

War on the Rivers

The Hampton Roads Naval Museum is proud to announce the upcoming exhibition *The Ten Thousand-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.

The current issue, focusing on the riverine operations, is the third of five *Daybook* issues concentrating on the Navy in Vietnam. 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.

Inland waterways, such as the lush Mekong Delta, define Vietnam. In the 1960s the Delta was home to forty percent of South Vietnam's population and produced most of the country's rice. Operation Market Time's success in stopping cargo ships at sea forced North Vietnam and the Viet Cong to use inland routes for supply. American naval planners concluded that control of waterways was vital as they were the main highways in the region.

The U.S. Navy established the River Patrol Force (Task Force 116) to pressure enemy supply lines. In Operation Game Warden river patrol boats (PBRs) denied the enemy use of South Vietnam's rivers. The Game Warden Sailors kept shipping channels open, searched river craft, disrupted enemy troop movements, and supported special operations and ground forces.

The Navy supplied special vessels such as armored support patrol boats (ASPBs), monitors, and armored troop carriers (ATCs) for the Mobile Riverine Force (Task Force 117) to transport troops and support Army operations. Later in the war, Operation SEALORDS increased security in the Delta until American forces withdrew in the early 1970s.



HRNM Director John Pentangelo.

During the war, the “Brown-Water Navy” patrolled three thousand nautical miles of inland waters to protect South Vietnam. They helped doom the Tet Offensive in 1968 and defended the Mekong Delta until 1973. The articles within this issue help shine a light on these major contributions to the war effort.

This issue also includes excerpts from the museum's oral history interview with Vietnam veteran Jerry Gandy. Gandy describes his baptism by fire as a PBR Sailor on the treacherous rivers of South Vietnam. We wish to thank 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 in 2019. Until then, Happy Reading!





THE NAVY'S RIVERINE RENAISSANCE

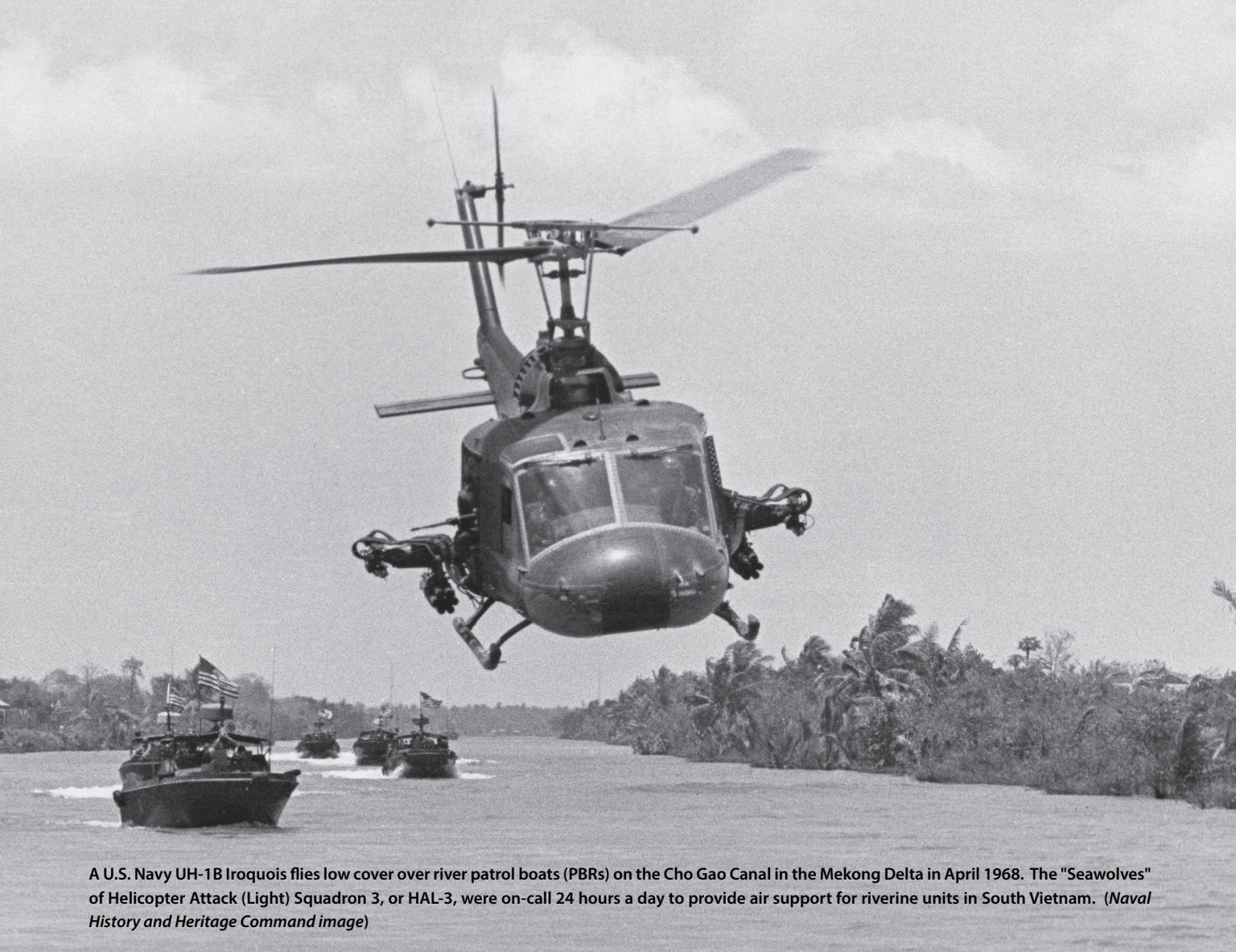
By John Darrell Sherwood, Edward J. Marolda, and R. Blake Dunnivant

More than 174,000 sailors served in South Vietnam between 1960 and 1972. At the height of the U.S. Navy's involvement in South Vietnam, the Navy's coastal and riverine forces included more than 30,000 Sailors and over 350 patrol vessels ranging in size from riverboats to destroyers. Naval Forces Vietnam, the Navy's major South Vietnam command, also operated minesweepers, floating barracks and maintenance ships, a fleet of maritime patrol aircraft, and helicopter gunships. Shore facilities included one of the largest and finest ports in the world, Cam Ranh Bay, as well as many smaller bases spread out along the 1,200-mile coastline of South Vietnam and its major rivers.

Besides being large and resource-intensive, the Navy's war in South Vietnam was a stark departure from the oceanic or "blue water" operations that characterized much of the U.S. Navy's 20th-century history. The capital

Gunner's Mate 3rd Class Earnest McGowan sits in the gun tub of the twin .50-caliber gun mount on a new Mark II PBR on January 13, 1968. Many of these newer PBRs saw action during the Tet Offensive. On the Mark II, the ".50s" are electronically fired and sit low on the deck. (*Naval History and Heritage Command image*)

ships of the "brown water" (riverine) and "green water" (coastal) navy were not battleships, ballistic missile submarines, or aircraft carriers but small boats, many of which were converted World War II-era landing craft or modified commercial craft. Vietnam was a decidedly low-tech, manpower intensive operation—an anathema to a navy focused on fleet operations and cutting edge technology. The U.S. Navy shifted gears during the Vietnam War, constructed three inshore task forces from scratch, and adapted to a form of warfare not experienced since the Civil War. The U.S. Navy invested many resources to the in-country war: in addition to vast amounts of equipment purchased and expended, the three shallow-water task forces lost 457 sailors during the war, and many others were wounded.



A U.S. Navy UH-1B Iroquois flies low cover over river patrol boats (PBRs) on the Cho Gao Canal in the Mekong Delta in April 1968. The "Seawolves" of Helicopter Attack (Light) Squadron 3, or HAL-3, were on-call 24 hours a day to provide air support for riverine units in South Vietnam. (*Naval History and Heritage Command image*)

Throughout Vietnam's history, inland waterways have been central to the country's growth and development. They are where the population settled and cultivated and marketed their agricultural products. The fertile Red River valley in the north, the lush Mekong Delta in the south, and the many canals and rivers crossing those two prime growing areas brought economic prosperity and social cohesion. During the 1960s, the Mekong Delta was home to six million people—nearly 40 percent of South Vietnam's population. The well-irrigated paddies that covered the flat land produced most of the country's rice, and the delta's 3,000 nautical miles of waterways enabled farmers to bring their harvests to market.

The First Indochina War broke out when Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh independence movement, which consisted of communist and noncommunist nationalists, rose up in revolt. Ho's troops destroyed French forces

on the frontier with China and secured the jungles and mountains of northern Vietnam's interior during the early 1950s. The Viet Minh, however, were unable to break French power in the two delta regions. The French used the inland waterways as barriers to Viet Minh advances and as highways to quickly move ground and naval forces from one threatened area to another.

French units of heavily armed and armored river craft, most of them surplus World War II U.S. amphibious craft, prevented Viet Minh forces from seizing Vietnam's primary food-producing regions, population centers, and ports. But in May 1954, the Viet Minh defeated more than 10,000 French Union troops at Dien Bien Phu, an outpost located deep in the mountains and jungles of northern Vietnam and far from the country's inland waterways. The rout of the French army's most elite forces at Dien Bien Phu led ultimately to France's withdrawal from

Indochina, leaving the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) under Ho Chi Minh in control of the northern regions of the country. The Geneva Conference of 1954, convened by the world powers to bring peace to Indochina, established the division between North Vietnam and South Vietnam at the 17th parallel.

The survival and future growth of the fledgling government of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) depended heavily on its ability to secure the nation's waterways, especially the Mekong Delta and the rivers that allowed access to the sea from the capital, Saigon. From 1955 to 1965 South Vietnam, with U.S. military assistance, developed a River Force to protect river transportation and commerce from attacks by indigenous Communists, the Viet Cong (VC).

Political chaos in Saigon, the deteriorating security in the countryside in 1963 and 1964, and the North Vietnamese attack on destroyer *Maddox* (DD 731) in the Gulf of Tonkin in August 1964 prompted major U.S. military intervention into South Vietnam in 1965. To stem the infiltration of weapons, ammunition, and other war materials into South Vietnam by sea, Commander U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) established the Coastal Surveillance Force (Task Force 115) under Chief Naval Advisory Group (later subordinated to a new organization, Naval Forces, Vietnam [NAVFORV]) on April 30, 1965. The United States also deployed U.S. Navy and U.S. Coast Guard destroyer escorts, ocean minesweepers, cutters, coastal craft, and patrol planes along the country's 1,200-mile coastline. The eventual success of this anti-infiltration operation, called Market Time, forced North Vietnam to transport munitions via inland routes through Laos and via merchant ships into the port of Sihanoukville in supposedly neutral Cambodia.

As war materials flowed into the Mekong Delta from Cambodia, the U.S. command stood up the River Patrol Force (Task Force 116) in December 1965. In Operation Game Warden, 31-foot river patrol boats (PBRs) assisted by armed helicopters limited the enemy's use of South Vietnam's larger rivers. The U.S. Navy then teamed with the U.S. Army to form the Mobile Riverine Force (MRF), whose purpose was to locate, surround, and destroy main force Communist combat units in the delta.

Although these efforts hurt the enemy, supplies from North Vietnam continued to get through to Viet Cong and

North Vietnamese forces, enabling them to hold their own in battle with allied units. The Communists simply switched the infiltration routes from the main rivers to the lesser rivers, canals, and swamps of the delta. The buildup of enemy forces culminating in the nationwide Tet Offensive of 1968 severely tested the staying power of the allied forces. In the end, however, the River Patrol Force, the Army-Navy Mobile Riverine Force, and the Vietnam Navy (VNN) River Force reestablished control of the delta.

Hoping to cap this victory and prevent enemy forces from rebuilding their strength in the region, Vice Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt Jr., Commander Naval Forces, Vietnam, and his staff devised SEALORDS (Southeast Asia Lake, Ocean, River, Delta Strategy). This strategy generated fierce battles and high casualties on both sides, but by 1970 allied forces had made it especially difficult for the enemy to maintain the supply route and had established a military presence in previously uncontested areas. The increase in security in the delta after 1968 enabled the South Vietnamese command to divert significant combat forces for the invasion of Cambodia in 1970 and to counter the Communist Easter Offensive north of Saigon in 1972.

The SEALORDS effort equipped, trained, and prepared the Vietnam Navy to take on the fight as U.S. forces began withdrawing from Vietnam in the early 1970s. Accelerated Turnover to the Vietnamese (ACTOV) was the naval component of the overall U.S. Vietnamization program. By the end of March 1973, when the last American military units departed South Vietnam, the VNN operated 1,500 naval vessels that included hundreds of former U.S. river patrol boats, Swift boats, riverine assault craft, minesweeping craft, and river logistic support bases. South Vietnam's defeat in 1975 did not result from the failure of the VNN or the loss of control over the nation's waterways; the Republic of Vietnam succumbed to a massive North Vietnamese ground offensive that advanced inexorably from the hills of central and northern South Vietnam to engulf Saigon.

The fight in the Mekong Delta during the losing struggle for South Vietnam took place half a century ago. But the service and sacrifice of U.S. Sailors demonstrated America's commitment to its South Vietnamese allies in defense of freedom and universal human rights.



The Operations:



MARKET TIME & GAME WARDEN

By Edward J. Marolda and R. Blake Dunnavent

From its establishment in 1775, the U.S. Navy has fought on the rivers and inland waterways of America and numerous countries around the world. In the Revolution, War of 1812, Second Seminole War, Mexican-American War, Civil War, and Philippine-American War, Navy bluejackets have traded fire with the enemy far from the sea. Naval forces have shown the flag of the United States on China's Yangtze River, on the Rhine River after World War II, and on myriad other inland waterways for more than two centuries. Hence, the naval and military leaders responsible for planning and directing naval operations in the Vietnam War had a rich history from which they could draw.

The actual experience of naval forces in the maritime environment of South Vietnam, however, proved equally influential. In March 1965, MACV established the Coastal Surveillance Force, designated Task Force 115, to interdict seaborne infiltration from North Vietnam along South Vietnam's 1,200 mile-coastline in Operation Market Time. Commander Task Force 115, initially

On the Perfume River not far from Hue in Corps Tactical Zone I, Sailors aboard a river patrol boat (PBR) review the identification papers of those aboard a passing sampan. (Naval Photographic Center/ National Archives and Records Administration)

reporting to Chief Naval Advisory Group and later to Commander Naval Forces, Vietnam, deployed U.S. forces to three interdiction areas: Navy patrol planes to an outer barrier far out in the South China Sea; U.S. Navy, U.S. Coast Guard, and Vietnam Navy oceangoing ships to a barrier beginning 12 miles offshore; and allied patrol craft and junks to an inner barrier just offshore. Market Time units operated in waters just east of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) at the 17th parallel all the way to Cambodia in the Gulf of Siam (Thailand). Task Force 115 units sought to locate, track, stop, and capture or destroy 100-ton North Vietnamese trawlers laden with war materials as well as junks and smaller vessels plying the coast.

On May 10, 1965, Rear Admiral Norvell G. Ward relieved Captain William H. Hardcastle Jr. as Chief Naval Advisory Group, Vietnam. Ward earned praise for his efforts on two fronts: he strengthened that country's naval service and oversaw the standup of an American Army-

Navy riverine assault force and a river patrol force.

The river patrol boat (PBR), initially designed for the civilian commercial market, became the principal fighting vessel of the River Patrol Force. A shallow draft allowed the PBR to reach relatively high speeds and maneuver especially well. Ward divided the PBRs into ten-boat river sections (later divisions) and positioned them at bases ashore and afloat.

MACV leaders and Rear Adm. Ward concluded that the success of Market Time during 1965 had compelled the enemy to rely increasingly on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the route through Cambodia to get their supplies to Viet Cong units in the delta. Therefore, on December 18, 1965, the U.S. Navy established the River Patrol Force, designated Task Force 116, to conduct Operation Game Warden in the Mekong Delta in cooperation with the VNN River Force.

On March 26, 1966, U.S. Navy, U.S. Marine, and South Vietnamese forces launched Operation Jackstay, the war's first major combined action in the upper delta's Rung Sat Special Zone, a lightly populated, but VC-dominated swampy quagmire south of Saigon, through which ran the capital's lifeline to the sea, the Long Tau shipping channel. PBR units, motor launch minesweepers (MLMSs) and minesweeping boats (MSBs) based at Nha Be, SEALs, and helicopters deployed for the action. At the end of the 12-day operation, the allies had killed or captured 69 enemy troops; destroyed Viet Cong supply bases, training sites, and other logistical facilities; and at least restricted enemy movement in the Rung Sat for a time.

On April 1, 1966, the Navy established the billet of Commander Naval Forces, Vietnam (COMNAVFORV),

under Ward, to oversee Task Forces 115 and 116 and enable the chief of the Naval Advisory Group, Captain Allan P. Slaff, to focus on improving the Vietnam Navy. The River Patrol Force's mission was to patrol the Mekong and Bassac rivers and the lower Mekong's main tributaries—the My Tho, Ham Luong, and Co Chien



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"River Boat 117 Under Attack at Night," an acrylic by John Steel, 1966 (Courtesy of the Navy Art Collection)

Vietnamese fishermen and farmers, dependent on the river for sustenance and transportation, did not always comply with the curfew. The Americans had to exercise restraint lest they kill such civilians moving about at night. The River Patrol Force also operated in the Rung Sat Special Zone. The Game Warden forces eventually established control of the Long Tau and the Rung Sat's shallower but still important Soai Rap River.

As COMNAVFORV, Ward established river patrol bases at Nha Be, My Tho, Cat Lo, Vinh Long, Sa Dec, Tra Noc, Can Tho, Long Xuyen, and Binh Thuy (just upriver from Can Tho), and initially deployed tank landing ships (LSTs) to the mouths of the major rivers to serve as floating bases. Within weeks, however, he decided that a river-mouth location subjected the LSTs, and more important, the smaller boats that called them home, to heavy seas and high winds, which hampered their operations. He moved the LSTs inland.

Despite the Navy's long history of river operations, in 1965 no codified doctrinal or tactical manuals on river patrol operations or riverine warfare existed. Based on operational experience and rules of engagement (ROE), the river patrol units developed their own operating procedures and tactics. In the early phases of Game Warden, the units established a standard 12-hour, two-boat, day-and-night patrol. Each PBR operated midstream and within radar range of the partner craft so both could

respond quickly and simultaneously if attacked by the enemy.

The ROE for Task Force 116 authorized PBR units to "demand the identification and a declaration of intent and to stop, visit and search vessels flying the RVN flag or flying no flag . . . which give a manifestly false response to the demand for identification and declaration of intent." Furthermore, the ROE gave permission to board and search vessels, detain suspicious individuals, and release those with proper identification. They also established guidelines for firing on enemy ground forces and watercraft attempting to evade a search. If U.S. Sailors repeatedly hailed a sampan or junk and received no response, the crew was instructed to fire warning shots to encourage a halt. If this action did not deter the crew, the PBR could stop the evading craft with direct fire. Should the occupants of a sampan or junk open fire on a Game Warden unit before or after hailing, the crew was authorized to return fire immediately. In all engagements with enemy craft, the Game Warden ROE specifically instructed Sailors to use "sound judgment in replying to fire around the vicinity of populated areas to ensure that unnecessary civilian casualties do not occur."

The rules for nighttime operations were different from the rules for daytime patrols because of the South Vietnamese government's sunset-to-sunrise curfew. River Patrol Force units could consider all vessels encountered

during the curfew as hostile. Although instructions directed the Game Warden forces to illuminate, hail, then search and visit river craft operating at night, they also authorized PBR patrol officers to radio their base or tactical operations center for permission to fire without preliminary action. The PBR Sailors could immediately return fire at night or during the day if they were fired upon from river banks, sampans, or junks.

Operation orders recommended random patrols to minimize the enemy's opportunities for ambush or evasion. They also stipulated that whenever two PBRs were involved in a daytime inspection, one unit should operate at a safe distance from the vessel, training its guns on both riverbanks, while the other unit conducted a search of the boat. Both units were warned not to drift toward shore lest they be ambushed.

Day-to-day riverine duty could transform from tedious to terrifying in seconds, making those who successfully led PBR patrols a special breed of Sailor. Distinguished among those leaders was Boatswain's Mate 1st Class James E. Williams of River Section 531. On October 31, 1966, gunfire from a sampan greeted his two-boat patrol in the Mekong Delta near My Tho. The two boats, PBRs 105 and 107, opened fire causing the sampan to flee to an adjacent but smaller river. Williams' boats then fired on another sampan that emerged from the same waterway. Williams ordered both boats to follow the retreating sampan and they soon found themselves in a hornet's nest. As they entered the river, enemy troops in concealed positions on both banks and in two large junks opened a devastating fire. Right behind these junks were another eight boats loaded with enemy troops. Undeterred, Williams' PBR 105 and PBR 107 crashed at high speed right through the enemy concentration, smashing sampans and toppling soldiers into the water. Williams later observed that the PBR "might be small but it was a man-of-war and I was in command."

Williams repositioned his craft away from the enemy concentration and called in air support. But when he spotted more enemy sampans and junks nearby, he decided not to wait for the aircraft. As before, the two PBRs raced through the enemy boats, taking a few hits from rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) rounds and automatic weapons, but dishing out destruction. With air support now then available, Williams ordered the patrol



Honorary Chief Boatswain's Mate James E. Williams and his wife Elaine attend the State Funeral Service for the Unknown Serviceman of the Vietnam Era held on May 28, 1984. Behind them are former prisoners of war Commander Everett Alvarez, Jr., and Air Force Colonel George E. "Bud" Day. (Photo by Photographer's Mate 2nd Class Gillespie/Defense Visual Information Archive)

back to the previous ambush area. As Hueys from HAL-3 began the attack with M-60 machine guns and rocket launchers, Williams directed both PBRs to switch on their search lights to expose the enemy forces in the growing darkness. While the helicopters assaulted the rivercraft, the PBRs maneuvered close to the riverbank, and "despite a waning supply of ammunition the patrol successfully engaged the enemy ashore and completed the rout of the enemy force." The three-hour engagement destroyed scores of enemy boats and inflicted numerous casualties.

In recognition of Williams' courage and leadership under fire, President Lyndon B. Johnson personally awarded the boatswain's mate the nation's highest award for bravery, the Medal of Honor.





MOBILE RIVERINE FORCE

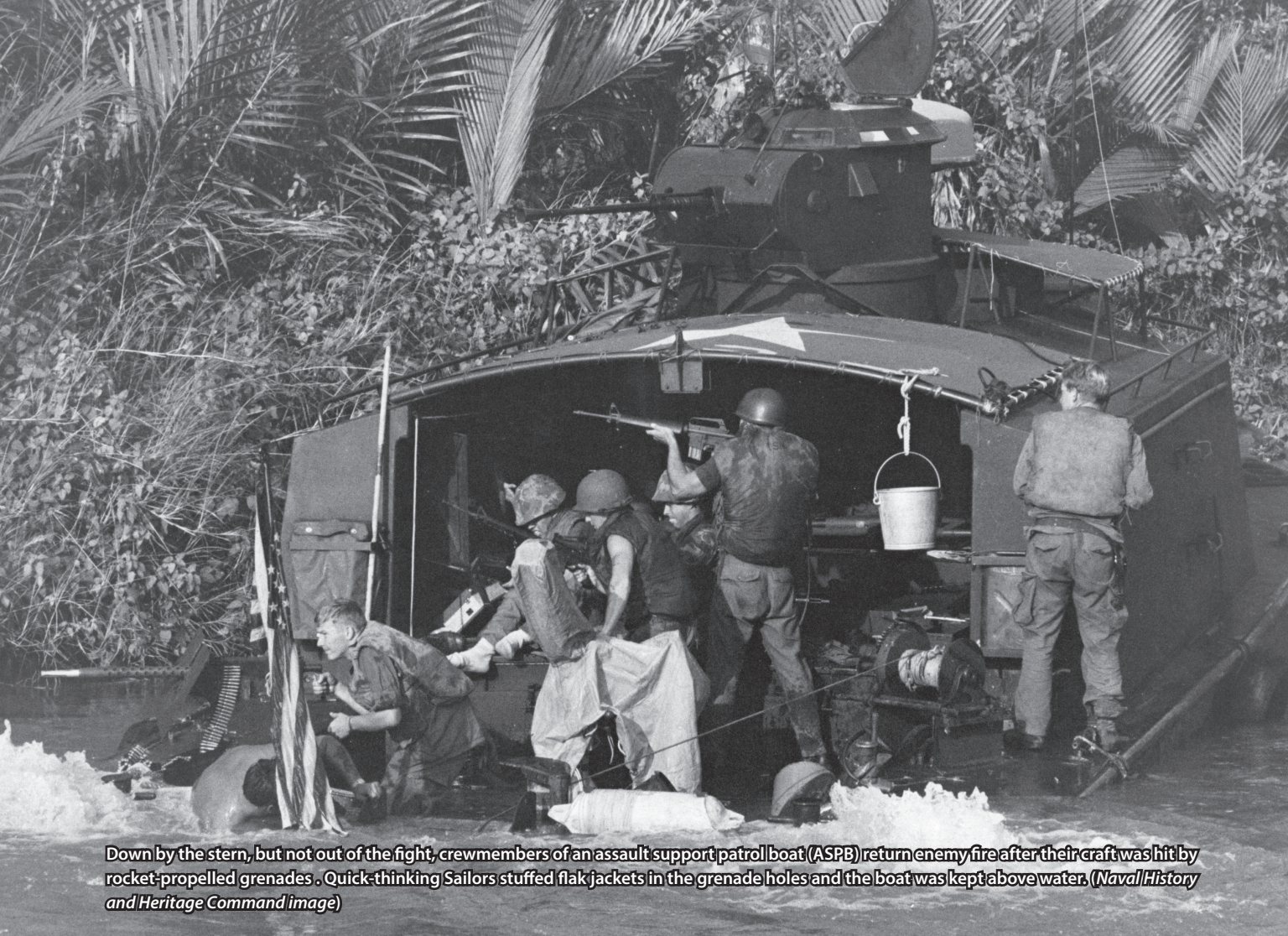
A U.S. Navy Armored Troop Carrier (ATC) lands U.S. Army troops of the Second Brigade, Ninth Infantry at an operating station along the Long Xau River during Operation Concordia Six in July 1967. (Chief Photographer's Mate R.C. Veeder/National Archives and Records Administration)

In 1966, General William C. Westmoreland, Commander U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, and Rear Admiral Norvell Ward, Commander Naval Forces, Vietnam, concluded that despite the Navy's success interdicting the enemy's infiltration on the main rivers, the naval force in the delta needed an assault infantry element. What Westmoreland and Ward wanted was an amphibious arm in the delta to locate, encircle, and destroy Communist units in battle. Traditionally, Marines would have constituted the ground component in such an operation, but the Marines were already fully committed to the fight in northern South Vietnam.

The U.S. command thus created an Army-Navy formation, the Mobile Riverine Force. The naval component, the Riverine Assault Force (Task Force 117) was paired with the 2nd Brigade and later the 3rd Brigade of the Army's 9th Infantry Division. The commanding general of the II Field Force, Vietnam, Lieutenant

General Bruce Palmer Jr., exercised operational control of the MRF's Army element led by Major General William B. Fulton. COMNAVFORV Ward retained operational control of the MRF's Navy element headed by Captain Wade C. Wells. In accordance with long-established amphibious doctrine, Wells controlled the Army-Navy force while it was underway and Fulton took charge when the troops operated ashore. Although this command relationship was less than perfect, cooperation and accommodation generally characterized the joint operation.

As Maj. Gen. Fulton put it, "there was to be no single commander of the Mobile Riverine Force." In theory, the Navy exercised tactical control of its forces and the Army its forces, but the theory was not the practice. Captain Wells, the first commander of Task Force 117 (dual-hatted as Commander River Assault Flotilla 1), recognized that since the Army had the preponderance of forces in the MRF, and higher ranking officers to command them,



Down by the stern, but not out of the fight, crewmembers of an assault support patrol boat (ASPB) return enemy fire after their craft was hit by rocket-propelled grenades. Quick-thinking Sailors stuffed flak jackets in the grenade holes and the boat was kept above water. (Naval History and Heritage Command image)

it was appropriate that the Army be the lead service. Wells deferred to Fulton; however, both men proved to be compatible leaders and cooperated well in their joint operation, as did their successors.

The Navy's armada divided into Mobile Riverine Group Alpha, comprising River Assault Squadron (RAS) 9 and RAS 11, and later Mobile Riverine Group Bravo (RAS 13 and RAS 15). The 400-man river assault squadrons each contained two river assault divisions (RADs).

American military leaders designed the joint force to conduct operations in the vast Mekong Delta from bases afloat and ashore. The base at Dong Tam (the MACV staff selected the name because it meant "united hearts and minds" in Vietnamese) was created from dredged fill west of My Tho. It served as the MRF's home ashore and site of the infantry division's headquarters. To house and support the force while afloat, the Navy created the mobile riverine base comprising various logistic ships.

In a typical operation, the MRF and the mobile riverine base would move swiftly to a site in the delta believed by allied intelligence to be the location of a battalion-size or larger enemy force. As the MRF approached the target area, ASPBs would move ahead to sweep any mines while Army artillery batteries, mounted on barges positioned along nearby riverbanks, would pummel the landing site. The ASPBs then deployed close to the riverbank opposite the landing site to protect the MRF's rear. When the main boat formation reached about 500 meters from the landing site, the artillery would cease firing, and the weapons on board the river assault units would open up. The latter continued their gunfire support until the armored troop carriers (ATCs) had disembarked their troops and backed away from the shore. The naval units then moved to cut off enemy attempts at flight or to disembark troops at other locations. Once ashore,

Mobile Riverine Force
Continued on page 20

The B-40: Scourge of



In 1966 the Viet Cong began equipping its troops with shoulder-fired armor-piercing B-40 rockets (such as the example above) that were lightweight and required minimal training to use. The B-40 fragment (below middle right) is what remains of the rocket that hit a river patrol boat (PBR) commanded by Lieutenant Ron Wolin (left) during the Tet Offensive in early 1968. "For a minute or two I didn't realize what had happened," Wolin remembered. "We lost control of the boat and when I came to, we were heading toward the bank. Had we hit that, we would have been in real trouble... There were cables hanging from our console and we were able to get the boat slowed down and finally turned. Everyone on the boat was wounded from small arms fire and the rocket... I had shrapnel in my legs and a concussion... A PBR picked us up and I was pretty sore for a few days but [I] was able to stay with my command." (*Hampton Roads Naval Museum Collection*)

Mr. Wolin kept a uniform shirt like the one that appears at the far left of the picture at left. Its most distinctive feature is the River Section 534 patch (close-up at far right), which Wolin designed. "I got the idea of a dragon flying over and I worked up the design and used the Vietnamese flag in the background," recalled Wolin. "A tailor shop made about 300 and gave three or four to every Sailor." (*M.C. Farrington/ Hampton Roads Naval Museum Collection*)



the Riverine Forces



The Vessels:

Brown Water Battle Fleet



By Edward Marolda
& R. Blake Dunnivant

When American military leaders surveyed maps of the Mekong Delta at the outset of the Vietnam War, one thing was clear. The region abounded with hundreds of rivers large and small, canals, and mangrove swamps; thousands of miles of inland waterways—and few roads. Those waterways served as virtual castle moats protecting Communist guerrillas from the forces of the Republic of Vietnam and its U.S. ally. To come to grips with this enemy, the allies would need a powerful combat fleet to transport, deploy, provide gunfire support, and logistically sustain a sizable ground force, much as the U.S. Navy had done on the Mississippi River in 1862, the Normandy coast in 1944, and the island of Okinawa in 1945.

At Norfolk Naval Shipyard, William R. Jarman (lower right) of Barbour Boat Works completes last-minute packing aboard a new armored troop carrier (ATC) about to be shipped to Vietnam as three employees of the Office of the Fifth Naval District Supervisor of Shipbuilding (SupShip 5) look on. At lower left is Walter E. Temples, inventory management specialist. Above, from left, are George A. Kunkler, supervisory ship's surveyor, and Leon Kravitz, material department head. By mid-1968, four private commercial shipyards had added enough armor to 26 WWII-era landing craft mechanized (LCMs) to more than double the weight of each one, at a cost of roughly \$150,000 each. The two ATCs in the photograph were among the 15 equipped with helicopter landing pads, which afford even more protection to the 40 infantrymen that can be carried in each ATC. Eleven ATCs were also delivered to the Navy through SupShip 5 contracts in 1966. (*Service to the Fleet*, page 1, June 21, 1968)

The Riverine Assault Force (Task Force 117), the Navy component of the joint Army-Navy Mobile Riverine Force (MRF), had many similarities to the oceangoing fleets of the past. Serving as the fleet flagship was the



An Army UH-1 Iroquois approaches a helicopter pad-equipped ATC for a landing sometime in 1968 (Naval History and Heritage Command image)

command and communications boat (CCB). This 70-ton, 60-foot-long craft was propelled by diesel engines and festooned with antennas connected to its onboard VRC-46 and PRC-25 radios. While gunfire support was not the primary mission of the CCB, it mounted a 40mm turret and two .50-caliber machine guns, a 20mm gun, and two M-60 machine guns. Harkening back to the Civil War, the battleships of this inland fleet were called monitors. Each 70-ton monitor carried an array of weapons, including 40mm and 20mm cannons, an 81mm mortar, two .50-caliber machine guns, and a pair of M-60 machine guns. The monitor used its guns to bombard a chosen landing site, defend the flanks of troop units ashore, provide on-call gunfire support, and cover the infantry's reembarkation.

The destroyers and minesweepers of the brown water flotilla were the armored support patrol boats (ASPBs). Usually called an "alpha boat," the ASPB was the only river craft specifically designed from the keel up for operations in South Vietnam. Adapted from the French-built STCAN/FOM, the boat was 50 feet long, displaced

28 tons, and had a draft of 3 feet 9 inches. Two diesel engines powering two propellers enabled the ASPB to move all around the other riverine assault craft at 15-knot speeds. In its primary missions, this vessel scouted ahead, kept watch on likely Viet Cong ambush sites, and cleared mines with its onboard minesweeping gear. The ASPB operated 20mm cannon, a .50-caliber machine gun, several 40mm grenade launchers, and an 81mm mortar. Insufficient armor protection and a tendency to swamp and sink in rough water initially caused high casualties in the ASPB force, but structural improvements alleviated those problems to a great extent.

The amphibious transport vessels of the Riverine Assault Force were the armored troop carriers (ATCs), each of which embarked a platoon of infantrymen from the U.S. 9th Infantry Division. Called a "tango boat," the ATC was 56 feet long, had a draft of 3.5 feet, and displaced 66 tons. The boat also boasted 20mm cannon and a variety of machine guns. Reconfigured ATCs also served as tankers and medical aid stations with landing pads for Army "Dust Off" medical evacuation helicopters.



As Operation Bold Dragon III gets underway in the Mekong Delta, a flotilla of U.S. Navy river patrol boats move down the Bassaic River toward their target: an enemy stronghold on Tan Dinn Island on March 26, 1968. (Photographer's Mate 1st Class L.R. Robinson/National Archives and Records Administration)

ATCs were modified to accomplish another task, the destruction of enemy riverbank bunkers that had proven impervious to the MRF's gunfire. ATCs mounted with flamethrowers, called "Zippo boats," and high-powered water cannon, called "douche boats," admirably filled the bill.

The Navy reconfigured the LCM-6 mechanized landing craft to create the CCBs, monitors, and ATCs. Naval shipyards in the United States and the Philippines enclosed the old hulls in plate and bar armor, the latter specifically designed to counter recoilless rifle and rocket propelled grenade rounds. When these rounds hit the outer bar armor, they frequently detonated without penetrating the inner plate armor. More powerful Soviet-made antitank weapons, such as the B-40 and B-50 rockets, however, began to cause the MRF's combat craft problems in 1969. Supporting the Army-Navy MRF afloat was the mobile riverine base (operationally Task Force 117.3 and administratively River Support Squadron 7) that consisted of two self-propelled barracks ships (APBs); two LSTs; a landing craft repair ship (ARL); a nonself-propelled barracks craft (APL); a repair, berthing, and messing barge (YRBM); two large harbor tugs (YTBs); and a net-laying ship (AN). The larger logistic ships were armed for self-protection with 3-inch, .50-caliber, quadruple 40mm, .50-caliber, and .30-caliber guns. The 9th Division soldiers considered the APLs and YRBMs godsend.

Between battles ashore, the Navy vessels served as the soldiers' homes, relatively safe from enemy attack and complete with hot chow and showers. The Navy ships also allowed the Army "grunts" to recover from "immersion foot," an affliction resulting from days of logging through the watery Mekong Delta.

Proud—Brave—Reliable

Between 1966 and 1967, United Boatbuilders of Bellingham, Washington, constructed two versions of the river patrol boat, Mark I and Mark II, based on a design by the Hatteras Yacht Company. The PBR MK-I's 31-foot fiberglass hull was impervious to teredo worms and other marine borers that thrived in Vietnam's rivers thanks to the region's high heat and humidity. Unlike other materials, when hit by enemy bullets and rocket-propelled grenades, fiberglass did not disperse the deadly shrapnel that killed or wounded crewmen of other type craft. The MK-I displaced 14,600 pounds and its draft was 2 feet 2 inches when operating at low speeds.

Two Jacuzzi water-jet pumps located below the waterline and powered by two General Motors 220-horsepower diesel engines propelled and steered the MK-I. This machinery enabled the PBR MK-I to average just over 20-knot speeds. Especially maneuverable and responsive to the boat captain's handling at high speed, the boat could stop or turn completely around



Swift boats loaded with South Vietnamese troops move up a canal in the Ca Mau in April 1969. The officer in charge of the boat making the turn, PCF-94, is Lieutenant (j.g.) John Kerry, a decorated Swift boat Sailor and future U.S. senator and secretary of state. (Chief Photographer's Mate A.R. Hill/ Naval History and Heritage Command image)

in its length. The PBR was equipped with a Raytheon Pathfinder surface search radar and two AN/ VRC-46 radios and armed with a twin .50-caliber machine gun in a forward turret, a single .50-caliber aft, an M-60 machine gun, and a 40mm grenade launcher, the latter two weapons located port and starboard amidships. Armor plates guarded the coxswain's flat and the engines. A ballistic-nylon fragment-suppression canopy covered the coxswain's flat as protection against fragments that often showered down when fire hit the radar dome.

The MK-II boasted the same armament as the MK-I but was somewhat larger in shape and length and presented a lower silhouette. Manufacturers made significant changes to the MK-II, adding aluminum gunwales to limit hull damage when sampans came alongside the PBR for inspection. Improved Jacuzzi jet pumps reduced fouling from weeds and other debris while upgraded engines reduced noise, a critical factor on patrol. The 32-foot MK-IIs could reach speeds of 30 knots.

Commander River Patrol Force directed the combat operations of the PBRs as Commander Task Force 116 and managed their administration as Commander River Squadron 5 (redesignated River Patrol Flotilla 5 in September 1966). More than 250 PBRs plied the brown waters of South Vietnam as part of Game Warden and SEALORDS operations.

Four enlisted Sailors—boat captain, engineman, gunner's mate, and seaman—crewed each boat. They routinely carried M-16 rifles, M-79 grenade launchers, a 60mm mortar, shotguns, side arms, and a Starlight night-vision device. Navy lieutenants normally commanded river sections and on many occasions, two-boat patrols, but just as often chief petty officers and senior enlisted boat captains led operations. Veteran PBR crewmen became especially adept at repairing the fiberglass hull, fine-tuning the engine, and reducing onboard weight to achieve the highest speed—crucial to the PBR's defense in a firefight, along with its onboard weapons. In the hands of the energetic, resourceful, and courageous Sailors of the River Patrol Force, the PBR, in the words of historian and river war veteran Tom Cutler, "proved to be a fierce little combatant." The boats and the men who fought in them were truthfully characterized as Proud—Brave—Reliable.

The Swifts of SEALORDS

The fast patrol craft (PCF), or Swift boat, served as one of the Navy workhorses of the SEALORDS campaign. The boat, constructed by the Sewart Seacraft Company of Louisiana, was used by offshore oil drilling

Brown Water Battle Fleet
Continued on page 25

Through a Sailor's eyes: "I DIDN'T ASK TO GO"

A Riverine's Experience on the Canals of Vietnam

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. This issue of The Daybook features portions of an interview conducted in May 2017 with Jerry Gandy, who deployed to Vietnam in September 1969 as a boat captain (and later patrol officer) of a River Patrol Boat (PBR). In this excerpt from the interview, Gandy discusses two of his missions in Vietnam, the second of which sent him back to the United States for four years of recuperation in various hospitals.



Petty Officer 1st Class Jerry Gandy (Courtesy of Jerry Gandy)

Question: Will you tell me about your first experience in combat?

Answer: We were going on patrol into an ambush position on the Vinh Te canal, which separates Cambodia from Vietnam. It was a night ambush position on the canal, and we were going up what was called the Yang Tan River, which was a very narrow river that you go up to the canal that separates Cambodia from Vietnam. We were going around a bend. The patrol officer was riding the lead boat, and I was in what was called the “drag boat,” or the cover boat—I was behind them. We went around this bend and I looked, and all at once—it’s hard to say how it happens, but the lead boat was completely engulfed in flames. Then I took a shoulder launch—we called them B-40s—one in the bow and one amidships, right behind me, and it hit my port side, knocked off the splinter shield, knocked the M60 machine gun away, blew my port engine out, blew a hole in the bottom of the boat, blew the aft .50 into the water with the stand, and blew my after gunner up and he was gone. It knocked me out—all I remember is getting up. I looked at the situation, and I guess it took me about two seconds—it seemed like forever. I had to decide. My boat was sinking. Do I take my boat and try to find my man, and get to safety? But I look up and I see this boat in front of me. I could see nobody, nobody on that boat. All I could see were flames. It was drifting toward the bank, so I guess without even thinking—I couldn’t tell you today—I managed to

maneuver my boat with one engine between the incoming fire, and it was still hot. When I say “hot,” I mean they were still engaging us.

I got my boat, and what I had left on there—I was telling the men to return fire. I kind of blocked the burning boat, and followed it back until it got to the bank. When I got there, I looked, and there was nobody on the boat. Then I backed up and went toward the stern of the boat and looked, and the entire crew was on the other side of the boat; the most bloody mess you’d ever seen. I don’t know how they were even existing. They were hiding between the boat and the incoming fire. Realizing that boat was fully engulfed and they were fully loaded with ammunition, what the patrol officer intended was—they were going to get the ones who couldn’t walk, and wade into the nipa palm, the reeds, to try to get away. I managed to get them all on my boat, and the patrol officer was too weak—actually, he was sinking, just too weak to do anything. I jumped into the water and went down and got him on my shoulder, and came up and got him on my boat. Once we got him on there we cleared the area. We had to go back through the worst of the fire to get out, and got to safety, and two helicopters came in and took the wounded, and got them to medical help. They had told me, “If you can keep your boat afloat, don’t let it sink there.” They worry about the enemy getting your crypto codes, your ammunition, your guns, whatever I had left—I didn’t have much left. There’s pictures of my boat after the attack.



Petty Officer 1st Class Jerry Gandy poses with his damaged PBR. (Courtesy of Jerry Gandy)

I got my boat headed back toward home base on one engine best I could, kind of going sideways. I only had two people on the boat with me, and we got back almost to home base and they came on the radio and said, “If you can, get up some speed and beach the boat, because it’s going to sink if you don’t, and we don’t want it to sink.” So I had to go as fast as I could on one engine, hit the beach, and hopped up on the beach. I got off the boat, turned around to look, and the shoulder-launch missile that had hit my bow was still in there and still alive. I almost fainted. I hit that bank just as hard as I could...and they had EOD [Explosive Ordnance Disposal] come in and take the hot round out. That was my first baptism of fire. I was awarded the bronze star and a purple heart in that action.


Question: Tell me what happened during your final patrol in Vietnam.

Answer: I was on patrol my last day in Vietnam—I’d been there ten months. I was on patrol riding in the lead boat, and all at once, the boat just exploded. Again, it knocked me down, blew a hole in my back—I lost both my right lung and part of my liver; I was just tattooed with shrapnel. Again, it was what we call the B-40, or shoulder-launched missile, that hit us. First thing I remember is getting back up, and this Vietnamese sailor was reaching toward me, like, “Help me...” What I realized was he didn’t have a hand. All I could see was white, very white bone. I couldn’t help him. I guess I went down again and the next thing I knew, I was on the helicopter being medevac’d out. There was this friend of mine who, when he heard I got hit, was one of the people who came to my rescue. He said when he saw me, they had me on the riverbank trying to keep me—my intestines were actually hanging out—they were trying to keep them out of the mud. I don’t know. I don’t remember.

From there, I was medevac’d to Third Medical, an Army hospital in Binh Thuy, Vietnam, and from there they found out I had malaria, so they had to get me treated for malaria plus my lung, then they took me to the hospital in Yokosuka, Japan. I was in the hospital in Third Medical for about a month, I think. I went to Japan, I was there about two weeks, and then they medevac’d me to Travis Air Force Base in California. Something that happened there has stuck with me more than any of my

experience in Vietnam. When we got to Travis, we were on this huge medevac plane. It was stacked five guys high, and I was on the bottom. I'm really claustrophobic, and all I wanted to do was get out of there. They put me on this stretcher, all these tubes connected to me, I looked like an octopus, I guess. They brought me down and had all these smaller medevacs there. Wherever you were going for your long-term treatment, you got on that plane from the big plane that brought us from Japan.

So they were bringing me down from the medevac, down the ramp to the tarmac, feet first. I'm looking up and I see a lot of people, I looked around—I was probably crying; I was home. I looked around, and this—she

wasn't really a girl, but a young lady—she walked over and looked down at me, and she dribbled spit in my face. She said, "They should have killed you over there, baby killer." These people were on an Air Force base on the tarmac. And then I looked, and they had signs. It didn't anger me as much as it hurt me. I will never understand why that lady did that, I will never understand why they were permitted to be there to start with. But that awakened me to how Americans really felt about the war. I didn't ask to go. But that was my experience in Vietnam, and that was all in a ten-month period. 

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

Mobile Riverine Force *Continued from page 11*

Army troops advanced on the enemy and often linked up with other U.S. and South Vietnamese soldiers deployed on solid ground by helicopter or armored personnel carriers. If all went as planned, the enemy unit would be surrounded and destroyed.

A major MRF engagement took place in June 1967 in Long An Province southwest of Saigon. Intelligence revealed that 300 to 400 Viet Cong troops were operating near the hamlet of Ap Bac. On the morning of the 19th, River Assault Division 91 landed a battalion of Army troops on the banks west of the hamlet while River Assault Division 92 deployed another 2nd Brigade battalion to the north of it. A South Vietnamese infantry battalion served as the "blocking force" to the south. The naval element then took up station to the east on the Rach Nui River. When the advancing soldiers made contact with the enemy force, the monitors and other naval units moved to within 25 and 30 yards of the hostile riverbank and blasted away with all their onboard weapons. Navy, Army, and Air Force helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft provided close air support that added to the enemy's woes. Despite receiving intense automatic weapon, RPG, and small-arms fire that killed 50 allied soldiers and wounded 15 Sailors, the joint force killed 250 VC guerrillas and destroyed the combat effectiveness of their unit.

During the annual Tet religious holiday at the end of January 1968, the North Vietnamese Army and its

Viet Cong allies launched large-scale attacks on South Vietnam's cities and towns. Their objective was to spark a nationwide uprising, defeat the allied war effort, and destroy the government of South Vietnam. The entire Mekong Delta was aflame as Communist forces attacked My Tho, Chau Doc, Tra Vinh, and Can Tho. The PBRs and HAL-3 helicopters of Task Force 116 and VNN units raced to the defense of these towns.

One of the fiercest fights occurred at Ben Tre, home to almost 75,000 people. Before dawn on January 31, 1968, 800 VC troops stormed the city and within 16 hours had compressed surviving South Vietnamese ground units and their American advisors into a four-block area around the MACV compound. Allied naval forces immediately responded to the attack. PBRs from River Sections 534 and 532, *Harnett County* (LST 821), South Vietnamese Coastal Force junks, and River Force LCVPs poured heavy fire from their 40mm, 60mm, and .50-caliber machine guns, mortars, and light antitank weapons into the enemy positions ashore. *Harnett County* and an LCM supplied the naval units and the MACV compound with ammunition and food.

In Ben Tre, as throughout South Vietnam during the Tet Offensive, Communist forces chose the battlefield by infiltrating heavily populated areas and setting up their defenses among civilians unable to flee. With little regard for the lives of these people—their own countrymen—the Viet Cong followed an approach that would in later decades be called employing "human shields." Unless the South Vietnamese and U.S. governments were prepared to



Next to the 40-mil-limeter cannon of a river monitor, suspected Viet Cong are interrogated by MRF personnel during a cordon-and-search operation. (Naval History and Heritage Command image)

surrender these cities to the enemy, which was tantamount to accepting defeat in the war, they had no alternative but to retake them.

The fighting and destruction caused by both sides killed more than 500 civilians, leveled 5,000 structures, and made 30,000 people refugees. An Army officer's observation that "it became necessary to destroy the town to save it," as reported by Australian journalist Peter Arnett, became a rallying cry for the antiwar movement in the United States. Nonetheless, many of Ben Tre's refugee citizens returned to rebuild their city in the following months, and it remained under the control of the Republic of Vietnam until the end of the war.

With its heavy combat power and mobility, the MRF proved to be the allies' heavy-hitter during the Tet battles. In February alone the MRF evicted the enemy from My Tho, Ben Tre, and Vinh Long and then reduced the enemy presence around Can Tho. These battles resulted in the death of 544 Communist troops. Captain Robert S. Salzer, Wells' successor as the Task Force 117 commander, observed that "it was sort of like cavalry coming to the rescue of the fort besieged by Indians, or rather with the Indians already in."

Following these initial Tet battles, Rear Admiral Kenneth L. Veth, who followed Ward as COMNAVFORV, emphasized to his command that it was time to strike: "Now is the time to resort again to the basic tactic of

concentrate and clobber. . . . Consider it preferable to eliminate one enemy unit than to take small attrition from several. . . . The enemy is moving about. Sometimes lost, and very vulnerable to ambush. Recommend all units move to the offensive wherever practicable and where the means are not available scheme, urge and cajole others to do the same. This is a time when ingenuity can pay off; Good Luck."

As the "fire brigade of the delta," the MRF traveled close to 1,000 kilometers fighting in the central Mekong Delta provinces of Dinh Tuong, Vinh Long, and Phong Dinh. The Viet Cong 514th Main Force Battalion was rendered combat ineffective after it tangled with the Army-Navy force near Cai Lai, and the MRF killed 687 Communist soldiers while relieving enemy pressure on Saigon. In August, the MRF deployed to the U Minh Forest, an area of dense mangrove swamps and a longtime Communist sanctuary on the delta's west coast. The fighting was fierce and casualties high, but the joint force established a presence there that would later be exploited by the Navy.

The MRF was clearly one of the U.S. military's most effective forces during the Tet Offensive of 1968. General Westmoreland credited the joint Army-Navy command with having "saved the Delta," and the nation's Commander in Chief recognized its superb performance with a Presidential Unit Citation.





The Operations: SEALORDS

U.S. Navy inshore patrol craft (PCFs) speed up one of the numerous rivers in South Vietnam while on a SEALORDS raid. (Naval History and Heritage Command image)

**By Edward J. Marolda
and R. Blake Dunnivant**

General Creighton Abrams, who had relieved Westmoreland as Commander U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, and Vice Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt Jr., the new COMNAVFORV, met for the first time in Vietnam in September 1968. The naval officer already understood that Abrams wanted the Navy in the delta to increase pressure on enemy forces, badly hurt by the allies' counterattacks after Tet. He also found that while the Coastal Surveillance Force, River Patrol Force, and Vietnam Navy had limited the enemy's use of the sea and the delta's major rivers for infiltration, the Communists had come up with a new tactic. Hanoi shipped munitions to "neutral" Cambodia's port of Sihanoukville where they were offloaded onto commercial vehicles and transported to locations on the border with South Vietnam. Communist logistic units then bypassed U.S. and Vietnamese patrols of the major rivers by moving the munitions on and through the delta's numerous canals, small streams, and mangrove swamps

to North Vietnamese and Viet Cong strongholds. He also learned that enemy main force units routinely avoided contact with the heavily armed and agile Mobile Riverine Force. Zumwalt concluded that "it was possible to blockade by water the entire area from the Gulf of Siam all the way across the Cambodian border" to the South Vietnamese city of Tay Ninh.

On November 5, 1968, Zumwalt's staff issued COMNAVFORV Operation Plan 111-69, which detailed the Southeast Asia Lake, Ocean, River, Delta Strategy and stood up Task Force 194 to execute it. The Market Time, Game Warden, and MRF operations would continue, but Task Forces 115, 116, and 117 were to detach units to support Task Force 194's mission. Hence, Swift boats would take part in patrols of the major delta rivers and PBRs, minesweepers, ASPBs, monitors, ATCs, and Vietnam Navy river units would move up to the Cambodian border and into the enemy's base areas. In addition, Asheville-class patrol gunboats moved into the broad rivers of the Ca Mau Peninsula.

The campaign's objectives were to interdict Communist infiltration into the delta, eliminate enemy

strongholds in the Ca Mau Peninsula, and improve the allies' protection of the South Vietnamese people in the Mekong Delta and the region around Saigon. SEALORDS

forces were specifically directed to:

–Maintain naval superiority on the inland waterways and contiguous waterways

–Interdict the enemy's communication-liaison route

–Conduct coordinated counter-infiltration operations in coastal and inland waterways in the III and IV Corps Tactical Zones

–Conduct operations to open and pacify assigned riverine areas essential to military, economic, and political efforts

–Conduct coordinated and combined offensive operations in conjunction with friendly forces to destroy enemy forces, base areas, and logistics systems by riverine and coastal assault raiding operations

In early November, Task Force 194 kicked off its first SEALORDS action—Operation Search Turn—when U.S. and South Vietnamese naval forces cleared the enemy from the vicinity of the Rach Gia-Long Xuyen and Cai San canals near the Gulf of Siam and established an interdiction barrier. This operation was executed about thirty miles south of the border with Cambodia. That same month, COMNAVFORV kicked off an even more ambitious effort to limit infiltration into the III Corps Tactical Zone in Operation Giant Slingshot. The Parrot's Beak, so-called because of what that portion of the South Vietnam–Cambodia border looked like on the map, pointed menacingly toward the South Vietnamese capital. Extending from the Parrot's Beak almost to the outskirts of Saigon were the Vam Co Tay and the Vam Co Dong, rivers along which the Communists moved their forces and supplies for the attacks on the capital during the 1968 Tet Offensive. Allied leaders knew it would be challenging to ensure logistic support of naval forces operating an interdiction patrol on the two rivers. The naval command deployed *Askari* (ARL 30), YRBM-18, and *Harnett County* to Tan An and Ben Luc, even though it was understood the units would be deep in enemy

territory. Round-the-clock vigilance, timely intelligence, and the simple but effective tactic of randomly dropping grenades into the water around the vessels were necessary to protect these logistic support units.

What the enemy could do to frustrate allied plans was vividly demonstrated on 1 November 1968 when swimmer-sappers attached limpet mines to the hull of *Westchester County* (LST-1167) anchored near My Tho in support of the Mobile Riverine Force. Explosions ripped into fuel tanks, storage spaces, and sleeping quarters, killing 25 American and Vietnamese sailors and soldiers and wounding 27 other personnel. Repairs in the United States kept the ship out of the fight for five months, but she returned to Vietnam service in March 1969.

Once the Search Turn and Giant Slingshot operations were underway, COMNAVFORV moved to fill in the unpatrolled section on the border between Chau Doc on the west and the Vam Co Tay on the east. Operation Barrier Reef, initiated on January 2, 1969, completed the barrier interdiction line from the Gulf of Siam all the way to Tay Ninh northwest of Saigon.

To protect the barrier patrol forces and help them accomplish their mission to interdict crossborder infiltration, naval units laid land mines all along the canals fronting Cambodia. Moreover, having taken advantage of former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's advocacy and financial support for electronic warfare, the Navy emplaced movement and other sensors in the border reaches during Operation Duffel Bag. The naval command also assigned river minesweepers and drone minesweepers to Barrier Reef in response to the enemy's mining of area canals.

The American mine warriors did yeoman work keeping these inland waterways free of mines, but not without cost. A nighttime ambush in 1969 devastated MSR-7, killing Chief Boatswain's Mate Charles P. Geisert and wounding four other Sailors. HAL-3 Seawolves came to the rescue, driving off the enemy and enabling units to retrieve surviving crewmen and recover the river minesweeper. A few months later the enemy once again hit MSR-7, this time on the Vinh Te Canal. A trio of B-40 rockets hit the craft, knocked out its steering, and set it ablaze. With little hesitation, Boatswain's Mate 1st Class Richard L. Schreifels, the captain of MSR-3, conned his boat into the hot kill zone, picked up several

MSR-7 crewmen, and headed for safety. Learning that other MSR-7 crewmen had been thrown overboard during the attack, however, the petty officer reentered the kill zone and retrieved the missing men. In the words of his Silver Star citation, Schreifels' "bold courage under fire was directly responsible for saving seven lives."

Giant Slingshot generated the most combat of all the SEALORDS operations. By February 1, 1969, after two months of heavy action, Captain Arthur W. Price Jr.'s Task Group 194.9 had engaged in 103 firefights with the enemy, mostly on the Vam Co Dong. Its Army and Navy units killed 259 Communist troops while losing ten of their own. On one occasion, exploiting tips from local villagers, the task group also uncovered almost fifty tons of arms and explosives hidden in 55-gallon drums all along the waterway. As security improved, civilian commerce picked up on the canals and rivers.

The enemy's weakness in the Mekong Delta after 1968 was reflected in their inability to prevent the allied advance into Cambodia in 1970 or to support the Easter Offensive of 1972, when for the first time in the war the allied command was able to divert an entire ARVN infantry division and two separate regiments from the delta to the fight north of Saigon.

The allied advance into Cambodia during the spring of 1970 brought the combined SEALORDS forces into a new riverine environment. On the morning of May 9, more than a week after ground troops crossed the border, a Vietnamese-American naval task force under the overall command of a VNN officer proceeded north on the Mekong River to secure that vital waterway to the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh. The U.S. contingent consisted of PCFs, ASPBs, PBRs, YRBMs, strike assault boats, a barracks ship, a landing craft repair ship, and a tank landing ship, as well as UH-1B helicopters and OV-10 fixed-wing aircraft. The Vietnamese flotilla comprised riverine assault craft, Swift boats, river patrol boats, and marine units. American naval advisors accompanied each Vietnamese vessel.

By the end of May 9, the combined naval force secured Neak Luong, a strategic ferry crossing point on the river midway to Phnom Penh. Because of the strong U.S. domestic opposition to President Richard Nixon's military "incursion" into Cambodia, no U.S. personnel proceeded north of Neak Luong (indeed, for the same reason, all U.S. forces were pulled out of Cambodia by

June 29). VNN units continued on to the Cambodian city and continued to guard the Mekong route for the next four years.

The River Patrol Force, the Army-Navy Mobile Riverine Force, and the Vietnam Navy River Force helped doom the enemy's Tet Offensive of 1968 in the delta and enabled the allies to keep their forces fighting at Hue and Khe Sanh supplied with ammunition and fuel. The success of SEALORDS and other operations helped the allies expand the Saigon government's political and military presence in southern Vietnam, secure the river approach to Saigon, mount the invasion of Cambodia in 1970, and frustrate the enemy's drive toward Saigon in 1972. Until the end, the Mekong River convoys defended by South Vietnamese and Cambodian river forces were the only feasible means for supplying the government in Phnom Penh with bulk supplies of fuel and ammunition. Partly because of the strength of the VNN river forces, the Mekong Delta was one of the last areas to fall into enemy hands in 1975.

For the Navy's personnel, Vietnam was a watershed in many ways. It represented the first time since the Civil War that large numbers of Sailors experienced riverine warfare in small boats—a combat experience more akin to that of an infantry soldier than a sailor on a large oceangoing surface combatant. For the most part, the sailors who fought in the shallow water Navy were volunteers eager to serve and were excited to participate in this nontraditional type of warfare. Consequently, discipline problems were rare and morale generally high.

The Vietnam War ended long ago, but the experience and expertise gained by America's river warfare forces continues to enlighten more recent military operations. American military advisors worked closely with the armed forces of Columbia during the latter part of the 20th century in successful riverine campaigns against Marxist guerrillas. Based on the successful use of mobile bases and advanced tactical support bases in Vietnam, the U.S. Navy employed similar afloat bases in the Arabian Gulf during the Tanker War of the 1980s. Several river patrol squadrons carried out more than 2,000 patrol and interdiction missions on the broad rivers of Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom. In short, river warfare remains a significant aspect of modern armed conflict and draws from the experience of 20th-century armed conflicts, particularly the Vietnam War.




Brown Water Battle Fleet

Continued from page 17

companies to service their rigs in the Gulf of Mexico. The Navy became interested in the boat for Vietnam operations because it had a shallow draft, was capable of high speeds, could operate in moderate seas, and most important was in production. And the boats already had an operational history; the CIA had used them in clandestine actions along the coast of North Vietnam. When the tempo of operations increased in 1965, the Navy ordered 100 of these small patrol boats and rushed them to Vietnam to counter the enemy's seaborne infiltration.

The aluminum-hulled Mark I PCF was 50 feet long, had a beam of 13 feet 6 inches, a draft of 4 feet 19 inches, and a displacement of 22 tons. A pair of 475-horsepower diesel engines turned two propellers giving the Swift boat a maximum speed of 25 knots. A junior officer and five enlisted Sailors manned the crew. The PCF's lethal weaponry included twin .50-caliber machine guns emplaced above the pilot house and a .50-caliber machine gun mounted atop an 81mm mortar (called an over-under gun) aft. From 1965 to 1968, the PCFs served on the Market Time inshore patrol under Commander Coastal Surveillance Force (Task Force 115). The units performed well on anti-infiltration patrols, but it was no easy job. The boats had difficulty in heavy seas and could not stay out on long patrols because they were only marginally habitable. Still, along with other Navy, Coast Guard, and South Vietnamese units, by late 1968 the PCF divisions had stymied North Vietnam's seaborne infiltration program, forcing Hanoi to rely more heavily on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Cambodian port of Sihanoukville to supply their troops in South Vietnam.

Concluding in September 1968 that the PCFs could be put to better use, Vice Admiral Elmo Zumwalt and Commander Task Force 115 Captain Roy F. Hoffmann incorporated the Swift boats into the SEALORDS campaign plan. After initial raiding operations into the mouths of South Vietnam's larger rivers, the PCFs began operating along inland waterways to free up PBRs and riverine assault craft for patrols in even shallower water. 

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Hominy Station—Firefight and Ambush—Swift Boat in Rung Sat, an acrylic by John Steel, 1966. (Courtesy of the Navy Art Collection)



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In the Mekong Delta, a task group of U.S. Navy River Assault Flotilla One moves down the My Tho River at dawn, en route to an operational area during Operation Coronado IX in December, 1967. *(Naval History and Heritage Command image)*