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# VIETNAM

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# VIETNAM



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As told by Raul Herrera

Before 1965, 70 percent of enemy supplies were being infiltrated by sea. But Operation Market Time cut that flow to a trickle.

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By Michael W. Sasser

"You came swooping out of the sky like an angel of death.... You could see the enemy... you could even make out their faces."

ABOVE: Moving out on patrol near the Demilitarized Zone, U.S. Marines board a Boeing-Vertol CH-46A Sea Knight of Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 164 at Khe Sanh in October 1966 (stories, P. 18 and P. 42).

COVER: Coming under ambush from Viet Cong in the Mekong Delta, American and South Vietnamese crewmen of a PBR (patrol boat, river) return fire during a typical action in the course of Operation Market Time (stories, P. 12 and P. 34).

Cover art: U.S. Navy



# The U.S. Navy patrol vessels of Task Forces 115, 116 and 117 played a key role in the war.

By Alan L. "Buz" Lowe

American naval involvement in Vietnam began in 1960, when a group of advisers was sent to train the Vietnamese military command in the art of naval operations. By the end of 1964, American involvement in Vietnam had escalated to the direct commitment of American forces to the war.

The U.S. Navy's use of coastal and riverine patrols was a key part of that commitment. To better understand the problems that the U.S. Navy faced in Vietnam, it helps to take a close look at the operations of Task Force 115 (Market Time), Task Force 116 (Game Warden), and Task Force 117, also called the Mobile Riverine Force. Such an examination can also help provide an answer to the question, "Could the U.S. Navy have organized a resistance force that was quick enough and good enough to stop Communist incursion into South Vietnam?"

The opening operation of the United States, in conjunction with the South Vietnamese, was code-named Market Time. The outset of the operation presented problems for the Republic of Vietnam Navy, which had no shallow-draft vessels to utilize in a coastal surveillance operation. The U.S. Navy was unable to send patrol ships to the area. However, it did send 28 vessels (destroyers, destroyer escorts and minesweepers) to participate in Market Time patrols. These ships were limited in how close they could go to shore, so the Navy called on the U.S. Coast Guard for help.

The Coast Guard needed only a few weeks to prepare for action in the coastal waters of Vietnam. Because of its role in coastal patrol and rescue operations, the Coast Guard had a number of craft that were specifically designed for inshore and river work. Twenty-six 82-foot cutters and five oceangoing ships were sent to patrol



A U.S. Navy PBR (patrol boat, river) drifts along the Tho River, searching for signs of enemy activity. Brown Water Navy sailors spent many days that were tedious, but on occasion, their patrolling was punctuated by moments of terror.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

the 2,000 miles of South Vietnamese coastal waters.

The life of a Market Time sailor was filled with contrasting extremes. He would find himself roasting in the hot Asian sun, then battling the pounding seas and torrential rains of the monsoon season. Boredom was his constant companion, but on rare occasions, boredom was replaced by a near-frenzied state of fear. Even though the sailors' lives were filled with tedium, their presence was an effective deterrent to enemy operations. The stream of supplies reaching the Viet Cong (VC) slowed to a trickle. Only 10 percent of the supplies necessary for the VC soldiers' survival managed to slip by the Market Time patrols. The operation was a success. In early 1966, it was estimated that the enemy accomplished three-quarters of its resupply by infiltration from the sea. By the end of the year, that was reduced to an estimated one-tenth of the total supply.

The coastal waters had been successfully eliminated as an enemy supply route. Now a new area of resistance was brought to the U.S. Navy's attention. The 5,000 miles of Vietnam inland waterways were being used to transport materials to the enemy. Until some means of stopping this flow of arms

and food supplies was implemented, the war would continue unabated. Naval authorities recommended the activation of a river patrol force. In December 1965, Task Force 116, code-named Game Warden, was established. This force was given the mission to enforce curfews, interdict VC infiltration, prevent taxation of water traffic by the Viet Cong and counter enemy movement and resupply efforts. In addition, the new force was to keep open the main shipping channel into Saigon by patrolling and minesweeping the Long Tan River. The so-called Brown Water Navy

force was made up of 120 specially designed river patrol boats (PBRs); 20 landing craft (LCVPs); a landing ship, tank (LST); a landing ship, dry dock (LSD); and eight UH-1B Huey helicopters.

The PBR came to symbolize the Brown Water Navy in Vietnam. When the U.S. Navy decided to commit river patrol forces, it found itself in need of a small, fast vessel that could maneuver in tight places. The Navy decided to use a 31-foot craft capable of 28 knots. The boat's armament consisted of a twin .50-caliber machine-gun turret in the bow, a single .50-caliber machine gun in the stern, and an M-60 machine gun and a Mark 18 40mm grenade launcher mounted amidships. Because its armor was limited, speed and armament became the PBR's best hope for protection. The PBR was born in an atmosphere of urgency and tested under actual combat conditions; it could have proved to be a disaster. Instead, it proved the reverse and accomplished its mission.

The life of the PBR sailor was not as adventurous and glamorous as it appeared. In reality, patrols were tedious and boring days that were sometimes punctuated by moments of sheer terror. The PBR and her

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crew patrolled 80 hours per week, leaving little time for rest or recreation. Many hours aboard the PBR were spent drifting with the current, watching for enemy troop movements.

The success of an operation is sometimes hard to assess. If assessments can be made by looking at growth charts, then Operation Game Warden was indeed a success. After the first year of operation, it became necessary to enlarge the area of coverage and double the size of the river patrol forces. Since the beginning of Operation Game Warden, more than 100 officers and enlisted men of the force had lost their lives as a result of enemy fire. The ratio of enemy killed by Game Warden units to Game Warden sailors killed by the enemy was something on the order of 40-to-1. That was one of the highest kill ratios of all U.S. forces in Vietnam. The effectiveness of the U.S. Navy's inland war may be realized by looking at early statistics. In the early months of Operation Game Warden, 58,530 sampans and junks were boarded and searched. VC losses included 38 killed, 44 captured and 1,423 suspects detained. Statistics are only as reliable as the person who prepares the fact sheets, but the relative tranquility of the Mekong Delta when PBRs were on patrol may be the best indication of the true success of Operation Game Warden.

A new plan was developed to help force the enemy out of his element and into what would hopefully be a trap. The Navy envisioned a plan that would strike the enemy where he least expected. The plan was to land soldiers to the rear of the enemy force aboard Navy armored troop carriers (ATCs). The soldiers were to dislodge the enemy and push him toward waiting entrenched South Vietnamese troops and crush the VC between the two forces. Out of this idea was born the Mobile Riverine Force. It was the first U.S. force of its kind since the Civil War. Its date of origin was September 1966, and the first trained elements of Task Force 117 began to arrive in March 1967. Full strength was realized by mid-June 1967.

The Mobile Riverine Force consisted of two river assault squadrons, 9 and 11. Each squadron had two divisions, one consisting of 13 ATCs, one command communications boat (CCB) and three monitors. The other division contained a refueler in place of one of the monitors. Later, eight assault-support patrol boats (ASPBs) were added to each division.

The ATC became the workhorse of the Mobile Riverine Force. It measured 56 feet in length and displaced 66 tons, with a draft of 3½ feet. It was armed with a 20mm cannon, two .50-caliber machine guns, two Mark 18 grenade launchers and an assortment of hand-held weapons. It not only was able to land troops, but could

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## □ FIGHTING FORCES □

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provide close-in fire support. Some of the ATCs were converted to serve as mini-carriers for UH-1 helicopters. The helicopters served in several capacities: transporting wounded servicemen to hospitals, acting as surveillance craft, and transporting troops to and from bases close to action.

The monitors used to support landing operations were armed much like the ATCs. Added to their armory were an 81mm naval mortar amidships and a 40mm cannon mounted in a forward turret. The vessels were 60 feet in length, had a beam of 17.5 feet, drew 3½ feet of water and displaced 75 tons. Flamethrowers were sometimes added to the monitor to burn away heavy vegetation and provide a landing zone for troops aboard the ATCs.

The sailor's life in the Mobile Riverine Force was unlike that of the other Brown Water Navy sailors. The missions that the force were sent on were usually action packed. Often the whole flotilla was sent into enemy hot spots where "Charlie" was waiting for it. The designated landing zone could be a hot one, and many of the troops were likely to become casualties before the day was done. More than one-fifth of the 2,000 soldiers and 1,800 sailors in the flotilla were killed or wounded. Their craft presented an irresistible target for snipers as they weaved through narrow canals toward their destination. Navy personnel, who regularly manned the delta craft, stood a 70 percent chance of being wounded during a year's service.

The success of Task Force 117 is not as clear as that of Task Force 115 or Task Force 116. The necessity of transporting troops by water to areas of resistance was clear. As the statistics show, the Mobile Riverine Force was somewhat successful, but not as successful as desired. In its first year of operation, 1967, the Mobile Riverine Force engaged in five major actions and killed more than 1,000 VC. As operations began, ambushes from shore, with the enemy using rockets and recoilless rifles, were common, and the enemy was often encountered in battalion strength. As time passed, a sharp decrease in the number of ambushes and the size of enemy forces attested to the success achieved. Sections of the delta long given over to the VC were, by the end of 1968, readily accessible. The Mobile Riverine Force cleared the way for other operations to gain a stronghold and expand in the region.

The American Navy and Coast Guard had accepted the challenge of coastal and riverine patrolling without hesitation. Could American naval forces stop Communist seaborne infiltration into South Vietnam? The answer was a resounding Yes. □