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COIN in the Littorals and Inland Waters**

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# **The Brown Water Navy in the Mekong Delta: COIN in the Littorals and Inland Waters**

## **Preface**

Soon after I was commissioned, I read LCDR Don Sheppard's *Riverine: A Brown Water Sailor in the Delta 1967*. His work and the mission he described captivated me. This was the first time I had been exposed to a surface warfare officer serving outside the "Blue Water Navy." His work has inspired me to serve in several unconventional surface warfare billets myself.

My studies of various counterinsurgencies at USMC CSC lead me to look at the Brown Water Navy in a new light. This paper combines my long time interest in Riverine warfare with my new interest in counterinsurgency operations.

I would like to thank Dr. Eric Shibuya, my Master's of Military Studies mentor, for his patience and dedication guiding me through the long process of putting this work together. I owe him quite a bit for keeping me on track and reeling me in as I frequently found other things "more important" than completing this paper.

Finally, I have to acknowledge my inspiration for all I do in my career and life; my two heroes, Pop and Dad. I know you're both with me always.

# **The Brown Water Navy in the Mekong Delta: COIN in the Littorals and Inland Waters**

## **Executive Summary**

**Title:** The Brown Water Navy; Counterinsurgency on the Fly

**Author:** Lieutenant Commander Richard Sessoms, United States Navy

**Thesis:** The Brown Water Navy, created in less than one year, conducted successful counterinsurgency operations against the Viet Cong only to be marginalized by its own government's policy of Vietnamization.

**Discussion:** In 1964 the Viet Cong was firmly entrenched in the Mekong Delta region. Using fear and terror tactics, the insurgency gained control of the population creating a safe haven for the movement to thrive and expand. The United States and the Government of South Vietnam recognized the infiltration problem in the Mekong Delta but their military organizations were either unable or incapable to deal with the problem. The geography of the region made it impossible for a U.S. Army or Marine Corps division to operate effectively and the South Vietnamese Army and Navy lacked the training and equipment to operate successfully. In response to these obstacles, Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, commissioned the U.S. Navy to develop a fighting force capable of operating in the delta and ridding the region of the Viet Cong influence. The Navy used for main Operations: MARKET TIME, GAME WARDEN, The Mobile Riverine Force, and SEALORDS to achieve these goals. In four short years the Brown Water Sailors experienced marked success with Viet Cong influence minimized and resupply efforts rerouted to the tortuous Ho Chi Minh Trail. However, by the end of 1968 American resolve to fight a war in South Vietnam had deteriorated and the Government needed a way out. President Nixon's Vietnamization program provided the exit for American forces and in turn mitigated the Brown Water Navy's successes of the previous four years.

**Conclusion:** The Brown Water Navy overcame tremendous obstacles in less than one year to create and deploy a formidable fighting force to the Mekong Delta. In four years aggressive strides against the Viet Cong insurgency were achieved only to be mitigated by the effects of Vietnamization.

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### **Introduction**

In 1964 the Mekong River Delta was firmly under the control of the communist insurgency known as the Viet Cong (VC). The absence of major cities and physical infrastructure south of Saigon made the area ideal for the VC to establish itself and thrive. By 1964, United States Army and Marine Corps presence in South Vietnam was increasing their assistance to the Government of South Vietnam. While progress was made in the areas north of Saigon, the Mekong Delta remained virtually untouched by American forces as well the Army of South Vietnam (ARVN).

Due to the Marine Corps' commitment in the north and the cumbersome nature of the Army Infantry Division in 1964, a new method had to be developed to counter the Viet Cong in the Mekong Delta. This task fell to the United States Navy which had no real riverine capability in early 1964. In less than one year the United States Navy developed a robust riverine capability, the "Brown Water Navy."

This paper will examine the development of the United States Navy's "Brown Water Navy" and its conduct of counterinsurgency operations. I will begin by discussing a brief history of the Viet Cong insurgency and its genesis in the Mekong Delta. Next I will discuss the formation of the Brown Water Navy through its three primary operations, MARKET TIME, GAME WARDEN, and the Mobile Riverine Force. Additionally, I will examine each operation's impact in the fight against the VC insurgency. Finally, I will discuss the effects of Vietnamization on the "Brown Water Navy" which ultimately reduced the effects of the counterinsurgency.

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### **Insurgency**

Joint Doctrine defines an insurgency as an organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict.<sup>1</sup> FM 3-24 further defines insurgency as an organized, protracted politico-military struggle designed to weaken control and legitimacy of an established government, occupying power, of other political authority while increasing insurgent control.<sup>2</sup>

In order to succeed in a counterinsurgency operation one must strive to gain control of the population. Bard O'Neil identifies four critical areas which must be addressed in order to gain control; control the physical environment, win popular support, address needs of the people, and legitimacy of the local government.<sup>3</sup> In South Vietnam the target of both the VC and the U.S. forces were the peasants. These were the "fence sitters" who had no real alliance to either the communists or the GVN. These individuals were easy targets for the VC because they were able to address their needs and so long as they acquiesced to VC they lived in relative security. The GVN was virtually unseen in the remote provinces of the Mekong Delta giving the VC near free reign and uncontested control of the region.

### **The Genesis of the Viet Cong**

Subsequent to the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu, the Geneva Accords divided Vietnam into the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the North and the Republic of Vietnam in the South. The Accords provided for a period of free movement in which citizens of either new country could move freely from one to the other. The Communist-



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led Hanoi regime took full advantage of this provision, choosing to keep nearly fifteen thousand communist supporters in place in the South while bringing nearly seventy thousand more Southerners to the North for training and later reinsertion.

Ho Chi Min, the Communist Leader of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, hoped to conquer the South through political agitation. He ordered his supporters in the South, known as the National Liberation Front (NLF) to build up a clandestine military force prepared to conduct a full scale revolutionary war. This force became known as the Viet Cong.<sup>4</sup> The Communist Party of North Vietnam employed Mao Zedong's theory of protracted popular war as the central strategy for the VC.<sup>5</sup> Although the VC had a main force element which could operate in traditional infantry organizations (i.e. battalions, regiments and/or divisions) it focused primarily on phase one and two operations of Mao's protracted war theory. The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) focused on phase three and regular army operations prosecuting the majority of the conventional aspects of the war.

The Viet Cong infrastructure (VCI) or shadow government was the non-military politically functioning element of the insurgency. The VCI mission was to support the military element and further spread the message by enlarging the cadre. The VCI flourished in the early 1960's, recruiting nearly three thousand members per month from the poor hamlets in the South. By 1964, all 16 provinces within the Mekong Delta fell under VC control or influence. It is estimated that nearly 75 percent of the Delta population was controlled or subject to the intimidation of the Viet Cong.<sup>6</sup> Populations in the larger coastal villages and cities remained somewhat loyal to the GVN.

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The Delta provided a safe haven for the Viet Cong to recruit, train, create arms caches, and build supplies. The Vietnamese Army was not willing to patrol the rivers and move into the Viet Cong controlled estuaries as they were outnumbered nearly two to one.<sup>7</sup> Basically unchecked, the Viet Cong thrived. They became extremely adept at using the water networks to further their cause. They had developed into a challenging foe, well schooled in the arts of war, after fighting the French for eight years in the Indochina War and the Saigon Nationalists for the last ten years. "Many were fishermen and hunters, which gave them a natural affinity for the land and water, a natural patience, and a great ingenuity when it came to devising methods of killing."<sup>8</sup>

### **The Mekong River**

Viet Cong operated relatively unchecked partially due to corruption and the GVN's inability to establish itself as a legitimate entity but also due to the relative isolation the Mekong Delta provided from the rest of the country. The delta stretches from the Gulf of Thailand north to the Cambodian border and east to Saigon. Although the area encompasses less than 25 percent of the total land area of South Vietnam, over 50 percent of the South Vietnam's population of 9 million resides within the delta.<sup>9</sup> The Mekong and Bassac rivers form the major waterways of the region with countless tributaries and canals covering the entire expanse. The society was nearly 100 percent agrarian, producing over 80 percent of the South Vietnam rice crop.

The area was difficult to maneuver by land due to the lack of road networks and periodic prolonged flooding in various areas. The 3,000 nautical miles of rivers, canals, and streams was the life-blood of the region providing locals a means of transportation,

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moving of goods, and communication. The VC capitalized on the waterways as well, infiltrating supplies up river from ocean going vessels as well as down river from Cambodian ports and later the Ho Chi Minh trail.

### **The Bucklew Report**

In-country Army advisors recognized the infiltration problems and the ARVN's inability to stop it, however they surmised the root of the problem was infiltration from the sea. In January of 1964, U.S. Navy Captain Phillip Bucklew and an eight-man team were sent to Saigon to study the problem and recommend feasible solutions. Captain Bucklew and his team confirmed infiltration was abundant. The Bucklew report recommended implementing blockades, curfews, checkpoints, and regular patrols focusing on Cambodian border traffic and Seaborne traffic.<sup>10</sup> The report also concluded that the Vietnamese Army and Navy were incapable of conducting a mission such as this to an extent that it would have measurable positive results. Rather, considerable numbers of U.S. Navy ships, air patrols, and advisor personnel would be required to assist the ARVN and VNN. The report was acknowledged by the Commander U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam (COMUSMACV) but not acted upon until after the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.

Once COMUSMACV resolved to combat VC infiltration in the Mekong Delta the U.S. Navy became fully engaged in the Vietnam War. Lead by Commander Naval Forces Vietnam (COMNAVFORV), four major riverine operations: MARKET TIME, GAME WARDEN, The Mobile Riverine Force, and SEALORDS were established to counter VC infiltration and presence in the region.

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### **Operation MARKET TIME**

The Bucklew report confirmed infiltration and re-supply of the VC from North Vietnam. However, the method of infiltration was strongly debated among the services. Although the Bucklew report stated the majority of the infiltration was coming down the Mekong River from Cambodia the Army was convinced it was coming up river from the sea. The Army's position was solidified by the Vung Ro incident. On 16 February 1965, a U.S. Army helicopter spotted a suspicious ship in Vung Ro Bay near Nha Trang. The ship was confirmed to be a supply ship from North Vietnam. Air strikes disabled the ship and the South Vietnamese Army began a mission to capture the vessel. After five days the ARVN forces had secured the ship and Vung Ro Bay; however the Viet Cong had already removed most of the supplies. The incident solidified two points: the North was in fact infiltrating supplies by sea and the South Vietnamese military was incapable of countering this infiltration.<sup>11</sup>

The day after the Vung Ro incident concluded COMUSMACV requested assistance from Commander in Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC) and Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet (CINCPACFLT) to plan an operation to counter the infiltration from the sea. Operation MARKET TIME was born. MARKET TIME targeted two types of seaward infiltration: sea going junks which traveled close to the coast and large steel hulled trawlers which traveled further out to sea. The area of operation assigned to MARKET TIME was from the coastline to 40 nautical miles seaward. By April of 1965, the U.S. Navy had 28 destroyers, destroyer escorts, and minesweepers on station conducting

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patrols.<sup>12</sup> Due to the draft of these vessels they were severely limited as how close to the coast they could patrol. The coastal patrols were relegated to the junk force and VNN.

MACV had little or no confidence in the VNN's ability to execute this mission therefore it was determined the U.S. Navy must introduce a patrol craft which could work with the VNN. The Navy's dilemma now was there was no such patrol craft in inventory. Two options were explored: design a craft from keel up or, purchase an existing hull which could be modified for military application. Due to time constraints, option two was selected. To cover the gap until purchased boats could be shipped in country, the Secretary of the Navy, Paul Nitze, worked a deal to obtain craft and Sailors from the Coast Guard.<sup>13</sup>

The Coast Guard provided seventeen 82ft U.S.CG Patrol Boats (WPBs). The WPB was steel hulled with an aluminum superstructure. It weighed 65 tons and drafted only 5 ½ feet yet it was surprisingly seaworthy. In anticipation of their combat roles, a .50 caliber machine gun and 81-mm mortar were installed on the forecastle as well four additional .50 caliber deck guns on the fantail.<sup>14</sup> The WPBs were a stopgap measure. The U.S. Navy discovered its future patrol craft servicing oilrigs in the Gulf of Mexico and quickly contracted Sewart Seacraft of Burwick, Louisiana to build 54 (later increased to 81) Fast Patrol Crafts (PCFs). The PCF, or "Swift Boat" as it became known, was an all-welded aluminum craft, which displaced 19 tons and drafted 3 ½ feet. It was powered by two diesel engines with twin screws capable of 28 knots. They were armed with twin .50 caliber machine guns forward and a .50 caliber machine/ 81 mm mortar combination aft.<sup>15</sup> While the WPBs and PCFs became the workhorses of MARKET TIME, the deep

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draft vessels played an equally important role. Radar Picket Destroyer Escorts (DERs), Coast Guard high endurance cutters (WHECs), and Minesweepers (MSO) were used to patrol the outer regions of the Area of Operations (AOR). Their primary role was to provide radar coverage of the area coordinating WPB and PCF actions on contacts of interest and when needed providing additional firepower. They also conducted inspections of their own and to a lesser degree serving as a mother ship to the smaller ships.

MARKET TIME also relied heavily on aviation assets. P-2 Neptunes and P-3 Orions flew long range maritime patrol flights from air bases at Utapao, Thailand, Sangley Point, Philippines, and Tan Son Nhut air base near Saigon. P-5 Marlins (seaplanes) flew missions from seaplane tenders anchored throughout the AOR.

The AOR was divided into four naval zones, which roughly matched the Corps AORs that MACV had established ashore. Each naval zone was administered by a surveillance center: first located at Da Nang, second located at Qui Nhon and Nha Trang, third located at Vung Tau and fourth located at An Thoi.<sup>16</sup> Each surveillance center was responsible for coordinating patrol units within its assigned patrol areas. The four naval zones were subdivided into nine patrol areas approximately 40 miles deep and 120 miles long. Typically one DER, WHEC or MSO was assigned to patrol an area. The seven inner patrol areas were covered by the "Swift" boats (PCF) while the Coast Guard WPBs covered the outer two border patrol areas (1 and 9).<sup>17</sup>

MARKET TIME's primary mission was "to conduct surveillance, gunfire support, visit and search, and other operations as directed along the coast of the Republic

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of Vietnam in order to assist the Republic of Vietnam in detection and prevention of Communist infiltration from the sea."<sup>18</sup> By design the ships would use their radar and the maritime patrols to identify suspected infiltrators. The patrols would then close on the vessel and perform the inspection or if in shallow water pass it off to one of the patrol craft. By mid 1966, the task force had essentially closed the door on seaward infiltration as the North essentially abandoned the use of trawlers and the attempt to move supplies by sea.<sup>19</sup> The day-to-day routine of MARKET TIME quickly became monotonous, searching sampans and junks. Periodically the monotony of the routine was broken when MARKET TIME units would be called upon to provide fire support for operations ashore. The fire support mission became top priority during the Tet Offensive in 1968 as MARKET TIME craft came to the rescue many hamlets and villages helping to beat back Viet Cong attackers with their added firepower. The aftermath of Tet placed the Viet Cong in a precarious situation desperately needing resupply. Their situation was so grim the North again resorted to trying to infiltrate the south from the sea. On the morning of March 1, four enemy trawlers tried to make their way south. All four were detected early and tracked. When challenged, the first trawler turned away and headed back to the north. The other three refused to acknowledge the challenges and were quickly taken under fire and destroyed. This was the last concerted effort the North made to infiltrate by sea.

### **Impact of MARKET TIME**

Evidence suggests Operation MARKET TIME was very successful. Measures of success can be somewhat misleading because data is collected on vessels stopped. We

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have no way of determining the vessels that went undetected. The total number of boardings conducted between June 1966 and June 1968 was over 400,000, a daily average of over 500. Considering the immense amount of waterborne traffic in the region, statistics alone cannot give a measure of success. The U.S. Army later commissioned BDM Corporation to conduct a study of the war to attain lessons learned. Their assessment of the Coastal Surveillance Force was:

Operation MARKET TIME has been judged to have produced significant results and is credited with forcing the enemy to change his logistic operations extensively. In early 1966, it was estimated that the enemy accomplished three-quarters of his resupply by infiltration from the sea. By the end of 1966 this was reduced to an estimated one-tenth of the total resupply.<sup>20</sup>

General Westmoreland further stated, "MARKET TIME forces have successfully blocked intrusions by sea, forcing the enemy to use the long, tortuous. Ho Chi Minh Trail, thus affecting significantly his ability to properly sustain his forces in the South."<sup>21</sup>

### **Operation GAME WARDEN**

As successful as Operation MARKET TIME was it only addressed a small portion of the infiltration problem. MACV initially tabled the Bucklew Report believing that seaward infiltration was the primary means of resupplying the Viet Cong. However this was quickly proven false. Infiltration from up river, out of Cambodia, had to be addressed.

On December 18 1965, Operation GAME WARDEN, Task Force 116, officially began in concept. The mission as stated in the operation order was: "Conduct river patrols and inshore surveillance, enforce curfews, prevent Viet Cong infiltration, movement and re-supply along the Delta estuary coast and across the major rivers of the



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Mekong Delta and the Rung Sat Special Zone of the Republic of Vietnam and conduct mine countermeasure operations as ordered in order to assist the government of the Republic of Vietnam to establish effective population and Resources Control Measures and to counter the effect of enemy mining.”<sup>22</sup> The Rung Sat Special Zone is the river area, which leads to north Saigon and though not technically part of the Mekong Delta is included in the operation area due to its proximity and importance. The task force was a combined U.S. Navy, Vietnamese Navy effort with assistance from United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Vietnamese National Police. The U.S. Navy contributed patrol craft, support craft, aviation assets, and Sailors to conduct the operation. This proved difficult in 1965, as the U.S. Navy had no patrol craft in inventory, no Sailors that had ever conducted riverine operations of this scale, and no doctrine to train sailors or conduct operations. The operation order was not an order to develop a riverine capability. It was an order to go to the Mekong Delta and start conducting operations as soon as possible.

Prior to the Navy's first Patrol Boat River (PBR) purchase, LT Ken MacLeod and his “River Rats” began conducting patrols in the Rung Sat using four old Landing Craft Personnel (LCPL) and various Landing Craft Mechanized (LCM) boats. Task Force 116 commenced operations with much less than optimal craft. Aside from being in various states of disrepair, the boats provided had loud diesel engines and drafted well over 48 inches. This made it virtually impossible to patrol many of the Delta's waterways. Due to the immediate demand, the U.S. Navy was not able to design and prototype a craft specific for the mission; rather they were forced to select a commercially available hull

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and modify it for combat use. The requirements were relatively simple. The craft had to have a minimal draft (18 inches at all stop, 9 inches when on plane) allowing it to travel into the shallow canals. The craft had to be light and capable of at least 28 - 30 knots, allowing it to evade VC ambushes and run down any craft on the river. Most importantly, it had to have a water jet propulsion system, eliminating the need for screws and a rudder and allowing for complete maneuverability in the shallows of the Delta. The U.S. Navy settled on the fiberglass 'Hatteras' hull and contracted for 120 PBRs (later increased to 250) to be built by United Boatbuilders.<sup>23</sup>

Small craft such as PBRs need frequent maintenance and the crews obviously could not live aboard them. Bases are required to house the sailors and maintain the boats. Shore bases were initially impossible due to the lack of infrastructure and difficulty in maintaining security. The U.S. Navy overcame this problem by pulling four Landing Ship Tanks (LSTs) from reserve and specially equipping them to serve as floating PBR bases. The floating bases were positioned at the mouth of the rivers to support operations in the area. As time passed bases were established ashore and the sailors and craft transitioned ashore facilitating operations further up river.

In addition to stopping Viet Cong infiltration in the Delta, Task Force 116 was also tasked with minesweeping and clearance in the region. The GVN as well as the U.S. advisors feared the VC would try to disrupt friendly shipping traffic in the vital waterways, particularly in the Rung Sat approaches to Saigon, by sinking a ship in the channel. Mine Division 112 was assigned to GAME WARDEN to accomplish this mission. They were equipped with Mine Sweeping Boats, MSBs, to keep the channels

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clear. These craft were successful in the channels however they could not venture into the shallow portions of the Delta. For this mission, river sweepers were constructed on LCM-6 hulls.<sup>24</sup> The shallow draft allowed them access to more of the river however; the PBR sailors conducted the majority of mine clearance operations themselves from the patrol craft using rudimentary methods.<sup>25</sup>

As the U.S. Navy overcame equipment issues, it faced personnel issues as well. At GAME WARDEN's inception, there were no "Brown Water Sailors." Yet, by February 1966, crews began flowing into the Delta. Training facilities were established at Coronado, CA and Mare Island, CA. and Riverine tactics and training was developed from existing assault boat coxswain's courses.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, U.S. Navy leadership recognized the task force was going to be heavily involved in counterinsurgency operations and that cultural and religious awareness would pay dividends. Operation GAME WARDEN Sailors went through the "Personal Response Project" which was geared to ensure the Sailor had an "understanding of the behavior and mannerisms of the people of the Mekong Delta, their belief systems, and other aspects of South Vietnamese society and culture."<sup>27</sup> Even though training was minimal and equipment scarce, it was the Sailors who made the mission a success.

The final obstacle facing Operation GAME WARDEN was not as easily overcome as the equipment and personnel issues. As GAME WARDEN was established the Sailors were forced to develop tactics and doctrine on the fly. To an extent, GAME WARDEN Sailors were able to draw from the experiences of the French in the Mekong Delta and the few American advisors that had operated in the Delta for the last ten years.

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However, the differences in mission goals and equipment made most lessons learned obsolete. In many cases the lack of established doctrine required Task Force 116 to rely on trial and error to establish accepted tactics and doctrine. This insured flexibility was inherent in the Task Force, which in many cases led to its success.<sup>28</sup>

### **Impact of GAME WARDEN**

The VC used the river to move supplies and troops rarely looking to initiate combat with the PBRs. Typically, if the VC, especially in daylight, initiated combat it was purely a diversionary tactic to draw American forces away from a vital movement elsewhere on the river. The PBRs operated in two boat patrols with one section on during the day and three on at night. The PBRs conducted searches of all suspect craft in order to detain all suspicious craft, personnel, cargo and contraband. The goal was to isolate the VC from their support base, forcing them to focus more on supply issues rather than combat operations. The VC primarily moved supplies and troops at night for obvious reasons. To combat this and make the search process easier, GAME WARDEN initiated a curfew prohibiting traffic on the waterways after dark.<sup>29</sup>

Enforcing the curfew became a primary mission and problem. Villagers had to be educated on the rules of the curfew and encouraged to follow them. Ideally if the curfew was strictly adhered to, any nighttime traffic could be identified as VC and engaged accordingly. Early in the operation this wasn't the case. Fishermen and other villagers ventured on the river at night forcing the PBRs to positively identify VC before engaging. This was important in establishing a trust among the Delta population and encouraging them to assist GAME WARDEN forces.

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While physically controlling the waterways put a damper on VC operations, the U.S. Forces did not begin to gain a noticeable advantage until they began to sway popular support. This was accomplished in various ways. USAID and the National Police worked to establish legitimate government representation within the villages in effort to weed out VCI. Task Force 116 also regularly supported Medical Civic Action Projects (MEDCAPs) in which entire villages were selected for medical assistance.<sup>30</sup>

Additionally, the Personal Response Project training began to pay off as Sailors found personal diplomacy could gain more than firefights in many cases. A young GAME WARDEN Sailor was quoted in *True* magazine stating

... This Vietnamese family is off in a sampan to catch a few fish and here comes this green boat shooting a shot across the bow. Round-eyed white men with weapons board their boat, which is also their home, and search through everything. Then just when they are most terrified, {they} give the kid a bar of candy and the father a pack of cigarettes and smile and wave them on. The next time we pass that sampan the family waves back. You can talk all you want about your fire fights, but I think this other kind of thing might add up to more in the end.<sup>31</sup>

The PBRs were also used for other non-lethal missions such as assisting in the GVN's Chieu Hoi program by playing recorded messages over loud speakers while patrolling. This program encouraged Hoi Chanhs (VC defectors) to come forward to provide information and receive protection. It is estimated that nearly 28,000 Hoi Chanhs came forward during the operation.<sup>32</sup> These missions and programs helped the local population while helping to reestablish the legitimacy of the GVN and control of the ARVN.

Although one in three PBR Sailors could count on being wounded, one in five requested at least a six-month extension in their duty. "Their courage and team spirit are reflected in the fact that the PBR crews were the most decorated naval command of the

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war.”<sup>33</sup> In the end, three Medals of Honor and over 900 purple hearts were awarded to Task Force 116 Sailors. 290 Sailors gave their life in support of Operation GAME WARDEN.<sup>34</sup> In an average month the PBRs patrolled approximately 65,000 hours, engaging in 80 fire-fights, destroying 80 enemy watercraft and killing 75 Viet Cong a nearly 40 to 1 enemy killed ratio.<sup>35</sup>

### **The Mobile Riverine Force**

MARKET TIME and GAME WARDEN were successful in their mission, to disrupt the enemy's movement and logistics, but they were not able to clear them from the Delta. In order to clear the enemy U.S./ARVN forces were going to have to influence more than the waterways and the riverbanks. A substantial force was needed to move inland to “search and destroy” the VC. By July 1966, there were three ARVN divisions operating in the Delta. Their effectiveness was severely limited by their lack of mobility due primarily to the Delta's terrain. With the exception of Route 4, the road network was virtually nonexistent. Additionally, the ARVN mismanaged the VNN assets assigned to support it, relegating the VNN to logistics support vice employing it tactically.

In late 1966, Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara approved the formation of Task Force 117 the Mobile Riverine Force (MRF). The MRF was to consist of a Navy component and a land component. While the obvious choice to join the Navy would be the Marine Corps, they were heavily committed in the I Corps area. Therefore the U.S. Army's 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division was tasked to dismount from its vehicles and move aboard the landing craft and ships of the MRF.<sup>36</sup>

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The operational concept of the MRF was for troops to be transported to the area of operations by the landing craft. Once the troops were ashore, fires from heavy weapons installed on the craft as well as artillery units afloat would support them. The MRFs operated from mobile river bases (MRBs), consisting of two barracks ships, two non-self-propelled barracks barges, two LSTs, and two harbor tugs. The MRB provided tremendous flexibility because the base could physically move to the vicinity of the operation.<sup>37</sup>

The MRF was able to pull from existing fleet assets to create its "fleet." The primary craft used was armored troop carrier (ATC). These were converted LCM-6 boats, which had standoff armor as well as a framework of iron bars welded to the craft to provide protection from rocket-propelled grenades. The craft were flat-bottomed, shallow draft vessels with a bow ramp, which made them ideal for landing troops on the banks of the river. Several of these ATCs were further modified with miniature flight decks to create the ATC (H). These craft became critical to operations because much the AOR would not support the landing of a helicopter for resupply or more critically medical evacuation. Quickly these craft became battalion aid stations. The second vessel was the Monitor. These were also LCM-6 boats modified with a 40mm cannon, a 20mm cannon, two .50 cal machine guns, an 81mm mortar, four .20 cal machine guns, and two grenade launchers. The third craft, Armored Support Patrol Boat (ASPB), used was the only one built especially for the mission. It was similar to the Monitor in its armament except for the 40mm cannon, which made it much lighter and faster. Probably the most innovative craft used was the artillery barge. The 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division had its inherent

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artillery however it was too cumbersome to employ. The MRF sailors constructed artillery barges, which could carry 2 105mm howitzers. In order to support operations they were towed into place, in vicinity of the operation, and moored to the riverbank.<sup>38</sup>

### **Impact of the MRF**

The MRF concept was an unbridled success whether you judge it from a body count perspective or from the strategic aspect of the control the riverine forces were able to regain from the VC. In 1967, MRF engaged in 5 major actions killing over one thousand VC. In the early days of the MRF, ambushes using RPGs and recoilless rifles were common and the VC regularly operated in battalion-sized units. By 1968, enemy encounters had decreased sharply as did the size of the enemy units encountered. The presence of the MRF in the Rung Sat Special Zone and the northern Mekong Delta significantly shifted the balance of power. This allowed the establishment of a base at Dong Tam, which provided security at nearby My Tho. Additionally the MRF's successes lead to the reopening of Route 4, reestablishing the only major land line of communication in the region.<sup>39</sup>

### **Operation SEALORDS**

The Tet offensive of 1968 proved that for all the successes that the riverine operations had, infiltration was still a real problem. By 1968, the VC had recognized the U.S. presence and began to avoid contact at all costs. Somewhat as a result of monotony, the riverine forces had become somewhat predictable. The VC picked up patrol patterns and began adjusting their own operations. Admiral Zumwalt assumed the duties as Commander Naval Forces Vietnam (COMNAVFORV) in the fall of 1968. Sensing the



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stagnation in operations and not wanting to give up the success of the previous year, he searched for a new strategy to boost morale and continue to weaken the VC influence in the region.

Zumwalt's strategy focused on three objectives: bring all forces under his command to bear on the problem of infiltration in the Mekong Deltas, close the Rung Sat Special Zone to the enemy while keeping the Long Tau shipping lane open to Saigon, and develop and implement a plan to increase the turnover of U.S. equipment to the GVN. Operation Southeast Asia Lake, Ocean, River, and Delta Strategy (SEALORDS) was conceived as an umbrella to several operations intended to: interdict VC infiltration from the Gulf of Thailand to the upper Mekong River, control the vital trans-Delta inland waterways, and penetrate rivers of the enemy held Ca Mau Peninsula by MARKET TIME raiders to "stir up the enemy and keep him off balance."<sup>40</sup> Prior to SEALORDS the U.S. strategy was to seek out and destroy enemy forces already in South Vietnam and to disrupt their ability to move with the country. Operation SEALORDS represented a shift in strategy, it sought to establish a front line in the guerilla war. Units now focused on preventing VC from moving from Cambodia to Vietnam vice dealing with them after they were already "in country."

SEALORDS resources were "borrowed" from MARKET TIME, GAME WARDEN, and the MRF. SEALORDS used the combined assets to move further up river and establish four barriers to prevent infiltration from Cambodia into III and IV Corps areas. Each was established along a previously identified infiltration route.

### **Demise of the Brown Water Navy**

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Less than four years after its inception, the "Brown Water" Navy, had achieved better than expected success. Infiltration from the sea was all but eliminated and VC resupply and movement was severely restricted on the waterways. In the next four years, U.S. Government and COMUSMACV's Vietnamization policy would bring about the end of the "Brown Water" Navy and the successes it achieved.

In late 1968, Washington sought a respectable exit from the war. Under severe political pressure President Richard Nixon announced his new policy; "Vietnamization." Under the Vietnamization policy, U.S. Sailors would train the VNN and ARVN to replace them using American equipment and infrastructure. In 1968 the U.S. Navy had over 38,000 operational Sailors in the Delta. By 1970, there were only 16,000 and all served in a training or advisory role.<sup>41</sup> Admiral Zumwalt's (COMNAVFORV) Vietnamization program became known as Accelerated Turnover to the Vietnamese (ACTOV). His program called for all operational responsibilities to be turned over to the VNN by 30 June 1970. This was by far the most aggressive plan of any of the services. Yet, Zumwalt insisted it would be completed on time.

ACTOV relied on a "graduated on-the-job training" program for the turnover of assets and missions to the VNN. The concept was accomplished by bringing a VNN sailor aboard a U.S. craft as a crewmember. When he was trained and ready to assume the duties of his American counterpart, the American sailor left and another VNN sailor came aboard. This process continued until the entire crew had been relieved with the officer in charge being the last to depart. Once the entire crew had been relieved the craft was formally transferred from the U.S. Navy to the VNN. Only a few American Sailors

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remained in advisory roles at the squadron or division level. Training facilities, logistics support, and bases would be turned over in a similar manner as quickly as possible after the operational assets were transferred.<sup>42</sup>

In order to facilitate a smooth turnover ACTOV had to overcome two obstacles. The first was language barrier. Initially, in an effort to be culturally sensitive, American leaders sought to teach U.S. Sailors Vietnamese. This proved difficult not so much because of the difficulty of the language but because Vietnam is primarily an agrarian society and words did not exist to describe many components and procedures concerned with the boats. Therefore English was taught to the VNN sailors since many could already speak rudimentary English. The second was the horrible quality of life of the VNN sailor. In 1970 a Saigon taxi driver made nearly three times as much in a month as a married VNN lieutenant.<sup>43</sup> In response, ACTOV responded with the Dependent Shelter and Animal Husbandry Program in which the U.S. Navy built hoU.S.es for VNN sailor's families as well as provided livestock to ensure they had enough food to eat. These measures were extremely successful increasing the size of the VNN from 8,000 to 26,500 sailors in one year.<sup>44</sup>

On 25 August 1969, the MRF became the first operation to turnover to the VNN and officially disestablish. What craft that had not been turned over transferred to SEALORDS. MARKET TIME and GAME WARDEN craft were turned over incrementally starting as early as late 1968. The turn over continued until the last naval operational unit was turned over to the VNN on 1 April 1971.

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The success of ACTOV is difficult to directly assess. The turnover process was accomplished in accordance with Zumwalt's timeline and initially the VNN performance was adequate. The VNN was able to maintain the barriers with the same relative success that they had experienced with U.S. Forces in the lead. However, the VNN was much less aggressive without U.S. assistance and this limited their "seek and destroy missions" ashore. Aside from a perceived lack of initiative the force also suffered from lack of funding, poor logistics support, and unsatisfactory maintenance procedures. The GVN did not supply necessary financial and military support with the U.S. no longer actively involved. This lack of support led to a deterioration in materiel readiness forcing some boats to be towed out onto patrols.

General Abrams assessed the status of the VNN in a letter to CINCPACFLT dated 13 April 1973:

...In the case of the VNN, current combat capabilities are adequate but if current progress toward self-sufficiency is to be sustained, certain critical deficiencies must be remedied. Commanding officers and executive officers are not thoroughly prepared to assume their responsibilities... Properly trained and qualified petty officers and offices are not always assigned to the key billets... The VNN lacks a permanent work force of trained specialists in positions of responsibility who can provide organizational continuity within the logistics system... There is insufficient command interest and monitoring of the units' performance of the planned maintenance system... The revised VNN supply system is deficient in formalized VNN officer and supply training.<sup>45</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The Brown Water Navy's participation in the Mekong Delta was an unprecedented success. U.S. forces were able to adapt and execute a mission in which they were in no way prepared for in less than a year after initial tasking. Incredible

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ingenuity both in the development of equipment and tactics allowed the Navy to perform the mission with little operational delay.

The allied naval forces conducted a successful counterinsurgency against the VC by winning control and favor of the general population. Most critical to this goal was establishing legitimacy for not only the South Vietnamese government but, the military forces in the region as well. Struggling before U.S. involvement, the ARVN and VNN were empowered by U.S. training and the arrival of superior U.S. equipment.

As in any counterinsurgency operation, control is the primary concern. The United States Navy exercised control based on Bard O'Neil's four principles of counterinsurgency. The main effort of the "Brown Water Navy" was concentrated on control of the physical environment. Success in this area was based on the Navy's ability to isolate the area, provide security to the population, and reduce the VC's ability to use the river delta to its advantage. The three primary operations were successful in isolating the region from VC infiltration. However, the magnitude of their success could have been increased and possibly quicker had the operations taken place in reverse order. In hind sight we see that the infiltration from Cambodia was much more important to the survival of the VC than infiltration from the sea. Ideally, the SEALORDS concept should have been executed from the beginning. However, the lack of experience and training may have prevented it from having the success it achieved after two years.

Dominance of the physical environment led to increased security in the region. While not completely cutoff from his supply and support lines, the VC resupply effort was so severely hampered that he had to focus his main effort on pushing supplies vice

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conducting combat operations and terrorizing the population. This in turn allowed government as well as non government organizations to operate within the villages in order to address needs of the people.

U.S. Naval Forces provided equipment and training to the VNN as well as the ARVN and Popular Force and Reserve Force units. This greatly increased their operational readiness and greatly boosted their confidence to conduct operations. The VNN grew from a meager force of less than two thousand sailors with modest equipment prior to 1964 to more than twenty eight thousand sailors operating state of the art equipment in 1970. The MRF with the added mobility and increased firepower it provided empowered the ARVN allowing it to conduct more daring operations further pushing the VC away from the river and its villages. These efforts significantly increased the legitimacy of the GVN's military and ultimately the GVN itself.

Ultimately, these efforts served to win popular support. By 1970 the VC "front" had essentially been pushed to the Cambodian border and legitimate local governments had been restored in all 16 provinces within the delta. When naval operations ceased in April of 1971 there was still a VC presence in the delta. However, VC influence was negated to the point that Route 4 was reopened and the hamlets and villages could function without fear. The VCI was forced to flee the villages, collocating with the VC battalions for their own protection.

The major failing in the delta was not one of the Brown Water Navy but one of the top levels of leadership. Vietnamization as a overarching program, was mismanaged and rushed due to military leadership and government's failure to recognize the

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implications of a hurried withdrawal from Vietnam. Although executed superbly, ACTOV, COMNAVFORV's Vietnamization program, was flawed and did not take into account the immaturity of the VNN. Initially, the VNN and ARVN were able to maintain operations after the American exodus however operational readiness and boldness suffered greatly. The VNN was unable to maintain material readiness due in part to their inability to deal with the relatively new technology and mass corruption within the supply organization. Once American funding to South East Asia was officially terminated in 1973, the VNN's fate was sealed.

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<sup>44</sup> Cutler, 352

<sup>45</sup> Cutler, 356-357.

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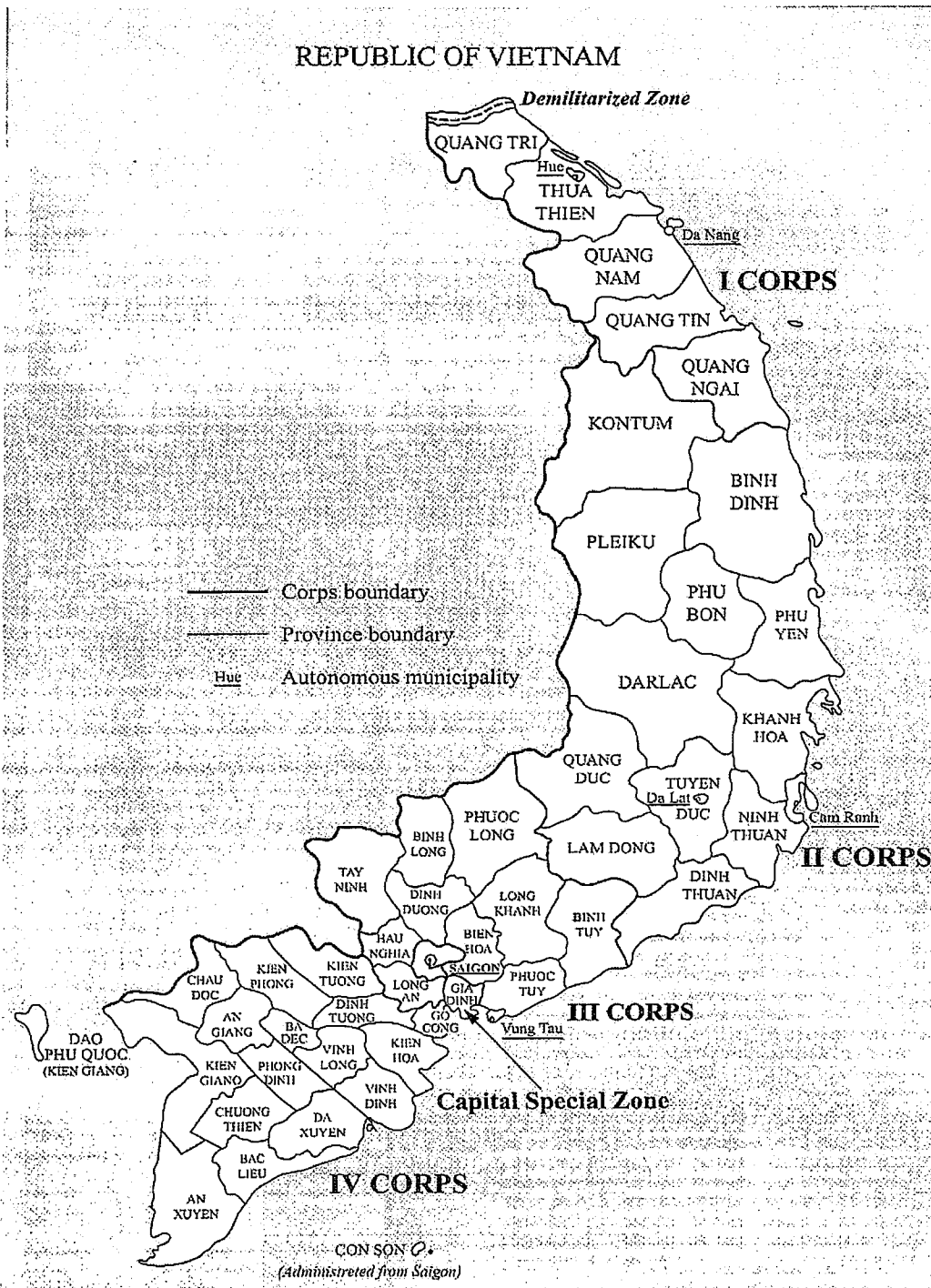


Fig 1 . The Republic of Vietnam. From Moyer , Mark. Phoenix and the Birds of Prey, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press. 1997.

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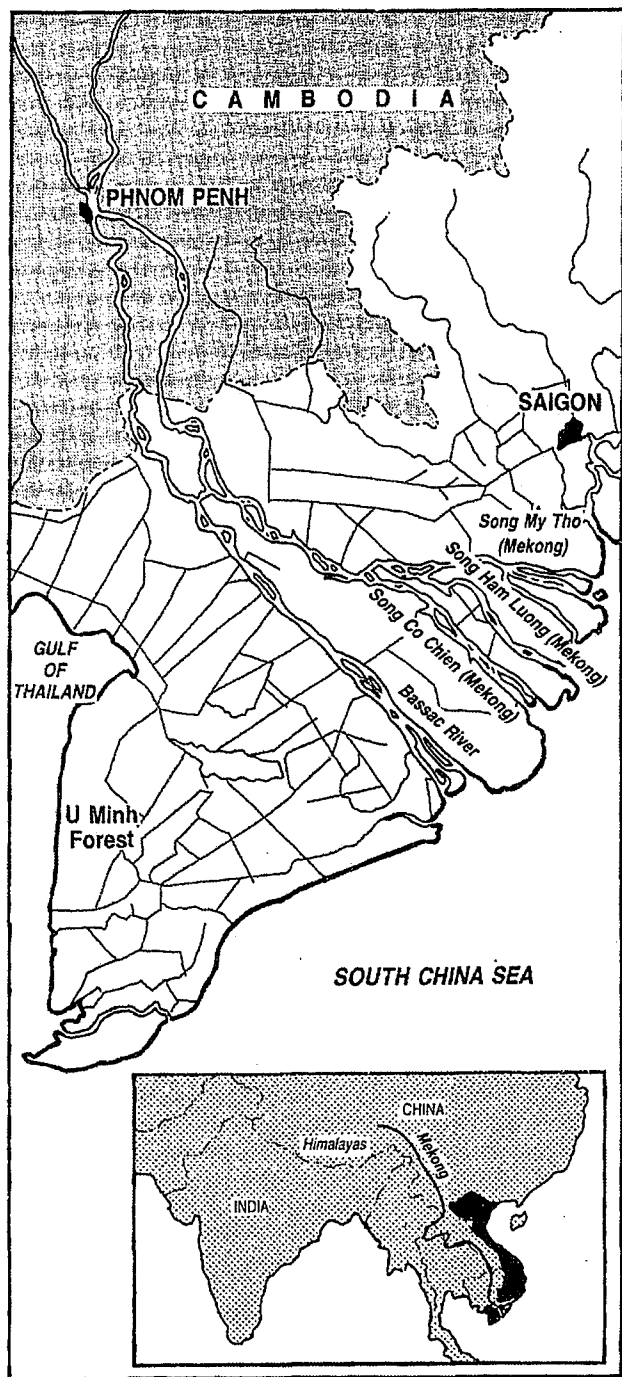
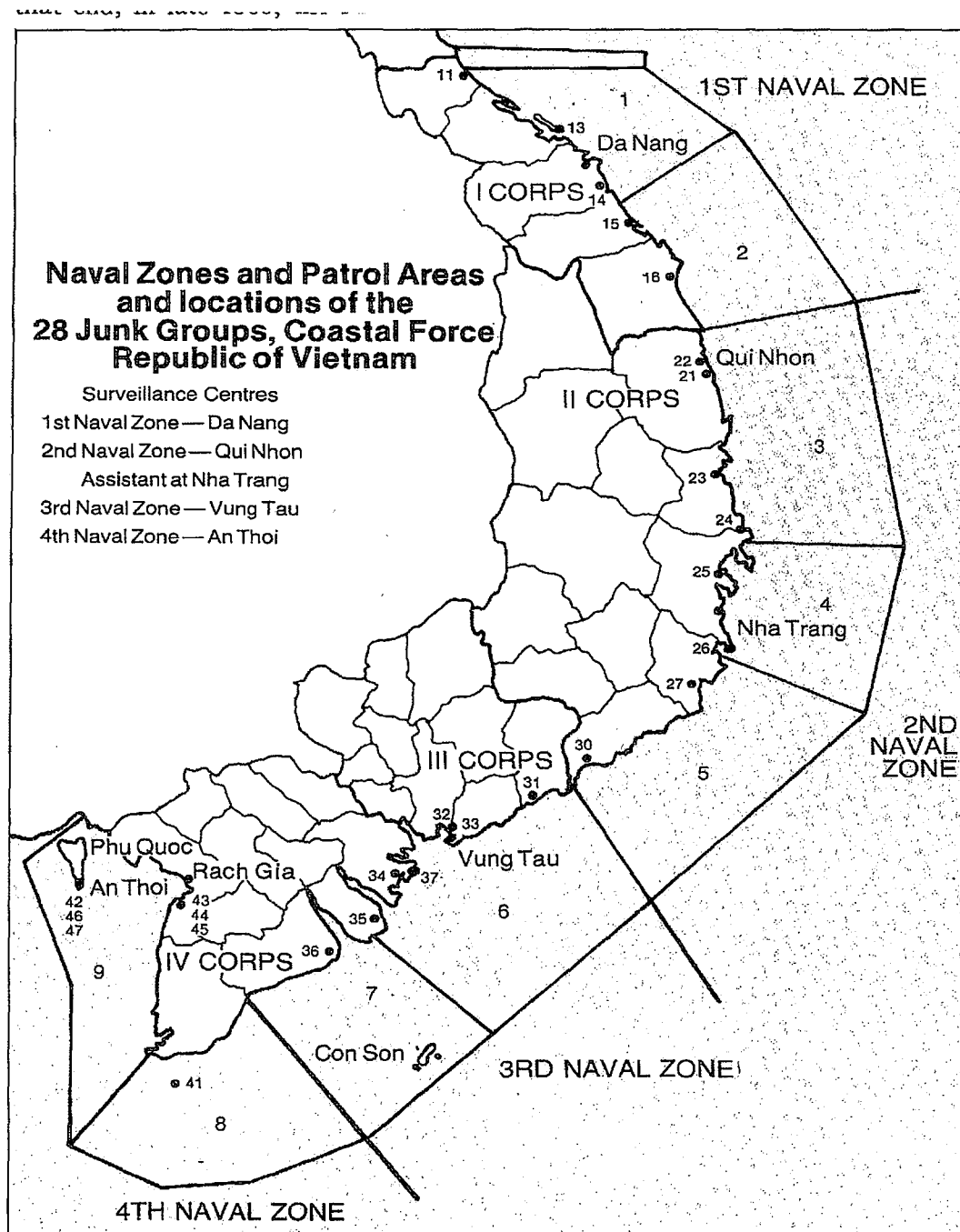


Fig 2. The Mekong River and Delta. From Forbes, John and Robert Williams. The Illustrated History of the Riverine Force The Vietnam War. New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1987. 20.

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Fig 3 Republic of Vietnam. From Croizat, Victor, Col. USMC. The Brown Water Navy The River and Coastal War in Indo-China and Vietnam, 1948-1972. New York, NY: Sterling Publishing Co., 1984. 95.

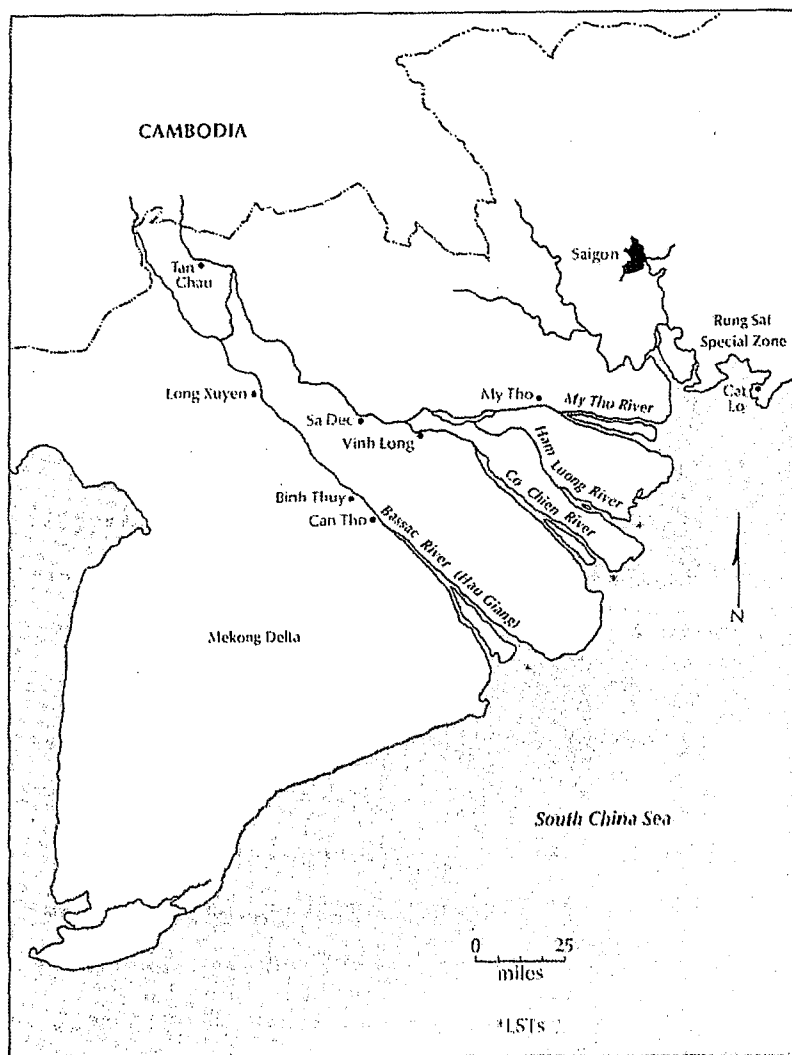


Fig 4 Operation GAME WARDEN operating bases. From Cutler, Thomas J. LCDR USN. Brown Water, Black Berets Coastal and Riverine Warfare in Vietnam Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1988. 160.

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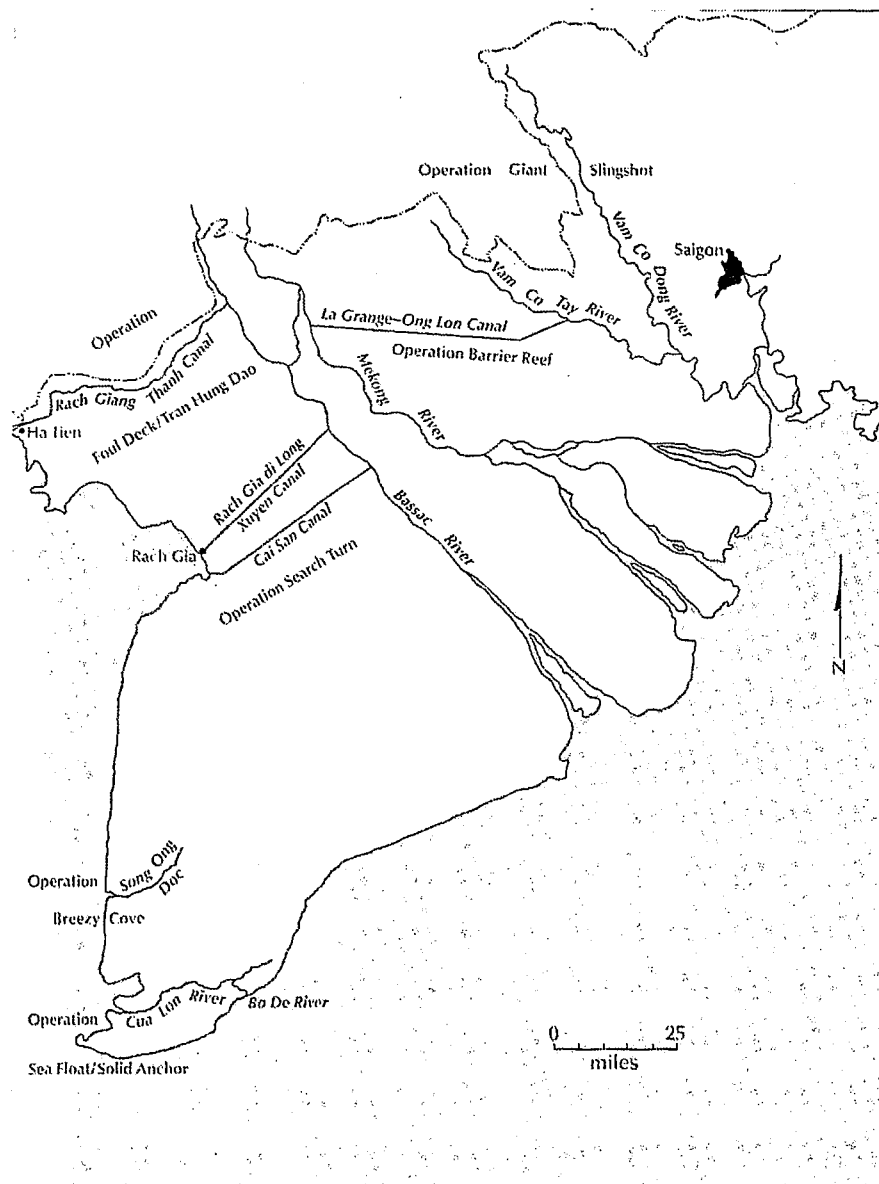
A map of South Vietnam showing the areas of riverine operations from 1967 to 1969. The map is divided into numerous provinces, each labeled with its name in all caps. The provinces shown include CAMBODIA to the west, TAY NINH, BINH LONG, PHUOC LONG, BINH DUONG, LONG KHANH, BINH NGHIA, GIA DINH, BIEN HOA RSSZ, PHUOC TUYEN, GO CONG, KIEN TUONG, LONG AN, KIEN PHONG, KIEN DINH, KIEN AN GIANG, CHAU DOC, AN GIANG, GIANG, PHONG DINH, VINH LONG, KIEN HOA, VINH BINH, CHUONG THIEN, BA XUYEN, BAC LIEU, and AN XUYEN. The GULF OF THAILAND is to the west, and SOUTH CHINA SEA is to the south. A legend in the bottom right corner indicates that shaded areas represent 'Operation areas'. Below the legend is a scale bar showing distances in miles (0, 25, 50) and kilometers (0, 25, 50), with a note '(approximate)'.

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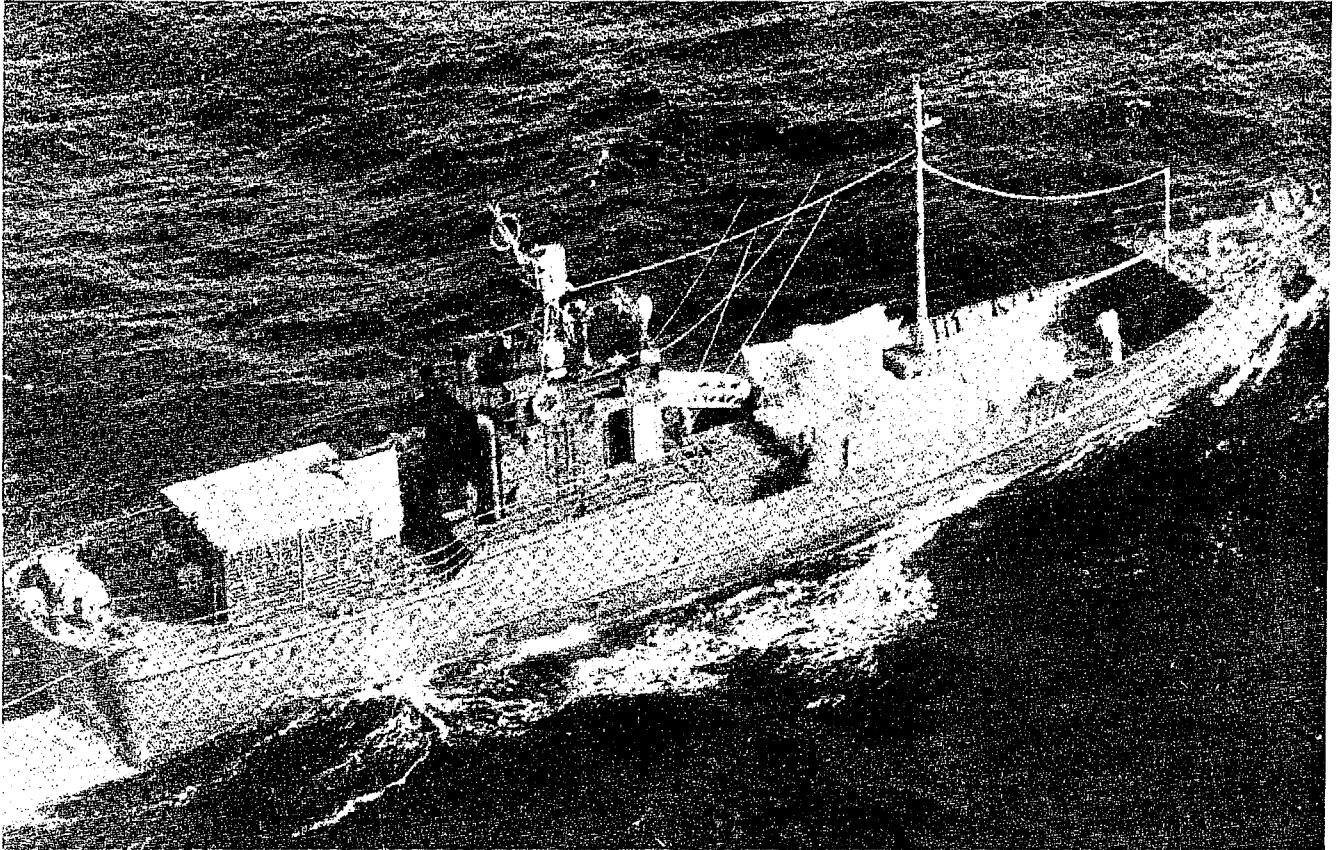
Fig 6. Operation SEALORDS blockade zones. From Cutler, Thomas J. LCDR USN. Brown Water, Black Berets Coastal and Riverine Warfare in Vietnam Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1988. 295.



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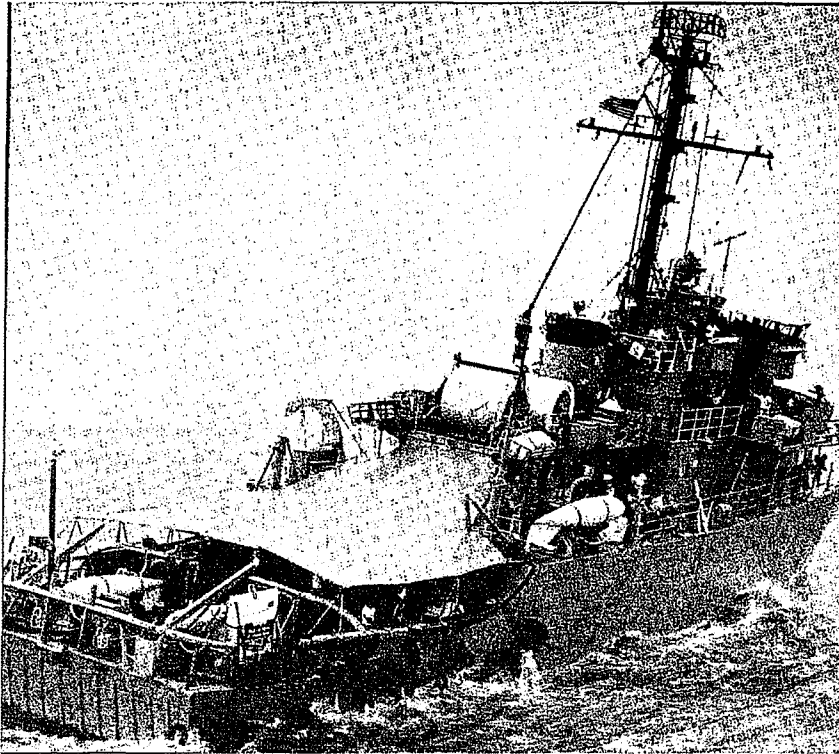


A North Vietnamese trawler initially used to resupply the Viet Cong via sea routes. From Mesko, Jim. Riverine A Pictorial History of the Brown Water War in Vietnam. Carrollton, TX: Squadron/Signal Publications, 1985

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USS PLEGE a deep water minesweeper was one of the first MARKET TIME vessels. From Forbes, John and Robert Williams. The Illustrated History of the Riverine Force The Vietnam War. New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1987.

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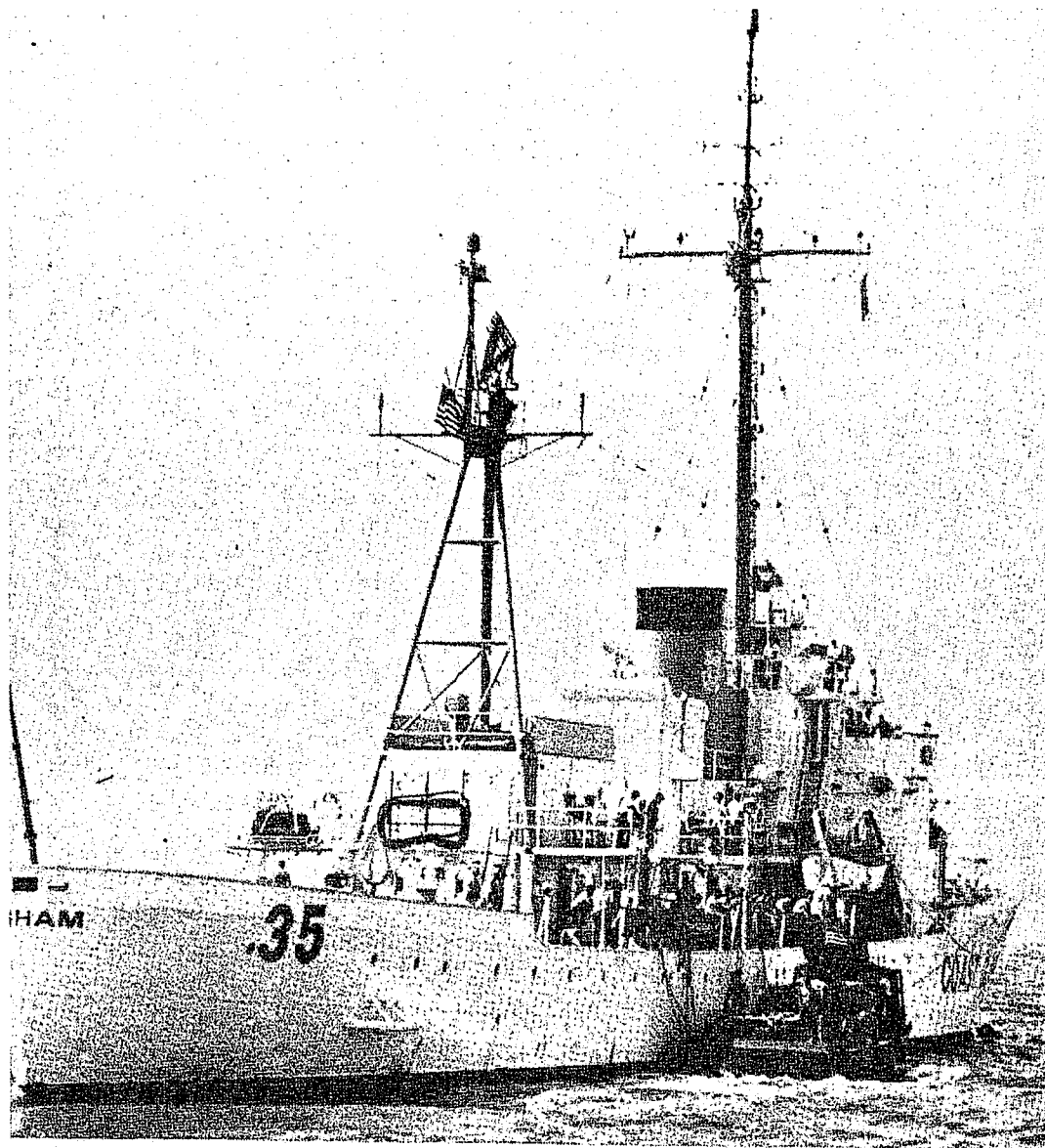


Crew members from DER 334 conduct search of a sampan. From Schnepf, Ed, ed. The US Navy in Vietnam. Canoga Park, CA: Challenge Publications, Inc., 1985.

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A Swift Boat conducts an underway replenishment with a Coast Guard High Endurance Cutter. From Schnepf, Ed, ed. The US Navy in Vietnam. Canoga Park, CA: Challenge Publications, Inc., 1985.

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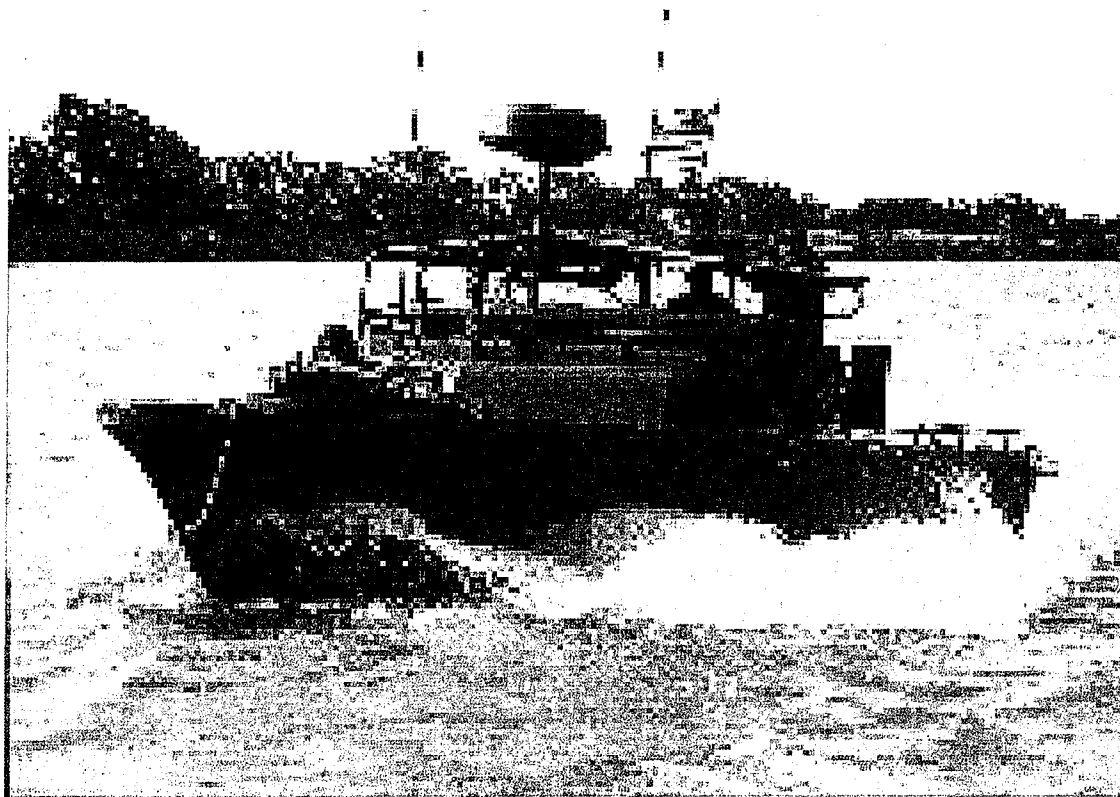


Swift Boats (PCF) operating at high speed. From Hawley, Kent. "The Brown Water Navy in the Mekong Delta," Hawley's Web Book, January 2000, <<http://brownwater-navy.com/vietnam/htmlweb.htm>> (15 March 2008).

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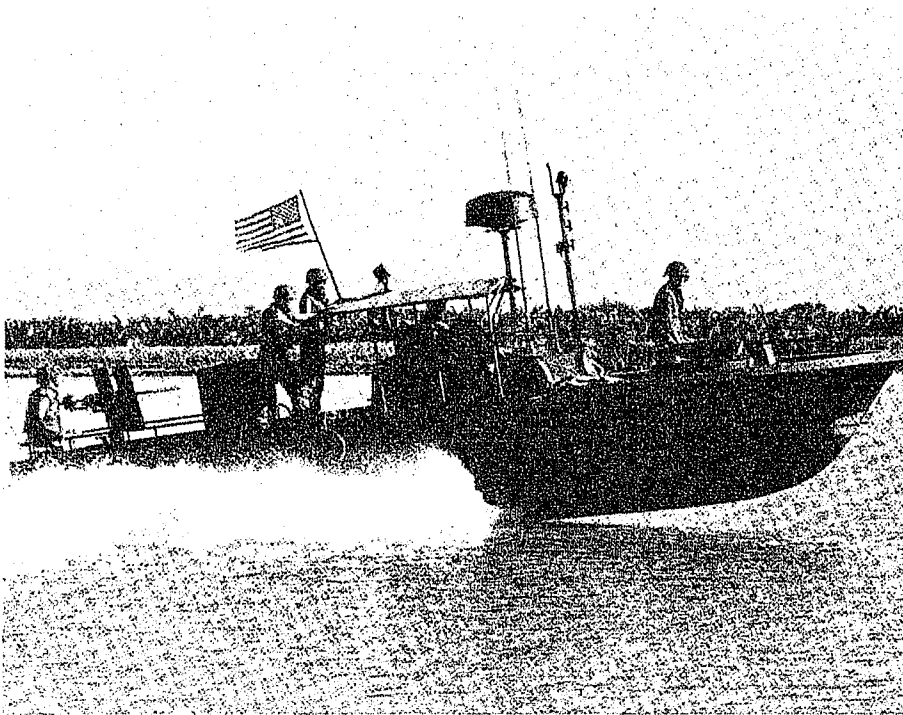


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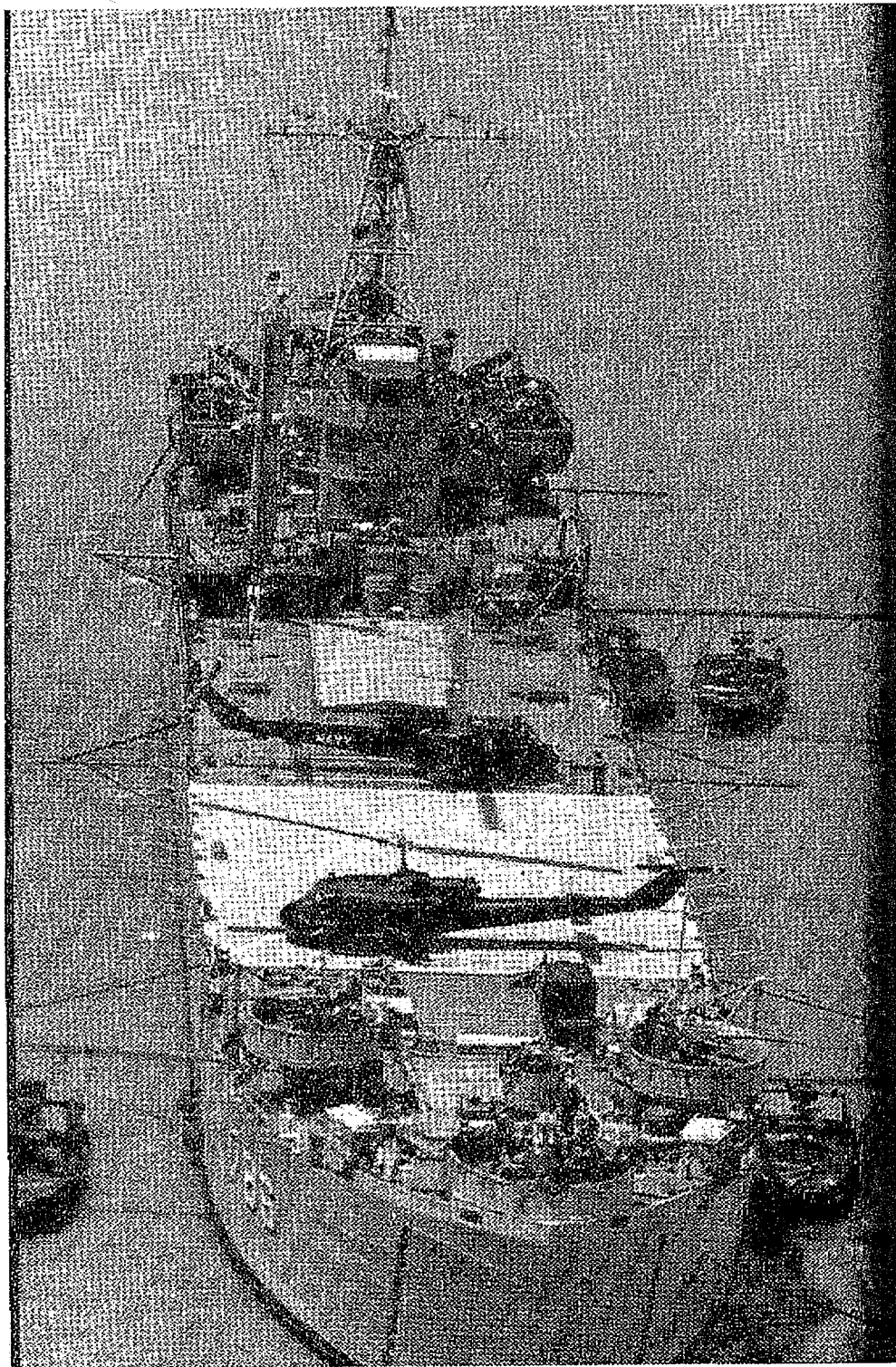
A Mark II PBR makes a high speed run along the Long Tau River in the Rung Sat Special Zone. From Forbes, John and Robert Williams. The Illustrated History of the Riverine Force The Vietnam War. New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1987.



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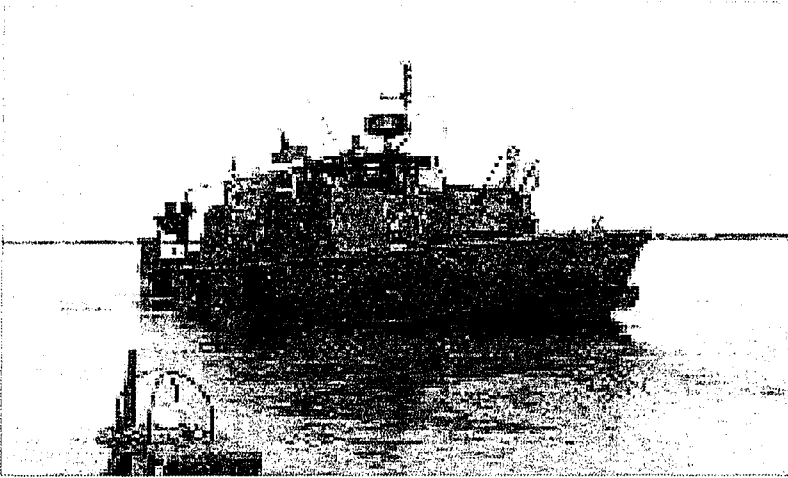


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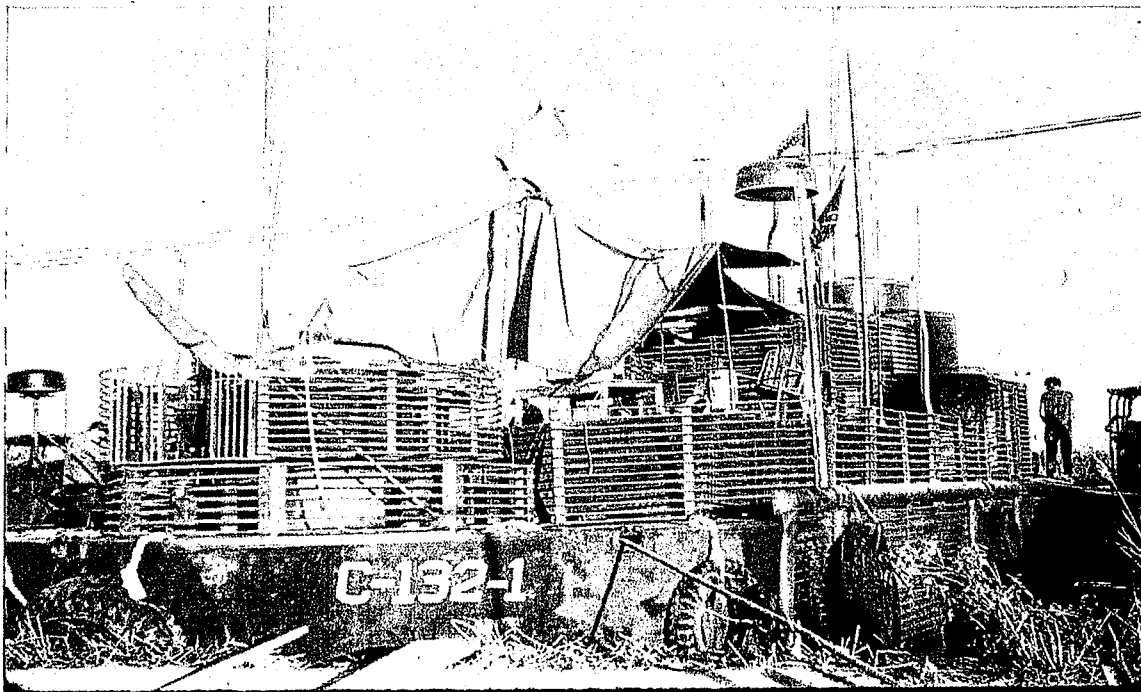
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USS GARRETT COUNTY provides a mobile support base for GAME WARDEN PBRs and SEAWOLVES. From Schnepf, Ed, ed. The US Navy in Vietnam. Canoga Park, CA: Challenge Publications, Inc., 1985.



The ASPBs were the only craft built from the keel up for the MRF. Its primary mission was minesweeping and fire support. From Hawley, Kent. "The Brown Water Navy in the Mekong Delta," Hawley's Web Book, January 2000, <<http://brownwater-navy.com/vietnam/htmlweb.htm>> (15 March 2008).

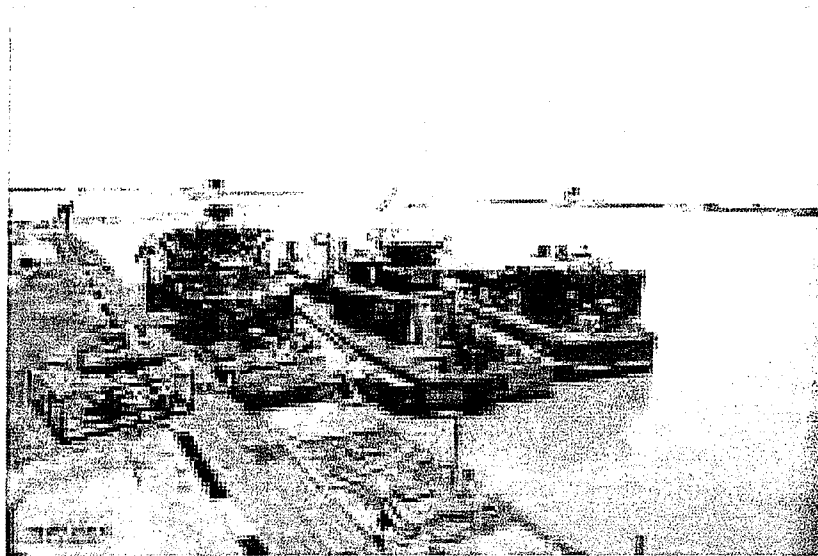


## The Brown Water Navy in the Mekong Delta:

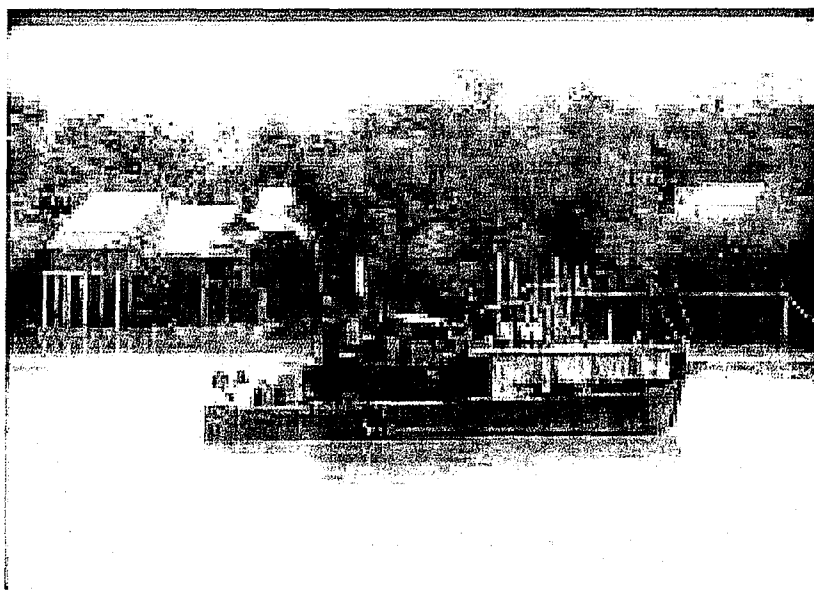
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The CCB was a command and control craft built on the hull of a monitor. From Hawley, Kent. "The Brown Water Navy in the Mekong Delta," Hawley's Web Book, January 2000, <<http://brownwater-navy.com/vietnam/htmlweb.htm>> (15 March 2008).



The ATC, armored troop carrier, was the back bone of the MRF transporting troops throughout the Delta. From Hawley, Kent. "The Brown Water Navy in the Mekong Delta," Hawley's Web Book, January 2000, <<http://brownwater-navy.com/vietnam/htmlweb.htm>> (15 March 2008).



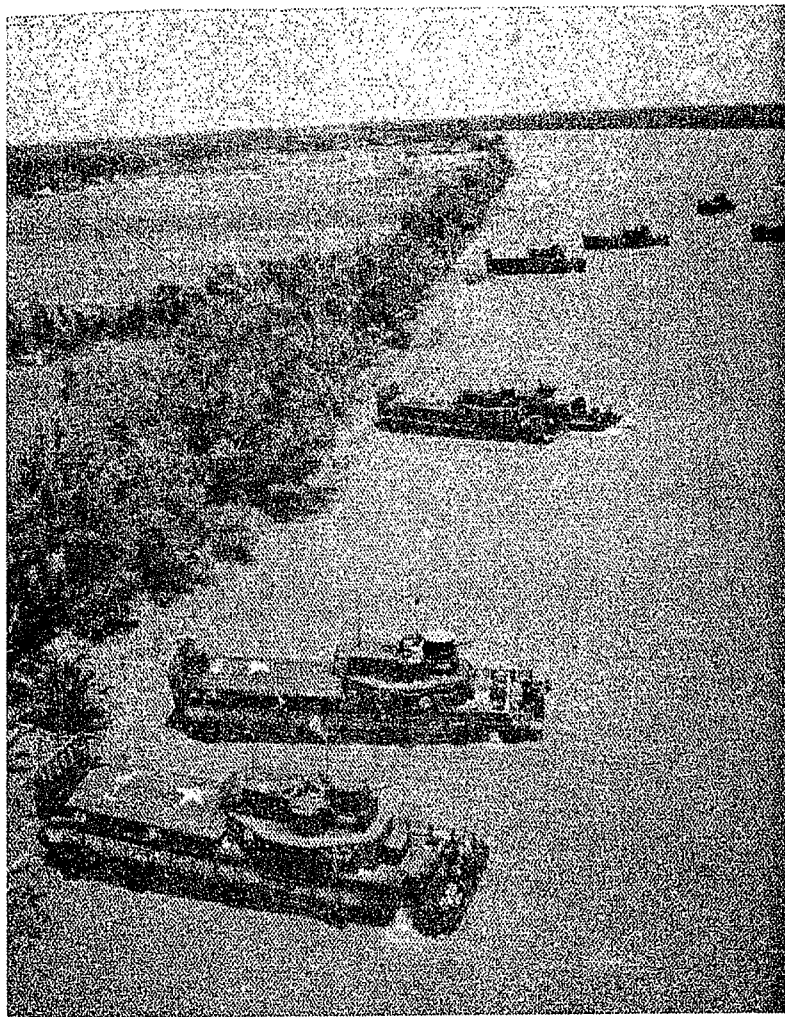
The ATC(H) is the world's smallest aircraft carrier. A sailor modification added a small flight deck to several ATCs. This allowed them to serve as aid stations and MEDEVAC sites when operating in areas that would not

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support the landing of a helo. From Hawley, Kent. "The Brown Water Navy in the Mekong Delta," Hawley's Web Book, January 2000, <<http://brownwater-navy.com/vietnam/htmlweb.htm>> (15 March 2008).



An MRF Assault, ATCs make their landing as fire support craft move into position. From Fulton, William B. MajGen, USA. Riverine Operations 1966-1969. Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1985.

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