



RIVERINE OPERATIONS IN THE VIETNAM WAR

PART 1 OF 3



A river patrol boat crew searches a sampan for enemy materiel on the Perfume River on August 20, 1968. Viet Cong insurgents often used small rivercraft to covertly transport weapons, supplies, and intelligence throughout South Vietnam's complex network of waterways, requiring U.S. patrol crews to stop and inspect many of the boats they encountered (USN photo)



The Mekong Delta, where the Mekong River fans out and empties into the South China Sea, was one of the most economically and strategically important areas of Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War. Six million people, nearly 40 percent of South Vietnam's population, lived in this humid wetland region south of Saigon.

With its rich, fertile soil and plentiful water, the Delta produced most of the country's rice crop, and its 3,000-mile network of waterways afforded farmers with an efficient means to transport their produce to market. But in 1965, a group of Communist insurgents, known to U.S. troops as the Viet Cong, dominated the Mekong Delta and the adjacent Rung Sat mangrove swamp. From their concealed bases in the Delta, Viet Cong troops launched attacks against nearby allied forces and harassed water traffic moving in and out of the port at Saigon. The Delta became a stronghold for the Viet Cong, and they exploited the area as a source of food and supplies, collecting taxes from the local populace. In order to secure the Delta and restore it to Saigon's control, the United States determined to clear out the insurgents with a series of riverine campaigns.

TASK FORCE 116 AND OPERATION GAME WARDEN

To loosen the Viet Cong's grip on the Delta, the U.S. Navy established Task Force 116 in late 1965. Comprised of armed patrol boats, landing craft, helicopters, and other vessels, Task Force 116 initiated Operation GAME WARDEN: the campaign to interdict Communist military activity along the waterways of the Mekong Delta and Rung Sat.

The first crews of Task Force 116 arrived in Vietnam in early 1966. They manned river patrol boats (PBRs), which were organized into divisions and based around tank landing ships (LSTs) and dock landing ships (LSDs) anchored in rivers. The task force also incorporated a squadron of UH-1 "Huey" helicopters, nicknamed the "Seawolves," for air support. Typical GAME WARDEN missions included patrolling rivers and canals searching boats, junks, and sampans for enemy contraband, enforcing curfews, supporting allied ground troops, and clearing mines and enemies from shipping channels, especially between Saigon and the South China Sea.

By the end of 1967, Task Force 116 had secured substantial portions of the Mekong Delta and the Rung Sat. During that year alone, task force personnel inspected tens of thousands of vessels and destroyed, damaged, or captured about 2,000 Viet Cong watercraft along with large amounts of enemy supplies and equipment. These efforts made it difficult for the Viet Cong to continue using the Delta and the Rung Sat as refuges and bases of operations.



PBRs berthed alongside the tank landing ship USS Harnett County (LST 821). LSTs anchored in rivers served as floating bases for PBRs and helicopters attached to Task Force 116, providing food, berthing, maintenance, and supplies, among other services (USN photo)



RIVER PATROL BOATS

The Navy introduced the 31-foot long river patrol boat (officially: Patrol Boat, River; or PBR) in early 1966. It became an iconic riverine operations vessel in Vietnam, and it was the workhorse boat of Task Force 116 and Operation GAME WARDEN. PBRs typically were manned by a crew of four and equipped with surface radar and VHF radios. They were armed with twin .50-caliber machine guns mounted forward, an M-60 machine gun and a grenade launcher port and starboard, and a single .50-caliber machine gun aft. PBRs traditionally operated in pairs, with a "lead" and "cover" boat. They were fast and maneuverable, using water-jet engines to reach speeds of 30 knots and operate in as little as two feet of water.

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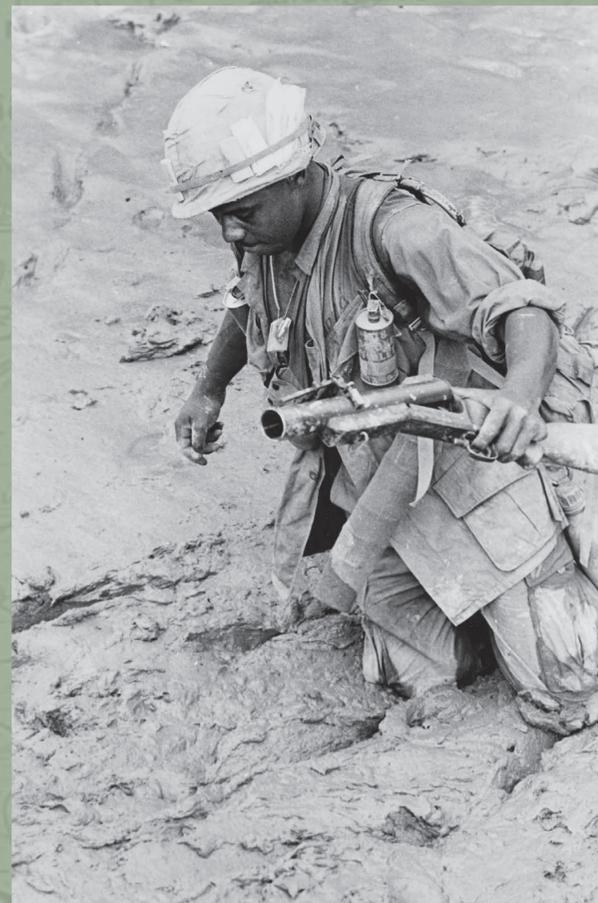


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Troops of the Mobile Riverine Force (47th Infantry Regiment, 9th Infantry Division) aboard ATCs move to dock with a barracks vessel, April 24, 1968. Floating bases allowed MRF Sailors and Soldiers to be stationed closer to their areas of operations and were more defensible against guerrilla attacks than shore facilities (USN photo).



A Soldier with the 9th Infantry Division carries an M-79 grenade launcher and wades through knee-deep mud to board an ATC, June 1968. The Delta environment presented unique challenges, and amphibious combat troops endured hot, dirty, and soggy conditions while pursuing insurgents (USN photo).

At the end of 1966, U.S. officials estimated that there were as many as 50,000 Viet Cong combatants in the Mekong Delta and the Rung Sat mangrove swamp, representing perhaps 45 percent of the total strength of the insurgency. GAME WARDEN operations prevented insurgents from openly using most waterways, but to pursue and engage the Viet Cong in the fields, paddies, and lowlands of the Delta, the United States established the joint Army-Navy Mobile Riverine Force (MRF).

MOBILE RIVERINE FORCE

The Mobile Riverine Force became operational in early 1967. Navy transport and assault vessels assigned to the MRF carried troops of the Army 9th Infantry Division, which engaged enemy forces in amphibious search-and-destroy operations near waterways. MRF vessels then remained on station to provide gunfire support and to pick up the infantrymen once the battle ended. MRF actions could last from hours to days, after which personnel returned to their bases, either on shore or aboard floating barracks and maintenance ships. The force's main shore base was at Dong Tam, northwest of My Tho between the Delta and the Rung Sat, but the MRF's floating mobile bases moved where they were needed.

The MRF consisted of a host of patrol boats and armored troop carriers (ATCs), while heavily armored and armed mechanized landing craft, nicknamed "monitors" for their likeness to nineteenth-century warships, served as the "battleships" of the force. Additional watercraft functioned as helicopter landing pads, medical boats, and refueling and resupply vessels. The MRF's greatest strengths were its mobility and flexibility. It could transport over 500 Soldiers nearly anywhere in the Mekong Delta within 24 hours and then provide them with logistics and fire support. The force conducted operations in nine provinces during its first year of existence, fighting to reduce the Viet Cong's strength in the Delta.

"The Mobile Riverine Force saved the Delta [during Tet]."

— GEN William C. Westmoreland,
former commander, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam

THE TET OFFENSIVE

In January 1968, Communist forces launched the Tet Offensive. Over 84,000 troops, mostly Viet Cong, simultaneously attacked hundreds of bases, cities, and towns across South Vietnam. In the Delta, the scale of the offensive caught Task Force 116 and the Mobile Riverine Force off guard. However, they recovered quickly and proved crucial in repelling attacks on numerous regional towns.



Mobile Riverine Force troops disembark from an ATC for a search-and-destroy mission along a river bank. The MRF's ability to quickly move to remote locations in South Vietnam's vast network of waterways proved crucial during the initial turmoil of the Tet Offensive in early 1968 (Department of Defense photo)

Within weeks, Task Force 116 and the MRF reestablished control over the major river towns and were able to provide critical fire support for besieged allied troops. U.S. riverine units were instrumental in defending My Tho, Ben Tre, Vinh Long, and Can Tho, among other towns. The MRF's efforts were especially significant during Tet. The force's ability to quickly bring firepower and ground forces into action throughout the sprawling Delta made it difficult for the Viet Cong to exploit or consolidate any initial gains. The MRF conducted operations in eight provinces during February alone. Task Force 116, and additional riverine units further north near the Demilitarized Zone, also played vital roles in defeating the Tet Offensive, particularly by providing combat support for the defenders of Khe Sanh and the city of Hue.

MEDAL OF HONOR RECIPIENT SPECIALIST FOURTH CLASS THOMAS KINSMAN U.S. ARMY



On February 6, 1968, near Vinh Long in the Mekong Delta, Specialist Fourth Class Thomas Kinsman (then Private First Class), a rifleman in 3d Battalion, 60th Infantry Regiment, 9th Infantry Division, was along on a reconnaissance-in-force mission. As his company moved up a narrow canal aboard ATCs, it came under sudden, intense rocket and automatic fire from a well-entrenched Viet Cong force. The company immediately beached their vessels and attacked the enemy position, which was hidden in dense vegetation. With limited visibility, a group of eight men, including Kinsman, were cut off from the main company. While the men attempted to linkup with their comrades, a Viet Cong soldier hurled a grenade into their midst. Kinsman quickly alerted the group and threw himself on the grenade, blocking the explosion with his body. As a result of his courageous action, he received severe head and chest wounds. Kinsman's bravery, complete disregard for his own safety, and concern for his fellow Soldiers averted loss of life and injury to the other seven men around him.

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A UH-1 "Huey" helicopter attached to the Navy's Helicopter Attack (Light) Squadron Three, nicknamed the Seawolves, lands on the tank landing ship USS Harnett County (LST-821), on the Co Chien River in the Mekong Delta, October 1967. As riverine forces pursued enemy troops into more remote parts of the Delta after the Tet Offensive, helicopter air support grew increasingly important (Department of Defense photo).



A Navy UH-1 "Huey" provides air cover for a patrol vessel attached to Task Force 194, conducting a SEALORDS mission, February 1969. Watercraft and helicopters often worked in concert during riverine operations (USN photo).

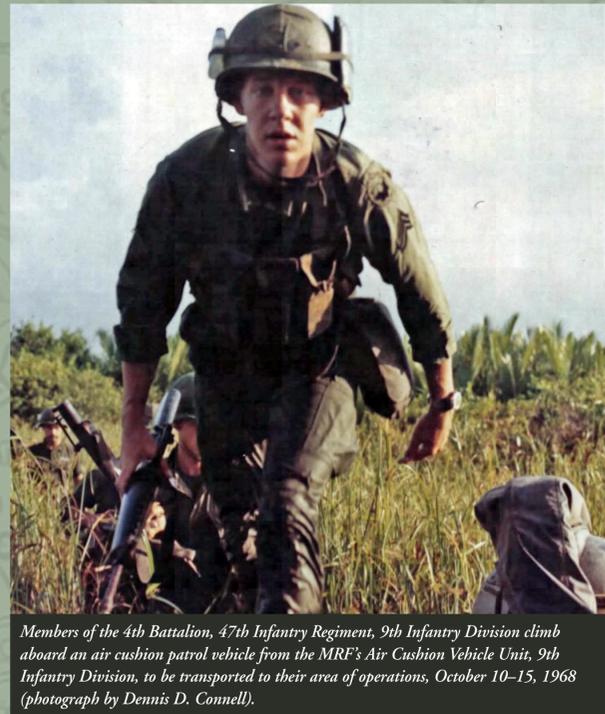


South Vietnamese sailors aboard river patrol craft during the Vietnamization period of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. As U.S. forces gradually withdrew from Southeast Asia after 1968, the South Vietnamese navy took on greater responsibility for riverine operations (Department of Defense photo)

The Tet Offensive was a tactical victory for American and allied forces, but 1968 and 1969 were the deadliest years of the war for American troops, and the United States appeared no closer to winning. Task Force 116 and the Mobile Riverine Force secured most of the key waterways in the Rung Sat and the lower two-thirds of the Mekong Delta by late 1968. But the North Vietnamese remained committed to the war, the Viet Cong insurgency regrouped in the more remote waterways of the upper Delta and Cambodia, and enemy troops and weapons continued to flow into South Vietnam.

SEALORDS

Tet decimated the ranks of the Viet Cong, but the insurgents found sanctuaries along the more remote streams and canals of the upper Delta, near the Cambodian border. From there, they continued guerrilla activities and facilitated the ongoing movement of enemy troops, ammunition, arms, and supplies into South Vietnam from Cambodia, partially frustrating overall allied progress.



Members of the 4th Battalion, 47th Infantry Regiment, 9th Infantry Division climb aboard an air cushion patrol vehicle from the MRF's Air Cushion Vehicle Unit, 9th Infantry Division, to be transported to their area of operations, October 10-15, 1968 (photograph by Dennis D. Connell).

MEDAL OF HONOR RECIPIENT, PETTY OFFICER FIRST CLASS JAMES WILLIAMS, U.S. NAVY



On October 31, 1966, two PBRs under the command of Petty Officer First Class James Williams encountered multiple Viet Cong troops aboard two sampans. The enemy boats attacked, and the PBRs returned fire, sinking one sampan while the other fled up a small stream. Williams's two PBRs followed the fleeing sampan, but quickly came under heavy fire from additional Viet Cong forces along the shore. Pressing ahead, the U.S. boats

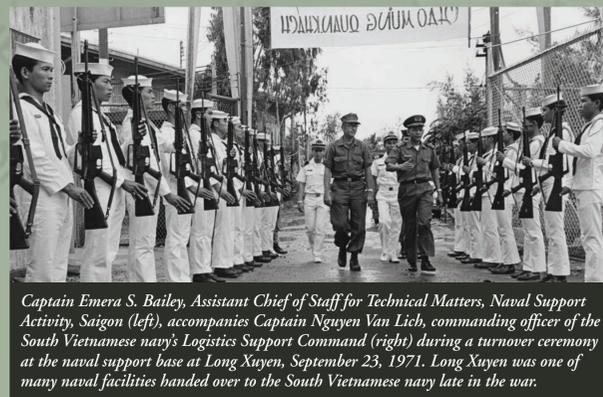
encountered a large number of enemy vessels. After calling for helicopter gunship support, Williams ordered his PBRs to attack, and they pressed their assault for three hours. Only after the PBRs' ammunition was exhausted did Williams order a withdrawal. American forces destroyed a total of 70 enemy watercraft in the engagement.

In order to secure the remaining waters of the Delta and interdict infiltration across the Cambodian border, U.S. leaders formed a new task force, which launched the Southeast Asia Lake, Ocean, River, and Delta Strategy (SEALORDS). Known as Task Force 194, it combined elements from Task Force 116, the Mobile Riverine Force, and coastal surveillance units to patrol the upper regions of the Delta, from Tay Ninh to the Gulf of Thailand. There it harassed enemy forces and formed barriers and blockades near the border where Communist troops regularly infiltrated South Vietnam by water.

SEALORDS operations officially began in October 1968. Within a year, Communist forces began to lose their grip on the upper Delta. Task Force 194 helped to disrupt the flow of troops and supplies entering from Cambodia, and eventually it made forays across the border, participating in the short-lived Cambodian incursion in mid-1970. The task force extended its reach to Viet Cong strongholds along Cambodia's waterways and captured a vital ferry crossing at Neak Luong, while South Vietnamese riverine units moved all the way to Phnom Penh, the Cambodian capital.

VIETNAMIZATION

Even with these accomplishments in the Mekong Delta, the war dragged on, and President Richard M. Nixon was elected in 1968 promising to extricate the United States from Southeast Asia. His administration committed to "Vietnamization": gradually handing responsibility for the war over to the South Vietnamese while incrementally withdrawing American troops. By the middle of 1969, the United States disestablished the MRF, turning over its vessels, equipment, and patrol duties to the South Vietnamese military. Other American riverine and maritime forces soon followed, and coastal surveillance personnel and Task Force 116 transferred most of their vessels and aircraft to South Vietnam's navy by 1971. Those turnovers largely ended major U.S. riverine operations in Vietnam. The United States reached a peace agreement with North Vietnam in early 1973, but the war continued and South Vietnam ultimately fell to Communist forces in 1975.



Captain Emera S. Bailey, Assistant Chief of Staff for Technical Matters, Naval Support Activity, Saigon (left), accompanies Captain Nguyen Van Lich, commanding officer of the South Vietnamese navy's Logistics Support Command (right) during a turnover ceremony at the naval support base at Long Xuyen, September 23, 1971. Long Xuyen was one of many naval facilities handed over to the South Vietnamese navy late in the war.

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