



THE U.S. NAVY IN THE VIETNAM WAR

PART 1 OF 3

INTRODUCTION

After World War II, the United States and its leaders sought to avoid the international escalation that started the war by actively maintaining a global presence. Part of this initiative was the goal of spreading democracy, especially to the new independent states of Southeast Asia.

After World War II, the U.S. Navy deemed the Pacific theater to be critical in its naval strategy. Bases were maintained in Japan, Guam, and the Philippines to keep the U.S. Navy close enough to react to any threats. With Vietnam's war for independence and its division in 1954, the U.S. Navy was in a key position to defend South Vietnam and counteract communist aggression from North Vietnam. This put the U.S. Navy at the forefront of every operation and logistical plan needed to achieve the America's goal for regional stability.

From 1950 to 1975, the U.S. Navy and its sailors intercepted arms smugglers, supported medical needs, provided fire support for ground troops, gained intelligence, and much more. The U.S. Navy lived up to President Theodore Roosevelt's turn-of-the-century vision as "America's big stick," when it helped bring North Vietnam to peace talks.

GEOGRAPHY OF VIETNAM

Vietnam has a long coastline, more than 2,025 miles. North and South Vietnam's combined eastern shore stretched from the Gulf of Tonkin in the north, along the South China Sea, and the western side of its southernmost peninsula included the Gulf of Thailand to its South and Southwest.

The Gulf of Tonkin in North Vietnam and the Mekong Delta in South Vietnam heavily influenced the Vietnam War strategy. The Gulf of Tonkin formed a crescent shape of North Vietnam shore from China's Hainan Island to Hue in South Vietnam. U.S. Navy vessels sought to control the Gulf of Tonkin; for its carriers to launch airstrikes ashore, and to eliminate it as a means by which the North Vietnamese could supply its military operations from the sea.

The Mekong Delta was a population hub for South Vietnam. In the 1960's 40 percent of South Vietnam's Population lived along the delta. U.S. Navy control of the waterways in Mekong Delta granted the U.S. access to the South Vietnamese population, ensuring its waterways were a strategic asset. This led to the development of riverine operations and the Brown Water Navy.

PRE- VIETNAM WAR NAVAL FORCES

The U.S. Navy changed dramatically between World War II and Vietnam. Ships of the line facing each other in a pitched sea battle was no longer practical, so most battleships were mothballed in storage yards as the age of the carrier strike group began. Missiles slowly replaced the roles of conventional guns as the weapon of choice for destroyers and cruisers. The Navy also experimented with, and then perfected nuclear propulsion in submarines, cruisers, and carriers, allowing for longer at-sea periods.

Helicopters allowed for more versatility at sea, transporting people and supplies, aiding in search and rescue, and participating in combat. At the same time, the U.S. military developed supersonic jets that could carry greater payloads and dominate the skies of Vietnam. The Navy also developed new units and tactics to meet the needs of a counterinsurgency, as a result Navy Sea, Air, and Land (SEAL) Teams were created in 1962. In order to operate along the waterways, the Brown Water Navy operated shallow draft boats.

By 1965, the U.S. Navy's Pacific Fleet reformed itself – from the conventional fleet that fought the Japanese, into the fleet needed for service in the Cold War and in Vietnam.



Operation PASSAGE TO FREEDOM, 1954-1955: Greeting aboard USS LST-901, at Haiphong Harbor, as refugees embark on their journey to Saigon. Following the Geneva Accords of 1954, a 300-day grace period allowed for the free movement of Vietnamese citizens north or south before Vietnam divided at the 17th parallel. The U.S. Navy transported more than 310,000 Vietnamese from the communist north to the non-communist south. (National Archives)



The Challenges of The Land. An Armored Troop Carrier, known as a "Tango" boat, sails down the Long Tau River in July 1967. The geographic features of Vietnam proved challenging for the United States because of the marshy land and the hundreds of shallow rivers. As part of a mobile riverine force, the U.S. Navy patrolled Vietnam's waterways and transported troops. (Official U.S. Navy photo)

SPLIT OF VIETNAM

In 1954, two governments emerged in Vietnam: the communist North and the non-communist South, dividing the country at the 17th parallel. Those governments gave the people of Vietnam 300 days to move to the regime of their choosing. To aid citizens with their moves, the U.S. Navy transported Vietnamese people wanting to relocate during an operation it called Passage to Freedom. From August 1954 to May 1957, U.S. transport ships moved more than 311,000 people between North and South Vietnam.

Specialized Navy construction units, or Seabees, were critical to the success of Passage to Freedom. Seabees constructed camps in Haiphong and the Mekong Delta to house those awaiting transport and those newly arrived in South Vietnam, respectively. Seabees constructed these camps in less than a month, including electricity and water.

Meanwhile, Navy medical personnel treated refugees for wounds, vaccinated them, and provided medical care to pregnant and nursing women.

MILITARY ASSISTANCE EFFORTS

The Department of Defense developed Military Assistance Advisory Groups (MAAGs) to aid other countries in the fight against communism. The DoD established MAAG-Vietnam in 1950 to aid the French in its fight against communist guerrillas. MAAG oversaw the transfer of American supplies and equipment such as aircraft and amphibious vessels.

MAAG's role changed as Vietnam divided. In the south, the Vietnam Navy (VNN) operated American-made surplus vessels, but it lacked necessities that a modern naval force needed, such as experienced officers, sailors, and well-kept equipment. American naval advisers trained the VNN officers and sailors to operate modernized equipment in the littoral waters of Vietnam. The results of MAAG's efforts were mixed. Though the VNN developed a force of river patrol boats and landing craft, it was rife with desertion.



Training the Vietnamese: American Sailors trained Vietnamese Sailors in a range of weapons and equipment throughout the war from the early advisory groups through Vietnamization. This image, taken in December 1969, is of an instructor at the small boat school instructing Vietnamese students on the power plant of a river patrol boat (PBR). (Official U.S. Navy photo)

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COMBAT AND INNOVATION 1965-1973

During the eight-year period of America's combat role in Vietnam, 1965-1973, the U.S. Navy played a significant role in limiting the flow of insurgent supplies and manpower from north to Communists into the south, with significant contributions to intelligence collections from the air, on the ground, and at sea, while striking ground targets from the air and sea. Navy medical personnel aided civilians, patrolled with U.S. Marines, and operated hospitals ashore and aboard specially designed ships.

OPERATION MARKET TIME

In March 1965, the U.S. Navy led the effort to limit the supplies reaching Communist hands in the south, and it launched Operation MARKET TIME. The operation consisted of boats patrolling offshore and the inland rivers, reconnaissance planes spotting on the seas, and U.S. Coast Guard and Navy vessels searching suspicious boats and seizing contraband.

Relying on coordinated intelligence networks, U.S. Navy ships destroyed or captured hundreds of tons of supplies on their way into South Vietnam. By 1967, Operation MARKET TIME limited all but less than five percent of Communist arms and equipment transported by sea. MARKET TIME's effectiveness forced the North Vietnamese to supply the Viet Cong by other means, increasing their use of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.



Intelligence by Land, Sea, and Air. An SP-2H Neptune flies low over junks at sea during surveillance patrols supporting Operation MARKET TIME in 1966. In the skies, naval aircraft photographed enemy positions and monitored enemy activity. Their capabilities included wide angle lenses, night vision, radar, infrared cameras and electronic intercepts. (Courtesy of U.S. Coast Guard Archive)



Coordinated operations. U.S. submarines such as USS Sculpin (SSN-591) collected intelligence along routes used by gun runners, while Navy planes like the P-5 Marlin, P-2 Neptune, and P-3 Orion reported live contact locations to the surface vessels. (Official U.S. Navy photo)

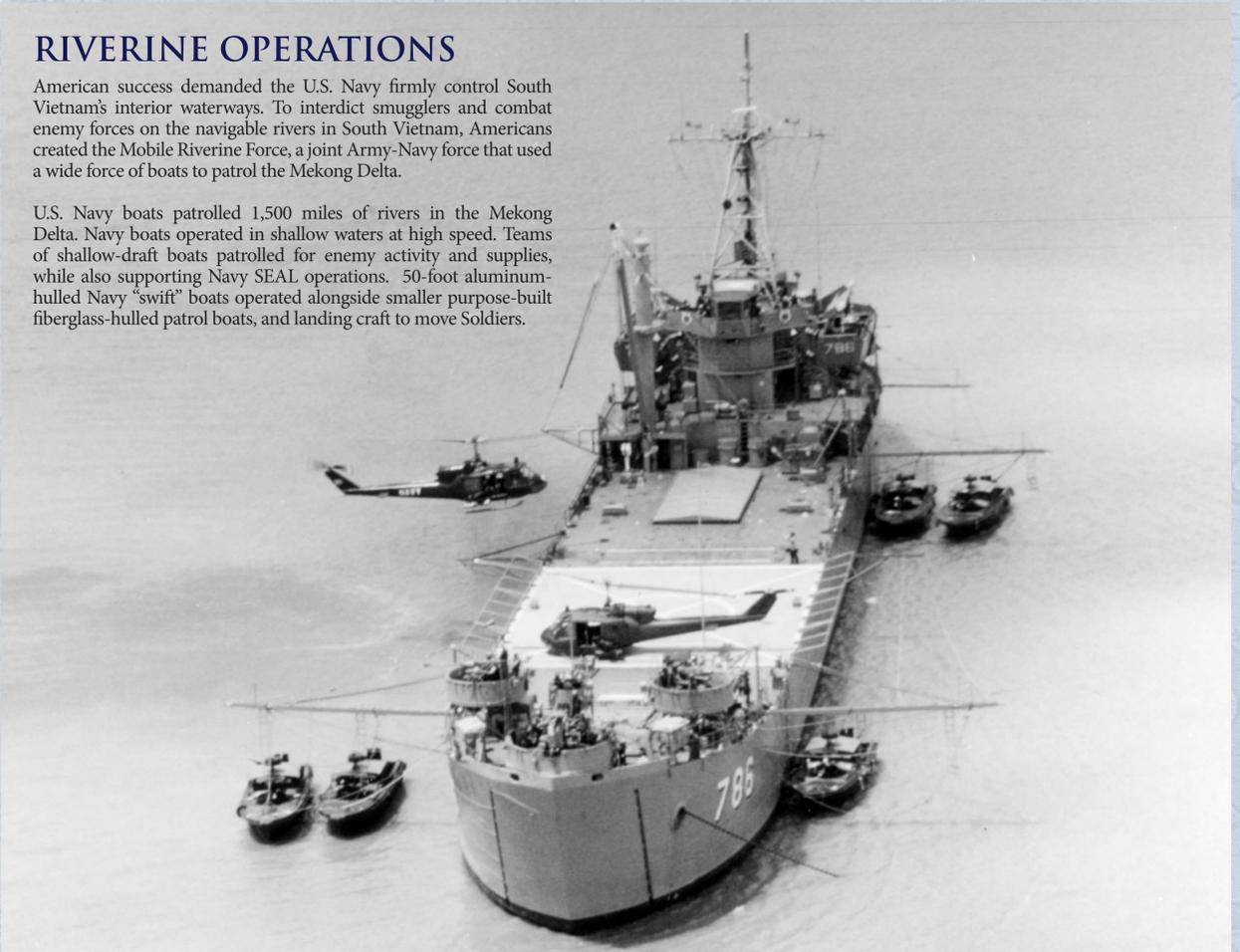


Interdiction operations. American Sailors transfer 80-tons of materiel from a trawler that ran aground attempting to smuggle arms into South Vietnam. As the U.S. Navy cracked down on smuggling, gun runners made desperate attempts to American sea and air patrols. (Official U.S. Navy photo)

RIVERINE OPERATIONS

American success demanded the U.S. Navy firmly control South Vietnam's interior waterways. To interdict smugglers and combat enemy forces on the navigable rivers in South Vietnam, Americans created the Mobile Riverine Force, a joint Army-Navy force that used a wide force of boats to patrol the Mekong Delta.

U.S. Navy boats patrolled 1,500 miles of rivers in the Mekong Delta. Navy boats operated in shallow waters at high speed. Teams of shallow-draft boats patrolled for enemy activity and supplies, while also supporting Navy SEAL operations. 50-foot aluminum-hulled Navy "swift" boats operated alongside smaller purpose-built fiberglass-hulled patrol boats, and landing craft to move Soldiers.



USS Garrett County (LST-786). A Bell UH-1E Hueys of Helicopter Attack (Light) Squadron 3 Seawolves lands while providing support for operation "Game Warden" Forces in the Co Chien River, Mekong Delta, South Vietnam, June 1968. Five river patrol boats are alongside. (U.S. Navy / National Archives)

STRIKE OPERATIONS

The U.S. Navy's ship-based air assets supported troops on the ground while also contributing to strategic bombing operations such as Rolling Thunder and Linebacker I and II. U.S. Navy surface ships provided quick and precise prolonged shore bombardment by placing cruisers and destroyers along South Vietnam's coast. The Navy even recommissioned a battleship in 1969, USS New Jersey (BB-62), to provide heavier gun support.



An F-4B Phantom II from USS Coral Sea (CV-43) drops bombs on North Vietnam. Navy air assets provided strike capabilities to any region of Vietnam. (Official U.S. Navy photo, courtesy of the Hampton Roads Naval Museum)

Carrier based aircraft penetrated deep into Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Naval aviators struck the Ho Chi Minh trail to destroy infrastructure and logistical trains used by communist forces. Aviators used many strike platforms throughout the war; including the A-4 Skyhawk, the A-7 Corsair II, the A-6 Intruder, and the F-4 Phantom II.

The Navy provided fire support throughout the war. Notably, ships and aircraft supported Operation LINEBACKER to force North Vietnam into peace talks. Navy and Air Force bombers struck North Vietnamese targets while destroyers and cruisers bombarded missile installations on the coastline. During LINEBACKER the innovation of television guided bombs allowed aviators to hit precise locations and reduce collateral damage.

NAVY SPECIAL OPERATIONS

President John F. Kennedy authorized the formation of Navy Sea, Air, Land (SEAL) Teams in 1962. SEALs were intended for two purposes: to conduct clandestine activities on the waterways of Vietnam; and to train the indigenous personnel to aid in clandestine naval warfare. SEALs ambushed enemy troops, gathered intelligence, and rescued personnel.

The original SEAL teams developed from Underwater Demolition Teams (UDT). UDTs formed in World War II to clear amphibious landing zones. UDTs operated in Vietnam to clear harbors and sabotage targets in North Vietnam.

SEAL Teams attained one of the highest kill ratios throughout the war, and provided intelligence to the U.S. and its allies. In the Mekong Delta, SEAL Teams secured waterways as part of Operation GAME WARDEN, defended naval installations during the Tet Offensive, and worked alongside other special forces from the U.S. and its allies.



U.S. Navy SEAL team members board a fire team boat for transportation to the site of an operation, October 1968. (U.S. Navy / National Archives)

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HUMANITARIAN EFFORTS AND CONCLUSION OF THE WAR

NAVY MEDICINE

The U.S. Navy had a range of medical personnel, including doctors, nurses, lab technicians, surgical teams, corpsmen, and a score of others. Navy medicine was an important tactical and humanitarian asset to aid local populations in Vietnam through programs like the Military Provincial Health Assistance Program (MILPHAP) in which doctors treated patients in rural villages. The Navy even dispatched dentists to teach dental health across South Vietnam.

The Navy assigned its Corpsmen to Marine units in the field, and aboard each of its vessels and river units. The "doc" was there to treat wounds and save lives in the battlefield. Corpsmen carried specialized medical equipment and trained to remain cool in the most stressful situations. Corpsmen inserted behind enemy lines with Navy SEAL and Marine reconnaissance teams, manned aid stations and hospitals, and flew aboard helicopters to save lives. Throughout U.S. involvement in Vietnam, approximately 5,000 Hospital Corpsmen and 300 dental technicians served in theater. More than 4,500 earned the Purple Heart Medal for a combat wound, and for heroism in combat 290 earned the Bronze Star Medal, 127 earned the Silver Star Medal, the Navy awarded 29 its Navy Cross, and 4 earned the Congressional Medal of Honor.

To meet the medical demands of the Vietnam War, the Navy reactivated two hospital ships, USS *Repose* (AH-16) and USS *Sanctuary* (AH-17). These ships comfortably treated 500 patients each and made available diverse crews of doctors and medical specialists, including 435 female Navy nurses. Hospital ships moved up and down the coast of Vietnam to aid troops where they were needed to reinforce the evacuation and field hospitals ashore. They also accommodated MEDEVAC helicopters, often receiving troops directly from battlefields.



Humanitarian missions. The senior medical officer at the U.S. Naval Support Facility in Da Nang, Lieutenant Terrence D. Schunrke, examines a small child at Stella Mari's outpatient clinic at the Sacred Heart Nursery Orphanage on the outskirts of the city, October 1971. (U.S. Navy / National Archives)

OPERATION FREQUENT WIND

As the war came to a close, the U.S. evacuated people at risk of persecution from the communists. Evacuees included South Vietnamese Leadership, Soldiers, and Catholics. The U.S. Navy positioned ships off Vietnam's coast to receive refugees from March to May 1975. Thousands of South Vietnamese fled in a variety of aircraft and boats to take refuge with the fleet. In total, the U.S. Navy moved 130,000 refugees from Vietnamese waters to Guam and the Philippines.

ENDURING LEGACY

The legacy of today's U.S. Navy has deep roots in the Vietnam War. Tactics, technology, and culture rapidly changed between 1955-1975. The war led to the decline of naval gunfire, the rise of guided missiles, the evolution of jets, and its use of helicopters evolved. The special warfare community defined itself in the jungles and rivers of Vietnam, drawing on those experiences as it exceeded expectations in the mountains of Afghanistan. The end of the draft and creation of an all-volunteer force led to increased racial equality across the Navy and greater representation of diverse cultures and women.

From 1975 onward, the U.S. Navy developed weapons systems such as Aegis and vertically launched missiles to accurately shoot down targets and strike ground forces. Laser guided bombs developed in Vietnam became common place, and attack, bomber, and fighter jets evolved to current multi-role strike/fighter status. Aircraft born in Vietnam, like the CH-53 and its variants, continue to serve the needs of the U.S. Navy well into the 21st century.

The Navy's tactical need to combat a conventional force in the North and an irregular force in the south taught lessons for future naval conflicts in both deep and littoral waters. Innovations like the littoral combat ship classes and modern frigates will serve the U.S. Navy's needs far into the future in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, where aggressive adversaries and pirates are just two examples of conventional and irregular threats.

The cultural shifts following the end of the draft ultimately lead to women stepping into combat roles and integrated on warships. In 1978, the Women On Ships program allowed for women to work on support vessels, and women formally integrated onto combat ships in 1994. The Navy assigned greater roles to African Americans, as well; Vice Admiral Samuel Gravely was the first African American to command a U.S. Navy warship in 1961, in 1971 he became the first black admiral in the U.S. Navy, and in 1976 he was the first African American assigned to command a fleet.

The U.S. Navy's humanitarian tradition carries on today. During the Covid-19 pandemic, hospital ship USNS *Comfort* (T-AH-20) anchored in New York Harbor to relieve overburdened area hospitals. Navy ships and sailors continue to aid people worldwide in the aftermath of hurricanes, earthquakes, and tsunamis.

From the rivers to the seas, the U.S. Navy continues its tradition of supporting America and its allies from the beginning to the very end. From the first naval



*The Fall of Saigon, April 1975. Boats of Vietnamese refugees approach USS *Durham* (LKA-114) during a rainstorm, 4 April 1975. They were later transferred from *Durham* to another ship for passage to a safe zone. U.S. Merchant and Navy vessels moved tens of thousands of refugees to Guam and the Philippines as South Vietnam collapsed. (U.S. Navy / National Archives)*

advisers in Vietnam to the mass evacuations in 1975, U.S. Navy's dominate presence in the sea lanes of South East Asia kept them free for world commerce, all the while helping the troops on the ground with intelligence, fire support, transportation, and resupply. The sailors of the Vietnam War made a difference that we recognize today as service to the nation and heroism to mankind.

MINING OF HAIPHONG HARBOR

To persuade the North Vietnamese into peace negotiations in 1972, U.S. Navy and Marine Corps aircraft laid more than 11,700 mines in Haiphong Harbor during Operation POCKET MONEY. The U.S. later used the removal of mines as a bargaining chip for the release of American prisoners of war held by the North Vietnamese. The following year, the Navy mobilized mine sweeping ships and helicopters to clear the harbor of any mines in Operation END SWEEP.



Operation END SWEEP. A CH-53A Sea Stallion tows a Magnetic Orange Pipe (MOP) to detect mines for clearing Haiphong Harbor. To reduce collateral damage after U.S. demands were met in peace negotiations, U.S. Navy ships and aircraft cleared Vietnamese waters of mines. (U.S. Navy / National Archives)

Racial tensions peaked onboard some ships in 1972. Race riots broke out on the USS *Kitty Hawk* (CV-63) and USS *Constellation* (CV-64) that prompted Navy-wide racial reforms.



*Discussing Racial Issues (1971). Admiral Elmo Zumwalt discusses issues of racial inequality with sailors aboard the USS *Kitty Hawk* (CV-63). Racial issues aboard U.S. Ships peaked alongside the civil rights movements within the U.S. Navy-wide racial reforms were instituted to create a fair environment for sailors of all backgrounds and ethnicities. (U.S. Navy)*