



THE COAST GUARD IN THE VIETNAM WAR

PART 1 OF 3



Coast Guard Squadron One. USCG 82-footers leaving Subic Bay in August 1965 en route to their new home in South Vietnam. On April 29, 1965, President Johnson approved U.S. Coast Guard service in Vietnam under operational control of the U.S. Navy. The white paint scheme was a holdover from their former duties off the United States shores. For success in their wartime role, the commander of the U.S. Navy Coastal Surveillance Task Force (CTF 115) directed Squadron One to paint its patrol boats "formula 20 deck grey" in September 1965. (Official USCG photo)



Squadron Three. Older high-endurance cutters used in Vietnam from 1967-1969 were replaced by new and more-capable Hamilton-class cutters in November 1969. The Coast Guard Cutter Chase (WHEC-718), seen here on patrol in the South China Sea in 1970, illustrates these 378-foot ships were equipped with a flight deck, and their top speed of 29 knots. By the time Chase arrived in Vietnam, Navy destroyers were withdrawn from Vietnam, leaving the Coast Guard's high-endurance cutters as the only large ships maintaining the outer barrier. (Official USCG photo)

"Squadron Three operations resemble [traditional U.S. Coast Guard] ocean station patrol work in many ways, but, of course, there are obvious differences. This is a war-oriented mission."

LCDR R.H. Beiter
Executive Officer USCGC Owasco
(WHEC-39)

INTRODUCTION

Early in 1965, Navy commanders requested assistance with military operations to patrol the 1,200 miles of coastline, and conduct inspections for contraband on more than 60,000 native small craft that traversed Vietnamese waters. The Navy petitioned the Coast Guard, which initially contributed 17 of its 82-foot patrol boats and crews to conduct nearshore operations. The Navy and the Treasury Departments agreed Coast Guard assets in Vietnam would rest under operational control of the Navy while on patrol or on special assignment. All other times, the patrol boats were under autonomous Coast Guard control. President Johnson approved this plan in April 1965.

The Coast Guard's 1965 arrival in Vietnam corresponded with the beginning of Operation MARKET TIME, and their primary mission was to help the U.S. Navy's Coastal Surveillance Force stop the infiltration of men and supplies along South Vietnam's waterways. U.S. Coast Guard was critical to this mission.

COAST GUARD SQUADRON ONE

Coast Guard Squadron One was commissioned on May 27, 1965 to support the U.S. Navy Coastal Surveillance Force (Task Force 115). The squadron's 26 patrol boats were split into three divisions to cover Vietnam's entire coastline.

At first, Squadron One's patrol boats acted as gate-keepers by patrolling along the north and south borders from the shore to the ocean to cut off the enemy as they entered South Vietnamese waters. Smugglers responded by sending their cargo in ocean-going trawlers that went around the barriers and approached the shore from the open ocean. To counter this, the Coast Guard and the Coastal Surveillance Force engaged the smugglers as they approached the shore.

DIVISION 11

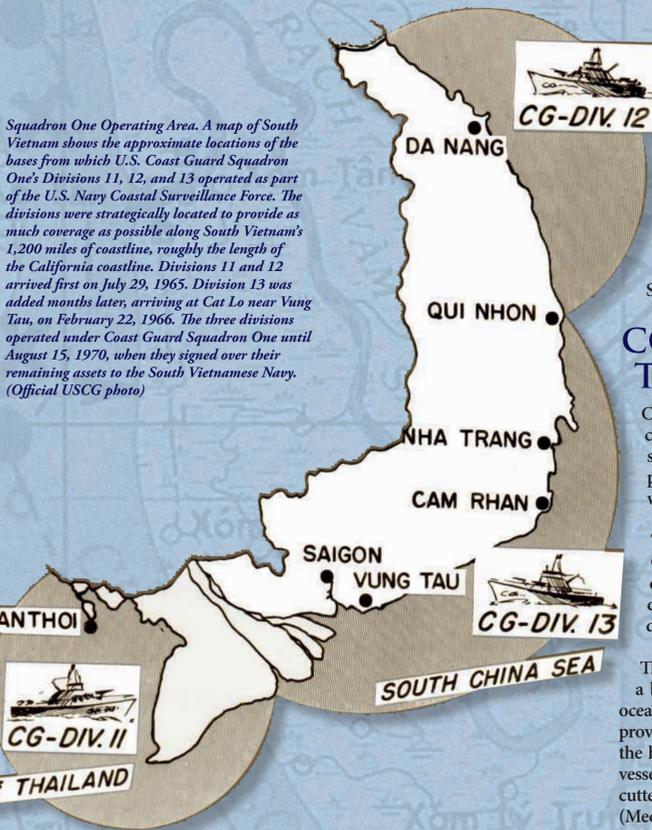
The 82-foot patrol boat crews assigned to Division 11 were homeported at An Thoi on Phu Quoc Island in the Gulf of Thailand. They patrolled the southernmost waters of South Vietnam with nine patrol boats, guarding the border between Cambodia and Vietnam. During their first month plying Vietnamese coastal waters, Division 11's Coastguardsmen stopped and boarded more than 1,100 junks and sampans, and their tempo remained the same throughout the war.

DIVISION 12

The men of Division 12 arrived at their homeport city of Da Nang on July 20, 1965, earning Division 12 the distinction as the first U.S. Coast Guard unit stationed in South Vietnam. The morning following their arrival, five of the Division's eight cutters were underway for their first patrols in the Da Nang area as part of Operation MARKET TIME. The cutters of Division 12 operated from the 17th Parallel to the city of Qui Nhon in II Corps (Military Region II).



Operation MARKET TIME. A U.S. Coastguardsman pokes through a load of sand on board a Vietnamese junk off the coast of South Vietnam. Coast Guard boarding teams routinely searched vessels for contraband. (Official USCG Photo)



Squadron One Operating Area. A map of South Vietnam shows the approximate locations of the bases from which U.S. Coast Guard Squadron One's Divisions 11, 12, and 13 operated as part of the U.S. Navy Coastal Surveillance Force. The divisions were strategically located to provide as much coverage as possible along South Vietnam's 1,200 miles of coastline, roughly the length of the California coastline. Divisions 11 and 12 arrived first on July 29, 1965. Division 13 was added months later, arriving at Cat Lo near Vung Tau, on February 22, 1966. The three divisions operated under Coast Guard Squadron One until August 15, 1970, when they signed over their remaining assets to the South Vietnamese Navy. (Official USCG photo)

DIVISION 13

In August 1965, General William Westmoreland, the Commander of the U.S. Military Advisory Command in Vietnam, requested an increase in the number of 82-foot patrol boats. The Coast Guard had Division 13 manned, equipped, and ready for Vietnam by December 1965.

Division 13 was homeported in Vung Tau, about 35 miles southeast of Saigon. It patrolled the Rung Sat Special Zone, an area of tidal mangrove swamp southeast of Saigon that straddled the Long Tau River, which was both a main stronghold for the Viet Cong and the main shipping channel to the Port of Saigon. Division 13's nine patrol boats also patrolled the central South Vietnam coast from Qui Nhon to the delta south of Saigon.

COAST GUARD SQUADRON THREE

Coast Guard Squadron Three consisted of U.S. Coast Guard high-endurance cutters ranging in size from 255 to 378 feet. With support from U.S. Navy supply ships the cutters could remain at sea almost indefinitely; by using a procedure known as underway replenishment, their food, supplies, and fuel were resupplied at sea. Typically, their deployments were 10-11 months long.

The Coast Guard sent eight deployments of high-endurance cutters to support Coast Guard Squadron Three from May 1967 to December 1971. The first five deployments were each comprised of five high-endurance cutters. The sixth deployment included three high-endurance cutters. The seventh and eighth deployments each included just two cutters.

The high-endurance cutters fulfilled many roles. By default, they acted as a barrier patrol from infiltration by sea. They inspected vessels in the open ocean by sending specially trained crew teams onboard. High-endurance cutters provided fire support to amphibious assaults and troops onshore. As motherships, the high-endurance cutters provided logistical support for Coast Guard patrol vessels and the Navy PCFs (Patrol Craft, Fast), known as swifts. Every few weeks, cutter medical staffs would visit local villages on missions known as "MEDCAPs" (Medical Civic Action Program) to provide medical aid to the local populace and military personnel stationed in the area. Occasionally, search and rescue expertise was also needed - a traditional and familiar duty for the cutter crews.

Operation MARKET TIME

The U.S. Coast Guard supplied two types of vessels to cover its share of the closely coordinated, multi-service MARKET TIME mission. This operation sought to prohibit the smuggling of enemy men and arms into South Vietnam from the sea. The Coast Guard operated 26 82-foot patrol boats (WPBs) in South Vietnam's near-shore waters from 1965 to 1970. Coast Guard high-endurance cutters worked with Navy destroyers between 1967 and 1971 to form the outermost ring of the Coastal Surveillance Force.

Other agents in the MARKET TIME operation included the U.S. and South Vietnamese Navies. The U.S. Navy's extremely fast and highly maneuverable 50-foot "Swift" craft were smaller and lighter than the Coast Guard WPBs. The Swift boats worked inshore of the WPBs because they did not have the range or heavy-seas capability of the Coast Guard's WPBs. U.S. Navy patrol aircraft flew round-the-clock airborne surveillance missions. Coastal Surveillance Force vessels were directed to suspicious waterborne targets spotted by airborne Navy aircrews.

The Coastal Surveillance Forces operations were effective. By August 1968, MARKET TIME interdiction practically eliminated the smuggling of men and supplies to the enemy by sea, and forced the communists to rely heavily on over-land supply routes, like the Ho Chi Minh Trail.



Joint-service role. The Coast Guard patrol boats not only intercepted junks for MARKET TIME, but also proved very useful for special operations insertions and gunfire support. Civil Irregular Defense Group soldiers on board the 82-foot Point Comfort are seen on the eve of an early morning raid into Viet Cong territory on Phu Quoc Island in September 1965. For this raid, two Division 11 patrol boats each carried 17 CIDG soldiers and a U.S. Army Special Forces advisor. (Official USCG photo)

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“The heat in Vietnam is oppressive and prior to 1967 the ships were not air-conditioned.”
 Commander Edward F. Oliver,
 The first
 USCG Shipping Advisor
 in Vietnam.



Aids to Navigation. Vietnamese children observe and play nearby as a Coast Guardsman replaces the batteries in a range marker. Aids in Vietnam had four threats: weather, enemy action, collision, and theft, so they required constant maintenance or repair. Coast Guard teams repaired aids or changed batteries on shore or at sea, to ensure vessels could navigate South Vietnam's busy harbors and waterways. (Official USCG photo)

AIDS TO NAVIGATION

Aids to Navigation are devices that assist navigators in determining their position or safe course, or to warn them of dangers or obstructions to sea travel. The Coast Guard used buoy tenders to maintain and repair Aids to Navigation. The U.S. Coast Guard worked for the Army and with USAID on navigation aid projects in Vietnam, and employed four different buoy tenders to mark South Vietnamese channels to keep the traffic moving, construct and repair navigation markers on shore, and to replace batteries in lighthouses along the South Vietnamese coast. The cutter Blackhaw earned more Combat Action Ribbons than any other cutter in Vietnam. Their proximity to the shore in rivers made them opportune targets.

AVIATION EXCHANGE PROGRAM

The Coast Guard-Air Force Aviator Exchange Program resulted from a mutual need for more experienced helicopter pilots. The Coast Guard needed a cadre of instructor pilots for its receipt of new HH-3 medium range recovery helicopters in 1969. U.S. Air Force replacement pilot demands had increased to support escalated bombing campaigns.

In 1967, the Air Force agreed to train Coast Guard officers to the instructor level in HH-3 helicopters. In exchange, the Coast Guard made the newly trained, rescue-experienced aviators available to the Air Force for duty. Coast Guard pilots received one-year of training, and then served a one-year tour of duty with an Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron in Vietnam.

From 1968-1972, as part of a service exchange program, ten Coast Guard helicopter aviators flew Air Force HH-3s (known as the Jolly Green Giants) and later HH-53s, while two Coast Guard fixed wing aviators flew Air Force C-130s. As a testament to their heroism, this small group of Coastguardsmen earned 4 Silver Star Medals, 16 Distinguished Flying Crosses, and 87 Air Medals.

The Coast Guard aviators on loan to the Air Force were well-received and well-respected. One Air Force helicopter crewman said, “The crews liked to fly with the Coast Guard pilots. It went beyond personalities. The Coasties were all experienced and excellent helicopter pilots and when on a mission they were able to readily adapt to any situation.”



Aviator Exchange Program. LT Jack Stice (in the “Snoopy Cap”), a Coast Guard aviator on loan to the U.S. Air Force in Vietnam, displaying the Coast Guard Ensign after rescuing Wolf 04. Most helicopter rescues in Southeast Asia were over land, but for those that were over water, the Coast Guard aviators brought a wealth of “feet wet” experience appreciated by both their Air Force copilots, and the downed crewmembers being rescued. (Photo courtesy of retired Coast Guard Captain John “Bear” Moseley)



Naval Gunfire Support. U.S. Coast Guard vessels in Vietnam regularly engaged the enemy ashore. U.S. Coast Guard high endurance cutters used their 5-inch guns to support American and allied troops against the enemy. High endurance cutters regularly bombarded enemy staging areas, supply points, and troop concentrations several miles inland. On the left, USCGC Barataria (WHEC-381) shoots its 5-inch gun at an enemy target offshore; the ship fired Squadron Three's first fire support mission on May 22, 1967. On the right, the crew of an 82-foot patrol boat fires mortar shells at a cave occupied by Viet Cong along a beach near Da Nang in 1966. (Official USCG photos)

MEDICAL CIVIC ACTION PROGRAMS (MEDCAP)

The U.S. military conducted humanitarian and civic action programs to “win the hearts and minds” of the people. These programs are known collectively as Medical Civic Action Programs (MEDCAP). In Vietnam, MEDCAPs provided humanitarian assistance to locals caught in a conflict and with inadequate medical resources. MEDCAPs were also intended to counter Viet Cong propaganda and promote a better understanding of the South Vietnamese government and USAID rural development programs.

U.S. Coast Guard personnel supported the Vietnamese people in various formal and voluntary humanitarian actions. In August 1966, the patrol boats instituted an island adoption program. Each crew built a rapport with their village during regular visits to support it with improvement projects. Visits were limited to no more than once every two weeks, for only three hours, and a liaison from the South Vietnamese Navy had to be present. Crews regularly distributed clothing and school supplies that Americans donated.



Medical Civic Action Programs (MEDCAP). Coastguardsmen from a patrol boat give a package of pencils, paper, candy, and plastic toys to a young Vietnamese child during a civic action visit to the remote island of Hon Nam Du in 1966. Each of the 82-footers adopted a remote island to support with gifts of medical and school supplies, and other items the villagers had little access to. (Official USCG photo)

LORAN STATIONS

Long Range Aids to Navigation (LORAN) was a radio navigation system used to help mariners and aviators fix their positions, day or night, and in any weather. The use of LORAN to support military operations in Vietnam was known as Operation TIGHT REIGN. The accuracy of this navigation system was especially helpful when navigating or bombing at night or in poor weather, it was accurate to within yards. In Southeast Asia, the U.S. Coast Guard set up and manned five LORAN stations: Lampang, Udorn, and Sattahip in Thailand; and Tan My and Con Son Island in South Vietnam.

MARINE POLICE ADVISOR

The Marine Police Advisor position lasted only from May 7, 1970, to March 18, 1971. It was short-lived due to the American draw-down of forces. The duty of the marine police advisor was to collect, prepare, and catalog a law library of pertinent Vietnamese laws and decrees for the South Vietnamese government. These included maritime law, ship inspection regulations, ship licensing, crew licensing, motor boat licensing and inspection, fisheries law, and navigation laws. The advisor also helped the Vietnamese Marine Police obtain suitable boats.

SHIPPING ADVISORY UNIT AND THE MERCHANT MARINE DETAIL

Vietnamese authorities rarely confronted unruly merchant mariners ashore in Vietnam, and U.S. Military Police authorities were not authorized to intervene until 1968, when all civilians accompanying the armed force, including merchant seamen, became subject to military law. Personnel of the Merchant Marine Detail, established in 1966, provided investigative and judicial services. Coast Guard officers assigned to Merchant Marine Details had the authority to remove sailors from ships, order violations corrected, or stop a ship from sailing. Though normally in the background, these officers were vital to the supply effort as they assisted merchant sailors encumbered by all the regular personnel problems that occurred afloat and ashore, including sickness, deaths, accidents, assaults, and smuggling.

PORT SECURITY AND WATERWAYS DETAIL (PS&WD) AND EXPLOSIVES LOADING DETACHMENTS (ELD TEAMS)

Port Security and Waterways Details provided advice and assistance in port security matters including the safe handling of explosives, as well as assistance on waterways matters, boat operations and safe handling, stowing and storage of dangerous cargo on vessels and waterfront cargo facilities. Four Explosives Loading Detachments were subordinate to the PS&WD, whose headquarters was in Long Binh. ELDs were located in Nha Be (Saigon), Cam Rahn Bay, Da Nang and Qui Nhon. The primary mission of the ELDs was to supervise the deep draft merchant vessels while discharging or backloading cargo in South Vietnam's deep-water ports. ELDs provided port security advice to port commanders and recommendations for the safe loading of dangerous cargo on board shallow draft amphibious vessels. ELD personnel were highly trained in explosives handling, firefighting, port security, and small boat operations and maintenance; they routinely taught U.S. Army and Vietnamese personnel to operate small boats, fight port fires, inspect piers, and to properly handle and store cargo.



Explosives Loading Detachments. A Coastguardsman assigned to ELD #3 oversees munitions being unloaded from a ship at Da Nang's Tien Sha Ramp in 1969. ELD personnel were highly trained in explosives handling, firefighting, port security, and small boat operations and maintenance. They were authorized to do anything necessary to enforce regulations. (Official USCG photo)



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82-Foot Patrol Boats. Described as “the backbone of the MARKET TIME operation,” a crew of 11 men and two officers manned each of the 26 patrol boats supplied by the Coast Guard. Each spent up to six days at a time on active patrol supporting Operation MARKET TIME. Each crewmember was armed with a .45-caliber pistol and had access to a robust small-arms locker that included M-16s, shotguns, and M-79 grenade launchers. Each patrol boat was armed with four M-2 (.50-caliber) machine guns; the bow-mount was a combined over-under .50-caliber machine gun and 81 millimeter trigger-fired mortar. The 81mm/.50 caliber “piggyback” was a unique Coast Guard innovation, to ensure 360 degree coverage for the cutters. (Official USCG photo)



Vietnamization. The U.S. Coast Guard’s 82-foot patrol boats had all been transferred to the South Vietnamese Navy by the summer of 1970. South Vietnamese flags fly from two WPBs after being ceremoniously transferred to the Vietnamese Navy by their former U.S. Coast Guard crews. (Official USCG photo)

“The mission of the advisory effort... is to work ourselves out of a job” – to bring the Vietnamese Navy from the junk age to a modern sea force with high-powered steel ships and their sophisticated equipment.”
 Commander A. I. Lonsdale,
 Commander, Gulf of Thailand
 Surveillance Group
 (CTG 115.4)

VIETNAMIZATION AND DISESTABLISHMENT:

Vietnamization was the name given to President Richard Nixon’s policy to end American involvement in the Vietnam War. During Vietnamization, U.S. Forces trained, equipped, and enabled South Vietnamese forces to shoulder more of the war while Americans reduced their presence in the region. The U.S. Coast Guard eventually turned over all of its patrol boats and four of its high endurance cutters to the South Vietnamese Navy. Each turnover was precipitated by an 11-week program where new Vietnamese crews trained alongside American counterparts. The cutter’s missions under the Vietnamese Navy remained the same: to halt enemy smuggling and provide gunfire support for allied forces operating near South Vietnam’s Coastal Zones.

SENIOR COAST GUARD OFFICER VIETNAM (SCGOV)

The office of the Senior Coast Guard Officer Vietnam was established on August 15, 1970, when Coast Guard Squadron One was disestablished. From his office in Saigon, the SCGOV was responsible for “the last 100,” the small group of 100 Coast Guardsmen that remained “in-country” to carry out the variety of missions across South Vietnam. The SCGOV and his staff coordinated all Coast Guard activities and provided support for the Coast Guardsmen arriving or departing Vietnam. Other duties included administrative control of most Coast Guard personnel in-country, and operational control of the Aids to Navigation detail and all buoy tenders deployed to Vietnam. The post was also a liaison to the U.S. Naval Forces – Vietnam commander for the turnover of Coast Guard assets when specific turnover personnel were not attached or available to perform required tasks.



High Endurance Cutters. USCGC Point Lomas (WPB-82321) alongside the 327-foot USCGC Duane (WHEC-33) in the South China Sea to drop off engine parts and pick up mail to ferry into Da Nang, 1968. The high endurance cutters regularly coordinated their MARKET TIME efforts with the 82-foot Coast Guard patrol boats and Navy swift boats. The 11-man crews on the patrol boats were mostly self-sustaining for five days at sea, but the Navy’s smaller 50-foot swift boats depended upon the larger ships for support. The six-man swift boat crews normally spent 24 hours on patrol, then switched crews for the next 24. On many MARKET TIME stations, swift boat relief crews lived aboard the large cutters while waiting for their next patrol. (Official USCG photo)

LEGACY AND IMPACT

In five years, Coast Guard cutters cruised more than 5.5 million miles, and inspected more than a quarter of a million junks and sampans to stop the enemy infiltration of men and supplies into South Vietnam. In July 1967, the 82-foot cutter *Point Orient* engaged and destroyed a trawler off Chu Lai. In February 1968, the Coast Guard played a pivotal role in the largest naval engagement of the Vietnam War; high-endurance cutters *Winona* and *Androscoogin* engaged enemy trawlers and destroyed them with the aid of Coast Guard and Navy patrol boats while the cutter *Mimnetonka* drove off another. In November 1970, cutters *Rush* and *Sherman* destroyed a trawler off the Ca Mau peninsula, and in April 1971, cutters *Rush* and *Morgenthau* engaged and sank a 150-foot trawler near the Ganh Hao River. Coast Guard cutters also participated in nearly 6,000 naval gunfire support missions, causing extensive damage to the enemy.

Of the 56 U.S. Coast Guard vessels to serve in Vietnam, 30 were turned over to the Vietnamese. The U.S. Coast Guard played a significant role in training the Vietnamese Navy to operate these vessels. The former U.S. Coast Guard cutters and the Vietnamese sailors on board them formed the nucleus of the Vietnamese Navy in the early 1970s.

More than 8,000 U.S. Coast Guardsmen served in Vietnam; each one lived up to the Coast Guard Motto, *Semper Paratus*, meaning “Always Ready.” Their ready efforts curtailed maritime smuggling and enemy infiltration, saved hundreds of lives, and were vital to the war effort in Vietnam.



Buoy Tenders. The Coast Guard Cutter *Basswood* (WLB-388) hauling aboard a 2,200 pound buoy near Vung Tau harbor in 1967 as Vietnamese fishermen travel to their fishing grounds in the South China Sea. *Basswood* made three deployments along South Vietnam’s coast: 1967, 1971, and 1972. None of the four U.S. Coast Guard buoy tenders that served in Vietnam were permanently assigned there; instead, they rotated in and out on short tours. While “in-country” the Coast Guard buoy tenders worked to place and maintain navigational markers while training South Vietnamese personnel to do the same. (Official USCG photo)

The Coast Guard in Vietnam	
Naval Gunfire Support Missions	5,975
Junks, Trawlers, etc., Destroyed	2,642
Enemy Strong Points Damaged/Destroyed	9,687
Coast Guardsmen Killed in Action (KIA)	7
Coast Guardsmen Wounded in Action (WIA)	59
Coast Guard Squadron One • May 27, 1965 to August 15, 1970	
Miles Cruised	4,215,116
Vessels Detected	838,299
Vessels Boarded	236,296
Vessels Inspected	283,527
Personnel Detained	10,286
Enemy KIA/WIA	1,055
Structures Damaged/Destroyed	4,727
Coast Guard Squadron Three • April 14, 1967 to January 31, 1972	
Miles Cruised	1,292,094
Vessels Detected	69,517
Vessels Boarded	1,094
Vessels Inspected	50,000
Personnel Detained	138
Enemy KIA/WIA	772
Structures Damaged/Destroyed	5,288
Coast Guard Ships Turned Over to the Vietnamese Navy	
USCG Patrol Boats	26
USCG High Endurance Cutters	4

Did You Know???

The term “cutter” identifies a Coast Guard vessel 65 feet in length or greater, with accommodations for a crew to live aboard.

Did You Know???

If a ship’s hull classification symbol begins with a “W”, it is a commissioned cutter of the U.S. Coast Guard. For example, WPB identifies the Coast Guard’s Patrol Boats, WHEC identifies the high-endurance cutters, and WLB identifies its buoy tenders.



Coast Guard Casualties. LT Jack C. Rittichier, a Coast Guard aviator serving in Vietnam on exchange with the Air Force, became the first USCG combat casualty of the war when the enemy shot down his HH-3E “Jolly Green Giant” as he attempted to rescue a downed Marine aviator. Six other Coast Guardsmen lost their lives while serving in Southeast Asia, and 59 were wounded. (Photo courtesy of Naval Aviation News)