

UPRIVER TO HUE AND DONG HA  
THE U.S. NAVY'S WAR IN I CORPS, VIETNAM, 1967-1970

A Thesis

by

JONATHAN BLACKSHEAR CHAVANNE

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

December 2011

Major Subject: History

Upriver to Hue and Dong Ha: The U.S. Navy's War in I Corps, Vietnam 1967-1970

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Chair of Committee,	James C. Bradford
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## ABSTRACT

Upriver to Hue and Dong Ha: The U.S. Navy's War in I Corps, Vietnam, 1967-1970.

(December 2011)

Jonathan Blackshear Chavanne, B.A., Baylor University;

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The United States Navy's involvement in the Vietnam War, especially its role in the region's inland waterways, has long been an overshadowed aspect of the conflict. Most histories ignore or minimize the Navy's contribution, especially its river patrol or 'brown water' role. Through archival and library research as well as interviews with U.S Navy Vietnam War veterans this thesis demonstrates the vital role played by the brown water navy in the northern provinces of South Vietnam. A key but understudied component of this effort was Task Force Clearwater, an improvised brown water fleet that—along with the maritime logistics campaign that it supported—would prove essential for the successful defense of South Vietnam's northernmost provinces and demonstrate the vital importance of inland naval power.

Task Force Clearwater and its supported maritime logistics effort form a little explored component of the U.S. Navy's role in South Vietnam. A brown water task force that proved essential for the successful defense of the northern provinces of I Corps, Clearwater repeatedly demonstrated the vital importance of inland naval power and the critical need for reliable and protected routes of supply. The task force revealed

many lessons that had been long understood, forgotten, and then relearned by the U.S. Navy, among them that control of inland waterways was perhaps the most advantageous form of logistical supply in war. Created in part to satisfy the ancient maxim of “keeping the supply lines open”, the task force’s role broadened with time. In the course of its existence the men and boats of Clearwater would provide not only the tools of war in I Corps but also provide key lessons for the future.

DEDICATION

To my dad.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The process of writing this thesis has taught me more than I ever expected when I began this long journey, and showed me the wisdom of what so many historians acknowledge, that writing history is a group effort. This project has relied on the talent and helping hand of many individuals, but I'd especially like to thank the members of my thesis committee. Coming from diverse academic backgrounds they each contributed enormously to the research and writing of this thesis, and I owe them more thanks than I can say in these few words.

To the chair of my committee, Dr. James Bradford, I want to express my profound gratitude and appreciation for his encouragement, guidance, and mentorship. Our shared love of naval history coupled with his patient advice over the past two years have steered me on this path, and without his example I could never have persevered. Dr. Olga Dror offered me an invaluable insight into the realities of the complex wars in Indochina and what the conflicts meant to all sides, for which I'm especially grateful. Dr Jason Parker provided important guidance and advice even from afar, and his course on diplomatic history opened my eyes to the key importance of that field. I want to especially thank Dr. D. Bruce Dickson for his guidance and tutelage. Although his PhD is in anthropology his love of military history is what caused us to meet in the first place, and subsequently establish a shared scholarship and great friendship. I'd also like to thank someone who I consider an unofficial member of my committee, Dr. Brian Linn. Whenever I sought out his advice he imparted his vast knowledge of both military history and great writing without hesitation. My deepest thanks to all of you.

Besides my committee members several individuals contributed directly and indirectly to my thesis. Among this group a few stand out in particular. I'd like to thank Dr. James Reckner for his establishment and steadfast dedication to the Texas Tech University Vietnam War Archive, without which I could not have completed the majority of my research. Also at Texas Tech thanks go to Dr. Ron Milam and Dr Steven Maxner for their guidance and assistance. Special thanks also go out to Amy Mondt, who gave me much needed archival aid during my visit to Texas Tech. Lastly I'd like to thank Dr James Sherwood at the Naval History and Heritage Command, for his advice and original idea to pursue a study of Task Force Clearwater.

I'd also like to thank the Vietnam veterans of the brown water navy who lent their time and knowledge to me in the course of my research. Special thanks go to Dr. Herman Hughes, who lent both memories and photographs of his extraordinary experiences at Cua Viet. Secondly Michael Taylor provided invaluable insight into life as a naval officer in Vietnam. For all the veterans of Task Force Clearwater and Danang who I wished I could interview, I express both my regrets that I never talked with you and my deepest thanks for your service. Fair winds and following seas.

Lastly I want to thank my family, including my mom, brother and sister-in-law, but especially my wife Richelle. In December 2010 she endured a cold and snowy research trip to Washington, DC, as well as my absence during archival research and myself typing endlessly on our kitchen table, straining under the weight of countless papers and books. Words cannot express the depths of my love and appreciation. Final thanks go to my dad, who though he's no longer with us continues to influence and guide me every day.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT .....	iii
DEDICATION .....	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	vi
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	viii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	x
CHAPTER	
I INTRODUCTION: ORIGINS OF THE VIETNAM BROWN WATER NAVY .....	1
Bucklew and Vung Ro .....	7
“More Different Types of Boats Than You Can Imagine” .....	11
I Corps.....	19
II THE RIVER WAR MOVES NORTH.....	29
Khe Sanh .....	33
The Tet Offensive .....	38
A Critical Need .....	44
The New Task Force .....	49
Keeping the Rivers Open.....	53
III HARSH DUTY AND DIVERSE THREATS.....	63
Life on the Northern Rivers .....	65
Mine Warfare .....	78
“Little Better than Moles” .....	82
IV THE SLOW DRAW DOWN.....	91
Enter Elmo Zumwalt.....	92
An Ever Evolving Mission.....	95
ACTOV and Mission’s End.....	107
V CONCLUSION .....	112

	Page
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	121
APPENDIX A .....	129
APPENDIX B .....	130
VITA .....	132

## LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE	Page
1 Mark II PBR.....	13
2 Armored Troop Carrier (ATC).....	16
3 Monitor.....	16
4 South Vietnam Tactical Zones.....	18
5 I Corps Map.....	20
6 Dong Ha River Security Group.....	22
7 Hue River Security Group Map.....	23
8 YFU Making the Transit to Hue, February 1968.....	47
9 Aerial View of Cua Viet Base.....	51
10 Cua Viet Base Ramp, March-April 1968.....	52
11 Cua Viet River Security Group Monitor.....	67
12 LCPL.....	70
13 PACV.....	71
14 MEDCAP Inspection.....	77
15 Cua Viet Base Barracks.....	85
16 Artillery Damage to Cua Viet Barracks.....	86
17 LT Hughes Inspecting NVA Sapper Gear.....	97

## CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION: ORIGINS OF THE VIETNAM BROWN WATER NAVY

*“It was a slow, dirty, sand-bar kind of war.”*

- LT John C. Roberts, USN 1965

On the hot and sweltering morning of July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1970 a brief turnover ceremony took place at a small and isolated U.S. Navy base in South Vietnam. As part of the new policy of Vietnamization, a term coined by President Richard Nixon, US forces were turning over responsibilities to their South Vietnamese counterparts. Naval Support Activity Tan My, a short distance to the south of the Demilitarized Zone, witnessed the official stand down of a small but vital component of the US Navy’s combat role in the Vietnam War. The ceremony marked the official disestablishment of Task Force Clearwater, a river patrol force that since its inception in February 1968 had been the US Navy’s primary inland presence in the 1<sup>st</sup> Corps Tactical Zone, the northernmost of the four zones that comprised South Vietnam. In a farewell message Vice Admiral Jerome King, the Commander US Naval Forces Vietnam (COMNAVFORV) congratulated Task Force Clearwater’s officers and men on the completion of their twenty-nine month mission. Exhorting them to take pride in their accomplishments, he ended by noting that they had trained their South Vietnamese counterparts to the degree that they “are now capable of taking over TF Clearwater’s combat responsibilities.”<sup>1</sup>

This message conveyed not only the hopes of Admiral King but also those of the Nixon administration and the US Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) that

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This thesis follows the style of *Chicago Manual of Style*.

<sup>1</sup> Clearwater Task Force Operations Summary 270413Z JUN 1970.

the armed forces of South Vietnam, armed to the teeth with American weaponry and supplies, would be able to defend their beleaguered country. Under the innovative and energetic leadership of Vice Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, who held the post of COMNAVFORV from late 1968 to early 1970, the diverse array of US Navy forces in South Vietnam had begun to train the South Vietnamese Navy (VNN) for this purpose. Following the January 1973 Paris Agreements the last remaining American military personnel left South Vietnam, many believing that the country could survive. In an April 1973 letter penned by the last COMNAVFORV, Rear Admiral James Wilson, to the Commander of the Pacific Fleet, the admiral was optimistic regarding the South Vietnamese level of training and preparation. He concluded that an, “appraisal of the VNN and VNMC (Vietnamese Marine Corps) find that both services are capable of successfully meeting the demands that are likely to be placed upon them in the immediate and near term future.”<sup>2</sup>

This effort failed. Despite the earnest hopes of millions and vast expenditures in money, material, and blood, the shattered remnants of an independent South Vietnam were crushed on April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1975. When deprived of direct American support, the U.S. trained military of South Vietnam could simply not withstand the undying determination of the communists to unify their country under the banner of “revolutionary war.” A creation of the West that knew few moments of peace since its creation, the Republic of South Vietnam passed into history overnight. For the United States, the war ended in an American defeat one US general and later historian declared as, “unprecedented in the

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<sup>2</sup> As quoted in Thomas J. Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets: Coastal and Riverine Warfare in Vietnam* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press), 356.

annals of military history,” and remains one of the America’s most bitter and enduring memories.<sup>3</sup>

Even before the fall of Saigon historians had expended copious amounts of time and energy analyzing America’s failure in Southeast Asia. A vast array of scholarship has also been directed towards the combat histories of the US Army and Marine Corps in Vietnam, with the battles of Ia Drang and Khe Sanh far better known than a decade ago. The destructive yet inconclusive ‘Rolling Thunder’ and Linebacker’ Operations that have come to symbolize the Air Force’s combat history in Vietnam have also received considerable scholarship. At the bottom of scholars’ priorities has been the role of the US Navy, obfuscated by the combination of America’s eventual defeat and its amorphous and ill-defined role in Southeast Asia.

Historical memory recalls a long and frustrating naval conflict. The war witnessed 2,511 sailors killed and over 10,000 wounded, as well as hundreds of aircraft, boats and river craft consumed both during the war and after the collapse of South Vietnam. Among many others it fell to a naval aviator, Lieutenant John McCain, to symbolize the privation and determination exhibited by American prisoners of war. These facts only tell a fraction of the story, however. In an essay summarizing the Navy’s experience during the Vietnam conflict, naval historian Edward Marolda contends that that the prevailing view of a long and futile struggle obscures the war’s ultimate impact on the service. Arguing against the traditional consensus he concluded that, “The Navy, however, emerged from that searing experience with a better

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<sup>3</sup> Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History 1946-1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), ix.

understanding of the nature of the conflict in the post-World War II era. In the operational realm, after a decade of warfare the naval service had honed a sharp-edged sword for projecting power ashore with carrier, naval gunfire, and amphibious forces; learned optimum approaches to seizing and maintaining control of open seas, coastal waters, and inland waterways.”<sup>4</sup>

In some ways American involvement in South Vietnam began and ended with the Navy, as the service was the key player in two pivotal events that bookended the conflict. The controversial August 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Incident involving the USS *Maddox* and USS *Turner Joy* became one of the catalysts for expanded “Americanization.” After the U.S. military endured fourteen years of war and nearly sixty thousand American casualties, the Navy spearheaded Operation Frequent Wind, the air and naval evacuation of over seven thousand military and civilian personnel in April 1975. The operation symbolized for many the perceived catastrophe of American involvement. The naval war in the years between these two events, however, has long been seen as a sideshow to the far more important battles on land and in the skies.

A few reasons for this trend are obvious. The American military role in Vietnam seems to offer little in the way of memorable naval campaigns, and in terms of sheer numbers, less than forty thousand officers and men, the Navy did not dominate as it had in past wars in the Pacific.<sup>5</sup> Geography and politics limited the role the Navy could play, and many of the best general histories of the war barely mention its involvement. For

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<sup>4</sup> Edward J. Marolda, “Crucible of War: The U.S. Navy and the Vietnam Experience,” Elmo Zumwalt Collection, Texas Tech Vietnam Archive, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Schreadley, “The Naval War in Vietnam, 1950-1970,” US Naval Institute *Proceedings*, 96:8 (August 1970), 23.

many sailors, however, the war was both memorable and relevant, and provided repeated opportunities for all of war's traditional privation and glory. Beyond blue water support in the form of carrier air strikes and a sea blockade the naval war in Vietnam was at its heart a river war. This was a gritty, brutal conflict marked by long periods of dull watch standing punctuated by intense firefights at close quarters, and in many ways would prove among the Navy's most challenging in its history.

The obstacles in South Vietnam proved daunting. A new brown water river force had to be built from the keel up, relying on tactics and methods that had lain dormant for decades. A key but understudied component of this effort was Task Force Clearwater, an improvised brown water fleet that—along with the maritime logistics campaign that it supported—would prove essential for the successful defense of South Vietnam's northernmost provinces and demonstrate the vital importance of inland naval power.

Beyond its important logistical role in some of the war's fiercest campaigns, the task force revealed what had long been understood, forgotten, and then relearned by the U.S. Navy, that whatever state controlled the inland waterways could exert power on land. Created in part to satisfy the ancient maxim of "keeping the supply lines open" the task force's role broadened over time. In the course of its existence the men and boats of Clearwater would provide not only the tools of war to those fighting on land but would also demonstrate considerable adaptability, courage, and the ability to provide key lessons for the future.

The U.S. Navy was no stranger to river warfare, having been involved in extensive brown water operations in the Mexican-American War, the U.S. Civil War, and on the long rivers of Asia a century before its involvement in Vietnam. As part of



the Asiatic Fleet in China from 1866 to 1942, the US Navy conducted river presence and peacekeeping patrols along the Yangtze River,<sup>6</sup> a mission later immortalized by Richard McKenna in his novel *The Sand Pebbles*.<sup>7</sup> Despite its extensive experience in brown water operations various constraints had limited its utility in overall US Navy strategy. In his history of brown water operations naval historian Blake Dunnavent concluded that while the U.S. Navy was the beneficiary of nearly two centuries of riverine warfare, from 1775 to 1970 the service relied on “informal doctrine” and never addressed the challenging need to create a more institutionalized operational guidelines for the conduct of ‘brown water’ warfare.

This informal doctrine could be likened to a set of vague instructions only opened in an emergency and then quickly forgotten. As the U.S. military became steadily more consumed by events in Southeast Asia the Navy had to reconstitute its brown water navy from this informal doctrine. Unlike previous wars, however, Dunnavent concluded that Vietnam was different, and this time a formal and codified canon of brown water strategy began to emerge, noting, “Events in the conflict in Southeast Asia marked a turning point in the emergence of a formalized riverine warfare tactical doctrine for the U.S. Navy.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> R. Blake Dunnavent. *Brown Water Warfare: The U.S. Navy in Riverine Warfare and the Emergence of a Tactical Doctrine, 1775-1970* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2003), 103-104. See also Kemp Tolley, *Yangtze Patrol: The U.S. Navy in China* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1971); Bernard D. Cole, *Gunboats and Marines: The United States Navy in China, 1945-1928* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1983); William R. Braisted, *Diplomats in Blue: U.S. Naval Officers in China, 1922-33* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Richard McKenna, *The Sand Pebbles*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

<sup>8</sup> Dunnavent, *Brown Water Warfare*, 110.

## **Bucklew and Vung Ro**

Much like the overall US military's effort in the Vietnam War, the establishment of Task Force Clearwater was an incremental process. From 1960 to 1964 the US Navy's mission in South Vietnam was in an advisory role, training the poorly equipped but expanding South Vietnamese Navy (VNN). Despite the desire by President John F. Kennedy to leave as small a footprint as possible, during this period the ties and organization between the US military and the South Vietnamese grew stronger with each passing year. With American leadership and material support the VNN expanded from around 3,000 personnel in June 1961 to 6,000 less than two years later.<sup>9</sup>

The U.S. military's primary command and control structure in South Vietnam, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), which would later come to embody South Vietnam's expanding American military presence, was established in February 1962. The US Navy's presence in country remained small, however, and at the end of 1963 fewer than eight hundred American naval officers and men were in stationed in country.<sup>10</sup> In 1964 a pair of events that many historians forever associate with American entry into the larger war occurred, but while on the strategic level the Gulf of Tonkin incident in August 1964 and the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong attack on Pleiku the following February have received the lion's share of scholarly attention, two less remembered events were far more influential in the development of a coherent maritime strategy in Southeast Asia.

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<sup>9</sup> Edward J. Marolda, *From Military Assistance to Combat, 1959-1965*, vol. 2 of *The United States Navy and the Vietnam Conflict* (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, 1984), 224.

<sup>10</sup> Richard L. Schreadley, "The Naval War in Vietnam, 1950-1970," in *Vietnam: The Naval Story*, ed. by Frank Uhlig (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1986), 279.

The first was the influential Bucklew Report. In January 1964 the head of the US Navy's Pacific Fleet, Admiral Harry Felt sent a fact-finding team headed by Captain Phillip Bucklew to South Vietnam. By this time infiltration of communist men and supplies into South Vietnam had become an acute and worsening problem, with more modern Chinese and Soviet weapons finding their way into the hands of Viet Cong and National Liberation Front cadres. A demanding taskmaster, Felt had grown weary of the optimistic reports then being generated and gave Bucklew simple instructions: get me the facts and get them fast. Felt wanted an honest assessment of not only the infiltration problem but also the overall military situation in South Vietnam.<sup>11</sup>

The full report was released a month later. The primary conclusions reinforced previous MACV and CINCPAC assessments that the main logistics route for the communists was through Laos on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and that maritime infiltration was a secondary means for moving personnel and logistics to the enormous Mekong Delta where they were distributed throughout South Vietnam.<sup>12</sup> The report expressed deep pessimism about the ability of the South Vietnamese to stop the growing infiltration on land or sea and concluded that the communists could move men and materiel with ease. Perhaps most importantly, the report concluded that any sea blockade was useless if the accompanying inland infiltration routes were not blocked as well.<sup>13</sup> Among the report's recommendations were the strengthening of the coastal patrols, better enforcement of curfews among all inland waterways and increased

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<sup>11</sup> David Lane Jones, "U.S. Riverine Warfare in Vietnam: A Critical Analysis of Strategy." PhD Dissertation (Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, 1999), 69.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>13</sup> Schreadley, "The Naval War in Vietnam, 1950-1970," 23.

involvement of US Navy assets in the region. Only one of the more peripheral recommendations, the inclusion of a representative of the VNN on the Joint General Staff, was accomplished quickly. Most of the report's other recommendations were not acted upon, despite the growing evidence of increased seaborne infiltration. For the remainder of 1964 little effort was made to alter American naval strategy.<sup>14</sup>

The second major event did much to change this policy. On February 16<sup>th</sup> 1965 a US Army UH-1 "Huey" helicopter pilot flying on a rescue mission off the coast of central South Vietnam noticed a camouflaged ship under power in Vung Ro Bay, an isolated indentation south of Qui Non. After the pilot communicated the vessel's description and location the local South Vietnamese coastal commander ordered it destroyed. A series of airstrikes disabled and all but sank the ship later identified as a trawler, but far more troublesome was the cache of weapons and equipment sighted onshore. A series of inept attempts by the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) and VNN to assault the site ensued, and it was not until February 24<sup>th</sup> and after overcoming heavy Viet Cong resistance that they secured the site.<sup>15</sup> To considerable consternation it was discovered that the offloaded cargo included over one hundred tons of Russian and Chinese made weaponry, ammunition, and medical supplies. Evidence from the ship proved its origin was in North Vietnam. After more than a year of downplaying seaborne infiltration the issue was no longer debatable for the US Navy. Vung Ro

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<sup>14</sup> Jones, "U.S. Riverine Warfare in Vietnam," 72-73.

<sup>15</sup> Schreadley, "The Naval War in Vietnam, 1950-1970," 281.

stunned many senior American naval officers, one of which remarked plainly that after more than a year of denial, “Sea infiltration into RVN is now proved.”<sup>16</sup>

In his history of the brown water navy in Vietnam, Thomas Cutler, a veteran of the force, argues that the importance of this event cannot be overestimated. “The Vung Ro Incident had done more than prove that North Vietnam was infiltrating supplies by sea: it cast serious doubt about the capability of the South Vietnamese to counter the infiltration.” Most importantly, Cutler contended, the “Vung Ro Incident had sparked a feeling of urgency” and ushered in a new era for the US Navy in Vietnam.<sup>17</sup> The incident led to a chain of events that culminated in the creation of Task Force Clearwater three years later.

Even before the end of the Vung Ro Incident the most senior officer in South Vietnam, Commander US Military Assistance Command Vietnam (COMUSMACV) General William Westmoreland undertook steps to address the infiltration problem. MACV organized a conference on the infiltration issue and on March 3<sup>rd</sup> Westmoreland met with naval officers and planners from CINCPAC. All agreed that a more robust and proactive naval effort should be undertaken, and armed with several of the Bucklew Report’s recommendations the conference formulated a plan to create a naval blockade force to “stop, board, search, and if necessary, capture and/or destroy any hostile suspicious craft or vessel found within South Vietnam’s territorial and contiguous zone waters.”<sup>18</sup> Known as Operation Market Time this surveillance blockade was soon established to stem the seaborne infiltration into the south. By April the new Task Force

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<sup>16</sup> Marolda, *The United States Navy and the Vietnam Conflict*, 514.

<sup>17</sup> Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 79.

<sup>18</sup> Schreadley, “The Naval War in Vietnam, 1950-1970,” 283.

115 numbered twenty-eight US Navy vessels patrolling the waters off South Vietnam, and over the next few months its organization and resources increased substantially.<sup>19</sup>

The importance of Market Time's establishment has often been obscured by another simultaneous and historic event. On the morning of March 8<sup>th</sup>, 1965 a US Navy amphibious task force landed the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 9<sup>th</sup> Marines on Red Beach near Danang in I Corps.<sup>20</sup> In September naval officers from CINCPAC, MACV, and several other commands met again in Saigon to discuss the progress of Market Time. Beyond an evaluation of the task force, the conference recommended the creation of a Mekong Delta patrol force numbering over one hundred boats. Assigned the title Task Force 116 and code named Game Warden, this force was established in December 1965. In many ways the father of Task Force Clearwater, Game Warden would for the first time place Navy men and boats deep within the rivers of the South Vietnam.<sup>21</sup> After more than four decades removed from such a mission, the US Navy would return to river patrol.

### **“More Different Types of Boats Than You Can Imagine”**

As the Navy prepared to implement Operation Game Warden one question became obvious: where were the river craft? There were none commissioned in the U.S. Navy in 1965. A River Patrol Craft (RPC) under development at the time was considered a failure due to its small size, limited armament, and unpopularity with

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<sup>19</sup> Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 79.

<sup>20</sup> Marolda, *The United States Navy and the Vietnam Conflict*, 514.

<sup>21</sup> Schreadley, “The Naval War in Vietnam, 1950-1970,” 287-88.

crews. Only thirty-four were built before the project was cancelled.<sup>22</sup> The US Navy's Bureau of Ships (BuShips) moved with remarkable speed and effectiveness, however, to find a suitable vessel and within a year of the establishment of Game Warden the brown water navy had so many different river craft that it prompted Rear Admiral Kenneth Veth, COMNAVFORV from April 1967 to September 1968, to note in a postwar interview that, "We had more different types of boats than you can imagine."<sup>23</sup>

One of these boats would in time come to symbolize the brown water navy in Vietnam. The iconic Patrol Boat, River (PBR) was almost a miracle of expediency (see Figure 1). An urgent request of the September 1965 Saigon meeting for a new generation patrol boat, the requirement called for a modest sized river craft capable of 25 knots but drawing less than eighteen inches of water. By good fortune BuShips had already been in talks with Hatteras Yacht Company of North Carolina, a civilian company whose inventory included a 28-foot fiberglass hulled cruiser with diesel engines and pump-jet propulsion system. Maneuverable, fast, and seaworthy the boat completed a set of sea trials and on November 29<sup>th</sup> 1965 BuShips awarded United Boatbuilders a contract for one hundred twenty boats based on Hatteras' design.<sup>24</sup> Thus was born the Mark I PBR. Lengthened to thirty-one feet and outfitted with ceramic armor and .50 caliber machine guns fore and aft, the PBR's fiberglass hull proved

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<sup>22</sup> Norman Friedman, *U.S. Small Combatants Including PT-Boats, Subchasers, and the Brown-Water Navy: An Illustrated Design History* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1987), 289.

<sup>23</sup> Admiral Kenneth Veth, Oral Interview, Texas Tech University Vietnam Archive, 1980.

<sup>24</sup> Friedman, *U.S. Small Combatants*, 312.

ideally suited to the heat, humidity and shallow waters of Southeast Asia.<sup>25</sup> With obvious affection, one brown water sailor described the beloved boat as, “Born in an atmosphere of urgency and tested under actual combat conditions, the PBR could have been a disaster. Instead it proved to be a fierce little combatant that accomplished its mission.”<sup>26</sup>



Figure 1. Mark II PBR (Patrol Boat, River). Source: Norman Friedman, *U.S. Small Combatants Including PT-Boats, Subchasers, and the Brown-Water Navy: An Illustrated Design History*, 320.

Cherished by brown water bluejackets for their speed, reliability and firepower, the PBRs become an icon of the US Navy’s presence in South Vietnam’s inland waterways. As the boats began to arrive in country they were divided into river divisions (RivDiv) and began patrolling the main branches of the Mekong Delta. Further reorganization of US Naval forces in the region soon followed. Befitting the

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<sup>25</sup> S. A. Swartztrauber, “River Patrol Relearned,” *US Navy Institute Proceedings* 96:5 (May 1970), 134.

<sup>26</sup> Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 158.



Navy's expanding role, Task Force 115 (Market Time) and 116 (Game Warden) along with numerous smaller commands were consolidated into a single command, US Naval Forces Vietnam. Headquartered in Saigon, Rear Admiral Norvell Ward assumed the title of COMNAVFORV on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1966.<sup>27</sup>

In the months that followed MACV discerned the need for an additional task force, one that could project sustained naval power inland and provide firepower sufficient for Westmoreland's strategy of 'search and destroy' missions. A 'riverine' task force, defined by its ability to use "water transport to move military equipment," i.e. men and supplies, into a river environment would be required.<sup>28</sup> Late in 1966 naval strategist Anthony Harrigan foresaw the need to employ such a riverine force in Vietnam. In a key essay he advocated a heavily armed river flotilla composed of three kinds of craft: a fast patrol boat for scouting and interdiction operations, a larger, more heavily armed support craft, and a throwback "monitor," a boat with armor and armament sufficient to modern counterinsurgency operations.<sup>29</sup> Such a force began its operational existence in September 1966 as River Assault Flotilla One, and in June 1967 was officially established as Task Force 117, the Mobile Riverine Force (MRF).

The MRF was a curious mix of old and new boats, reinvented tactics, and hybrid crews. Composed of modified troop transports and gunboats, the most common was the sixty foot Armored Troop Carrier (ATC), a modified version of the 1950's Landing Craft, Medium (LCM-6) amphibious assault craft, each of which could carry a full

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<sup>27</sup> Schreadley, "The Naval War in Vietnam, 1950-1970," 287.

<sup>28</sup> John W. Baker, Lee Dickson, "Army Forces in Riverine Operations," *Military Review* 42, no. 3 (August 1967): 942-46.

<sup>29</sup> Anthony Harrigan, "Inshore and River Warfare," *Orbis* 10, no. 3 (Fall 1966), 942-46.

platoon of combat troops (see Figure 2).<sup>30</sup> One petty officer described them as “an LCM that was converted, heavily converted, to an ironclad war type boat.”<sup>31</sup> The second craft was the Civil War inspired monitor envisioned by Harrigan. Also a converted LCM the monitor provided impressive firepower and protection, being equipped with heavy armor, a large mortar, 40 and 20mm cannons, and two .50 caliber machine guns (see Figure 3). A third craft was the fifty foot Assault Support Patrol Boat (ASPB). The only riverine boat to be designed from the keel up, the ASPB combined elements of a minesweeper and destroyer. Well armed and protected they endured a series of teething problems before proving their worth as minesweepers in both the Mekong Delta and I Corps.<sup>32</sup>

The manning of the MRF presented a problem. COMNAVFORV would have preferred to utilize Marines, but no significant units were available due to their assignment in I Corps. Agreeing that the MRF would be a combined operation, Army and Navy planners devised an innovative solution. The Army provided troops in the form of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, who after receiving specialized riverine training at Coronado, California, would be integrated with the Navy crews as they arrived in Southeast Asia.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Friedman, *U.S Small Combatants*, 330.

<sup>31</sup> Steve Sumrall, transcript of oral interview by Stephen Maxner, August 26, 2002, Oral History Project, Texas Tech Vietnam Archive, 9.

<sup>32</sup> W.C. Wells, “The Riverine Force in Action, 1966-1967,” *Naval Review* (1969): 60-61.

<sup>33</sup> Dunnavent, *Brown Water Warfare*, 117.

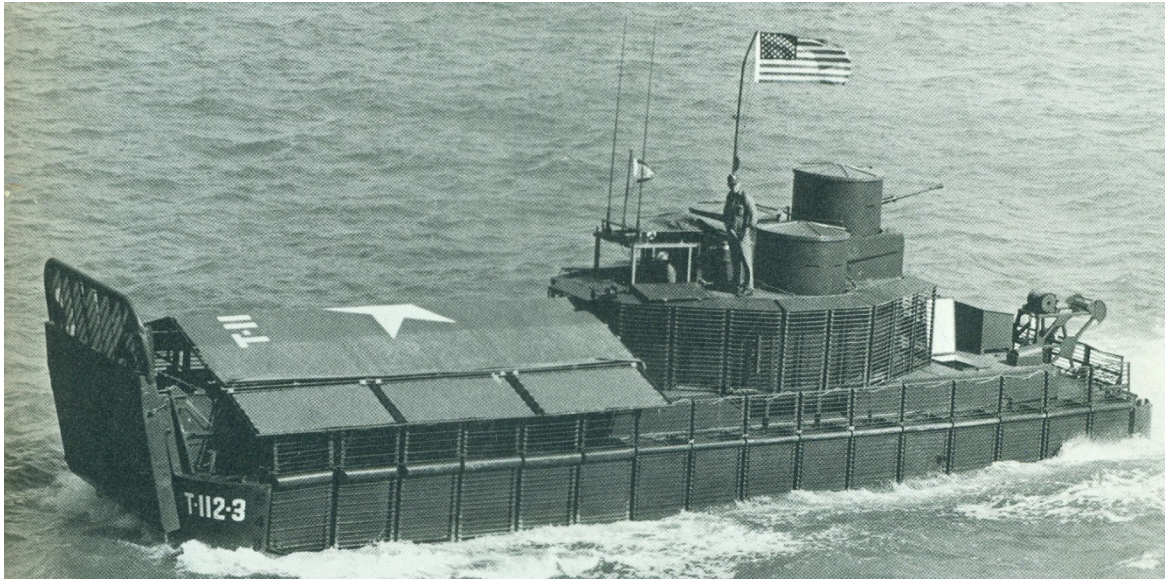


Figure 2. Armored Troop Carrier (ATC). Source: Norman Friedman, *U.S. Small Combatants Including PT-Boats, Subchasers, and the Brown-Water Navy: An Illustrated Design History*, 333.

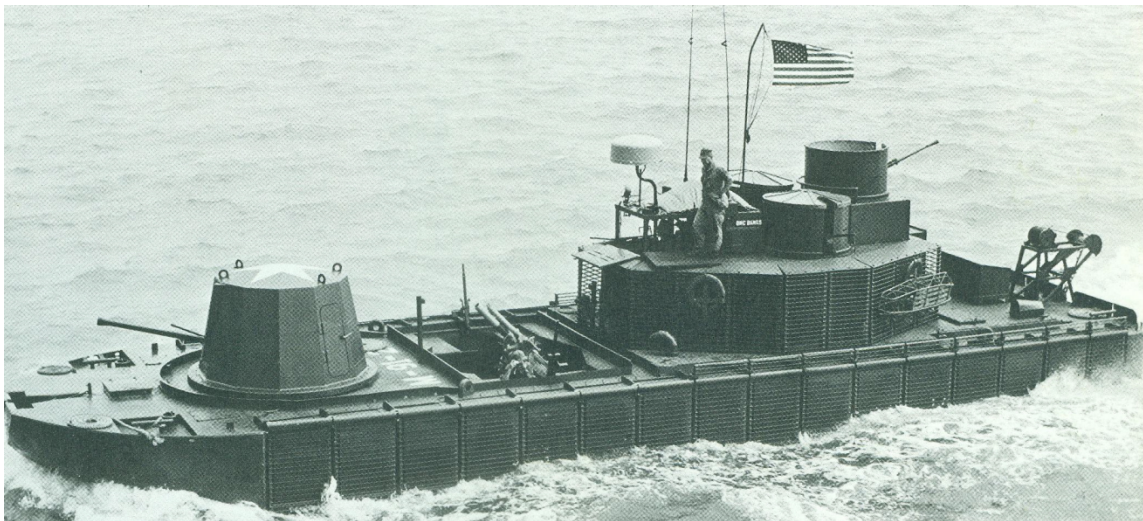


Figure 3. Monitor. Source: Norman Friedman, *U.S. Small Combatants Including PT-Boats, Subchasers, and the Brown-Water Navy: An Illustrated Design History*, 329.

With this unique combination of men and material the MRF came into existence. Following its final approval by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in July 1966, the

pieces came together with remarkable speed. By June 1967, fully outfitted with dozens of riverine craft and four thousand personnel, the MRF began a series of major operations in the Mekong Delta that would last throughout the year.<sup>34</sup> Naval historian Richard L. Schreadley argued that, “There was literally nowhere in the Delta, given navigable water, that the Riverine Assault Force could not go.”<sup>35</sup> With its advantages in mobility and firepower, the MRF added a powerful new dimension to US military operations in the delta. Beyond its military effectiveness, however, one can only estimate its initial effect on the dense Vietnamese population. Compared to the silent sampans that had plied the waters of the delta for centuries, the monstrous monitors and ATCs of the Mobile Riverine Force must have been a memorable and disturbing sight.

While the MRF was growing the sailors and PBRs of Game Warden also continued to expand the size and scope of their operations. After operating primarily from converted LSTs such as the USS *Benewah* (APB 35), anchored near the four river mouths of the Mekong Delta, on July 5<sup>th</sup> 1967 Game Warden’s primary land base was completed at Biun Thuy. Built seven miles upriver from Can Tho, this new base provided a secure and centrally located position for future river patrols.<sup>36</sup> In September a vital supporting element of Game Warden was established with the creation of HA(L)-3. Known as the Sea Wolves, this was a specially trained Navy squadron of 22 UH-1 “Huey” helicopters that provided air support to the RivDivs of Game Warden’, which by year’s end numbered well over hundred boats.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Wells, “The Riverine Force in Action,” 73.

<sup>35</sup> Schreadley, “The Naval War in Vietnam,” 292.

<sup>36</sup> Swartztrauber, “River Patrol Relearned,” 151.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.



Figure 4. South Vietnam Tactical Zones. Source: James H. Wilbanks. *The Tet Offensive: A Concise History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007, xix.

## **I Corps**

As the brown waters sailors steadily expanded the scope of their operations in the Delta a very different war was being fought a few hundred miles to the north. From the outset of their involvement in Vietnam the US military had to confront numerous legacies from the French colonial system. One of these was the division of South Vietnam into four military and political regions. These geographic zones were adopted by MACV and came to represent the American military command and control structure of South Vietnam (see Figure 4). IV Corps, the southernmost zone, comprised the sixteen provinces of the Mekong Delta and held almost two-thirds of South Vietnam's total population. The eleven provinces of III Corps included Saigon and its surrounding area, while II Corps consisted of the fabled Central Highlands and the Ia Drang Valley, site of the now famous battle that occurred in November 1965.<sup>38</sup>

Furthest to the north lay I Corps. Adjacent to the Demilitarized Zone and North Vietnam, the region comprised five provinces and some of the most formidable terrain in Indochina. A US Army report described the geography of its northernmost region as follows: "Excellent cover and concealment exist throughout most of the area of operations and provide both friendly and enemy forces numerous covered approaches to attack positions and protection from enemy fire. The heavy vegetation throughout the area of operations consists of a 60-foot-high jungle canopy, elephant grass, and dense areas of bamboo and vine thickets, which, combined with the steep slopes, create an

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<sup>38</sup> R.L Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea: The United States Navy in Vietnam* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1992), 76.

effective natural obstacle to cross-country movement and greatly reduce long-range observation.<sup>39</sup>

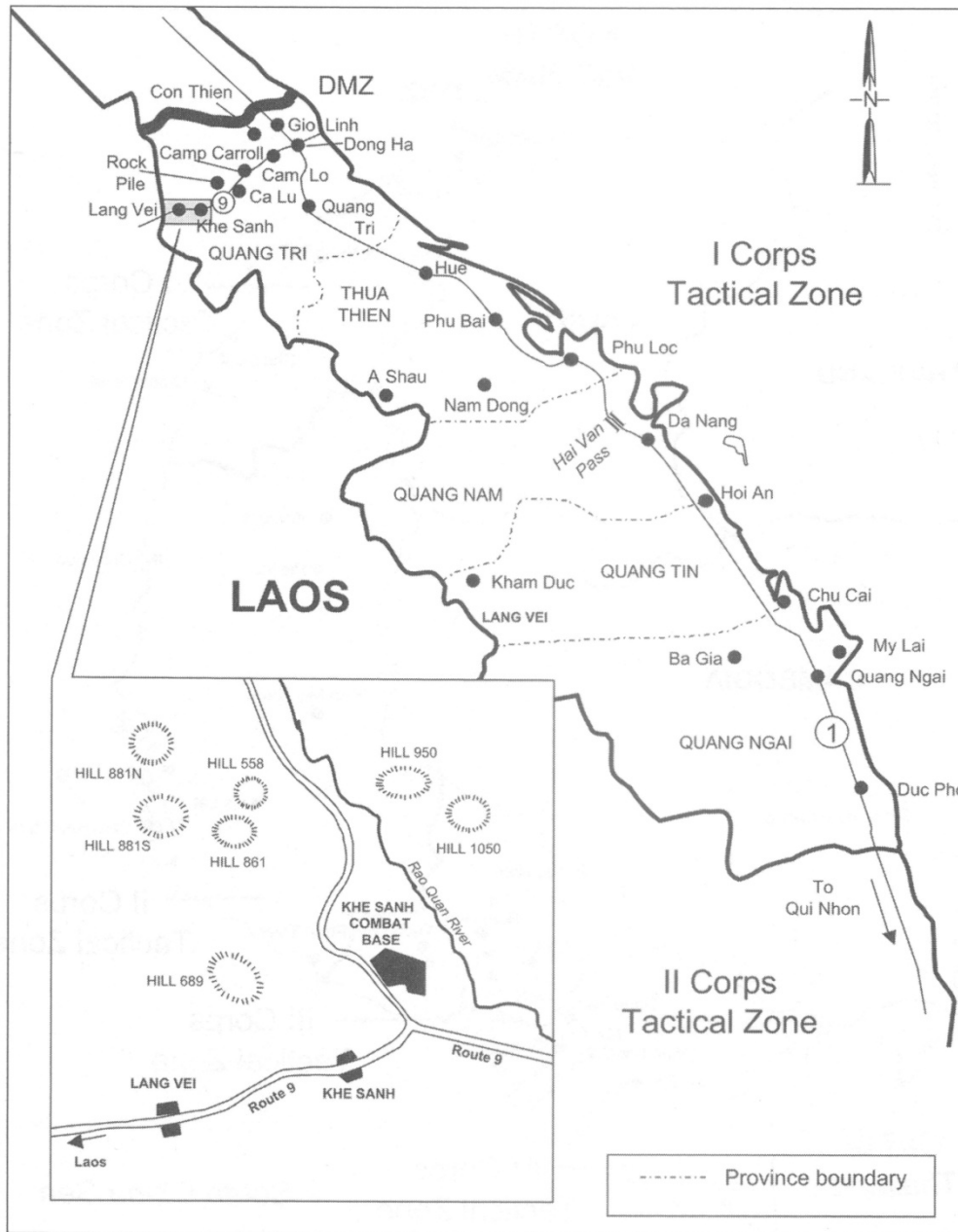


Figure 5. I Corps Map. Source: James H. Wilbanks. *The Tet Offensive: A Concise History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007, xx.

<sup>39</sup> Michael Archer. *A Patch of Ground: Khe Sanh Remembered* (Ashland, OR: Hellgate Press, 2004), 47.

This was I Corps terrain at its most elemental: rugged, nearly impassable, and offering limitless opportunities for cover and ambush. The two most northern provinces, Quang Tri and Thua Thien, were from a military viewpoint the most important due to their proximity to the DMZ and their shared border with Laos and North Vietnam (see Figure 5) In the words of an official Army history, the two provinces “presented a compact battlefield” of less than eighty miles from north to south and forty miles east to west.<sup>40</sup> Only two navigable rivers cut through its jungles and mountains. The Cua Viet, its mouth only a few miles from the DMZ, meandered west about three miles until making a sharp turn south. Here the river split, with the main river continuing south to the city of Quang Tri and a smaller tributary, the Bo Dieu, curving southwest to the strategic town of Dong Ha, the site of a key Marine Corps airfield and home of headquarters of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Division (see Figure 6).

Farther south the Huong Giang, better known as the Perfume River for the scent of nearby lotus blossoms, passed through the ancient and sacred provincial capital of Hue, home to a population of 140,000.<sup>41</sup> The Perfume River was both broad and fairly deep, but the Cua Viet was shallow, narrow, and barely navigable, with shoals and strong currents creating a challenge for navigation (see Figure 7). For ground transportation the two provinces relied on Route 9, a single east-west road that ran from Dong Ha to Laos and the coastal highway, Route 1, which climbs up hair-pin switchbacks from the DMZ to Hue and through the notorious Hai Van Pass before

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<sup>40</sup> Erik Villard, *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles of Quang Tri City and Hue* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 2008), 2.

<sup>41</sup> Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 275.



descending to the coast at Danang, on through Hoi An, and finally to Saigon far to the south.<sup>42</sup>

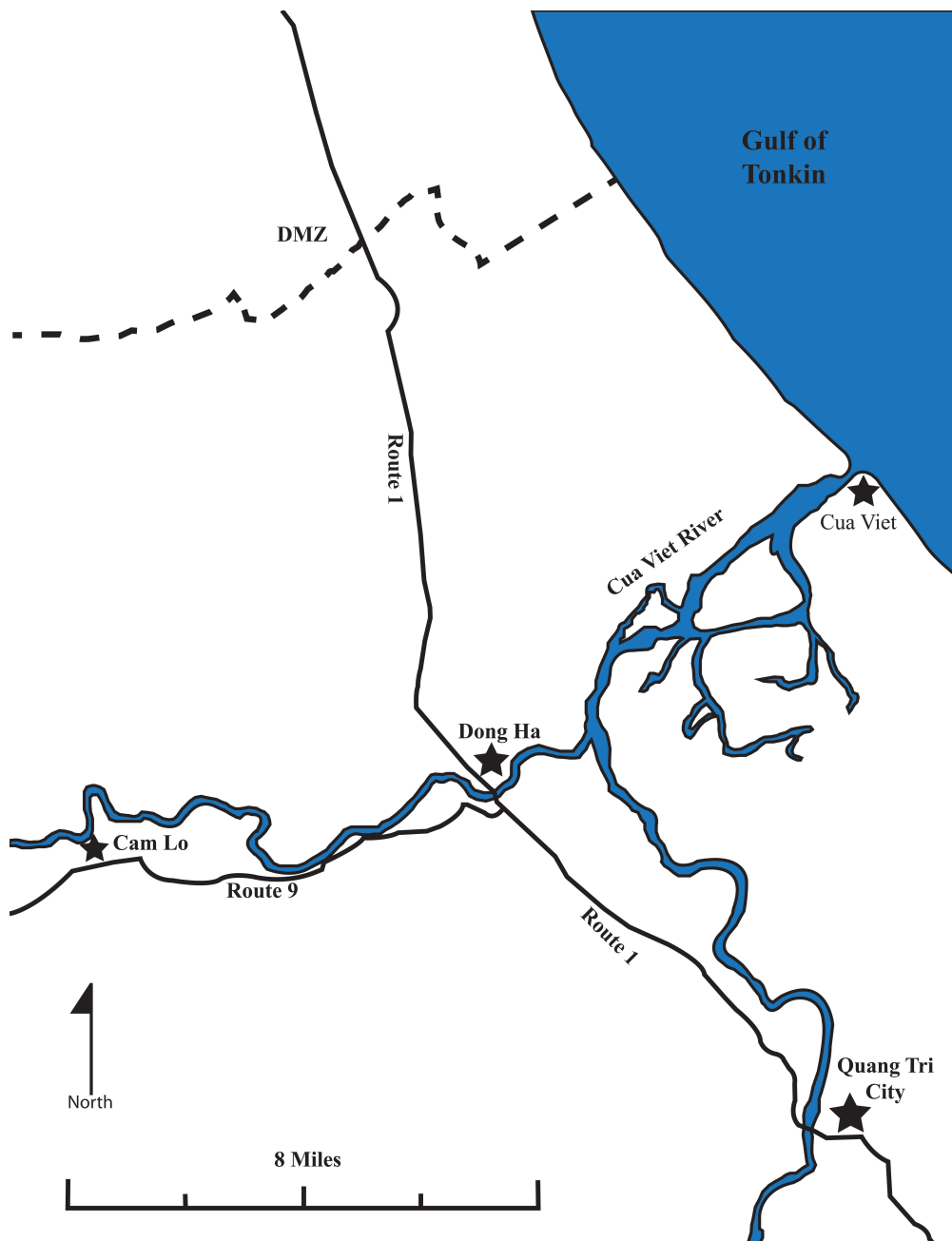


Figure 6. Dong Ha River Security Group. Source: Author

<sup>42</sup> Villard, *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles of Quang Tri and Hue*, 4.

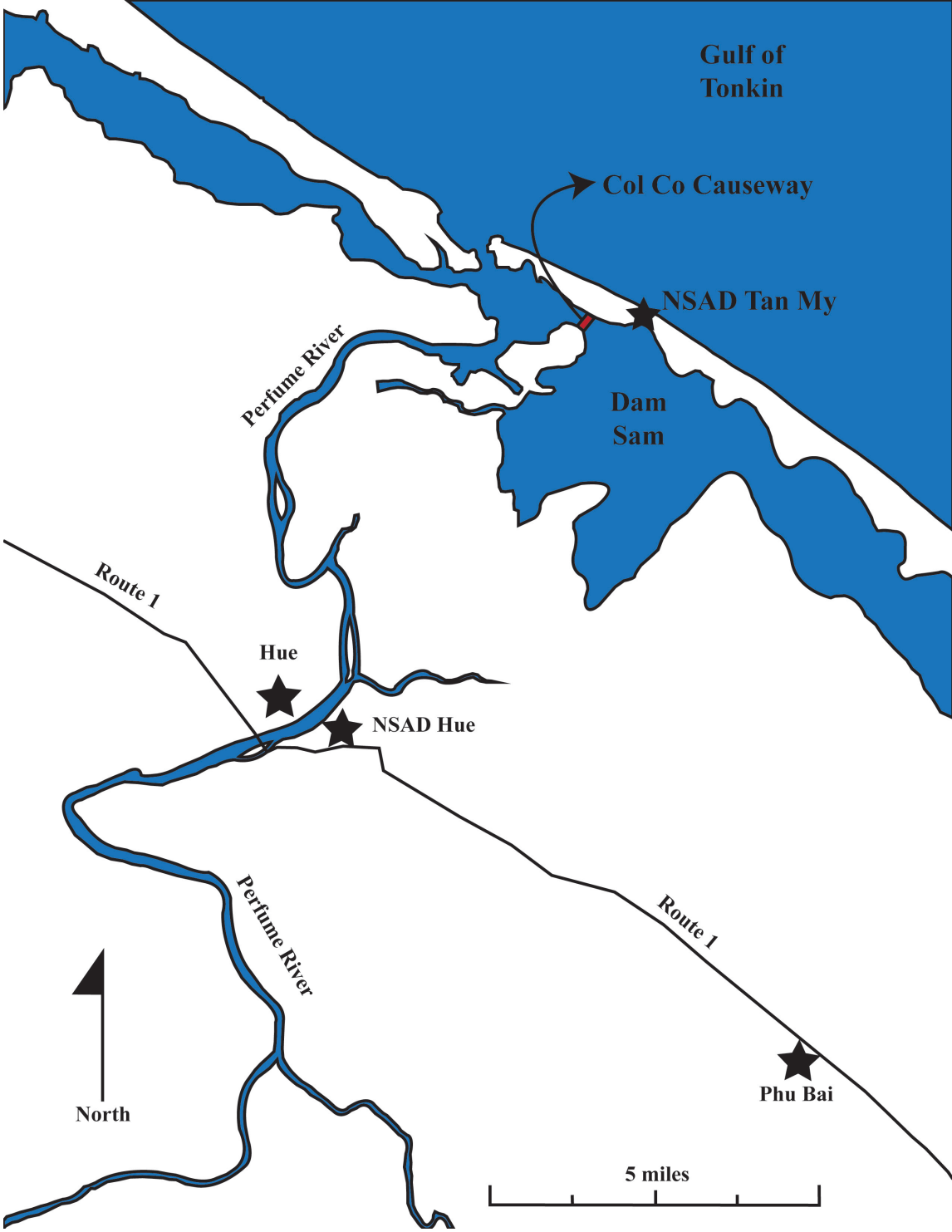


Figure 7. Hue River Security Group. Source: Author.

Naval Support Activity Danang, less than sixty miles south of Hue, was the center of US Navy operations in I Corps. Sharing with NSA Saigon the distinction of the “end terminus of the world’s longest supply chain,” this critical port grew exponentially from its formal establishment on October 15<sup>th</sup>, 1965, to become one of the world’s largest naval logistics complexes. In 1967 the supply depot square footage of the base measured 33,000 and the budget consisted of less than \$41 million, yet only two years later Danang had grown to over 900,000 square feet of depot space and a budget of \$102 million.<sup>43</sup> By that same year the base was supported by over eight thousand Navy personnel and handled up to one million tons of cargo every three months.<sup>44</sup> Largely the product of the sweat and hard work of U.S. Navy Seabees and civilian engineers, the expansion of Danang represented one of the most significant engineering accomplishments of the war.

The lifeblood of I Corps ran through Danang, as fully ninety percent of all logistics in the I Corps provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien came in through the port.<sup>45</sup> Yet as impressive as the establishment and expansion of the port undoubtedly were, the truly remarkable logistics feat was done after the material had arrived in the port itself. To support Marine and Army units ravenous for ammunition and supplies in I Corps, the Navy relied on a fleet of old but reliable logistic transports, many of which were mothballed but serviceable veterans of WWII and Korea.

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<sup>43</sup> Frank Collins, “Maritime Support of the Campaign in I Corps,” in *Vietnam: The Naval Story*, ed. by Frank Uhlig (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1986), 207.

<sup>44</sup> Department of the Navy, *US Navy Vietnam Welcome Pamphlet* (Washington, DC: June 25, 1968), 23-24.

<sup>45</sup> S. A. Schwartztrauber, “River Patrol Relearned,” in *Vietnam: The Naval Story*, ed. by Frank Uhlig (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1986), 375.

The Navy had begun assuming the responsibility of supplying ground forces in I Corps during spring and summer of 1966. By this time logistics craft such as Landing Craft, Utility (LCU) and YFUs (Harbor Utility Craft) had begun making the transit down the Perfume River, offloading their cargo at a specially constructed ramp near the University of Hue. After learning that LCUs could navigate the silt filled Cua Viet River, MACV ordered NSA Da Dang to operate the route from Danang to the growing Marine base at Dong Ha indefinitely.<sup>46</sup> From this point on a fleet of underpowered but sturdy LCUs and YFUs sailed north almost daily to offload their critical ammunition and logistical supplies upriver, which by January 1968 amounted to over 400,000 short tons to the I Corps inland ports of Hue and Dong Ha.<sup>47</sup> After a shortage of LCUs developed in the fall of 1966 the mouth of the Cua Viet was dredged to enable the larger and deeper draft LSTs (Landing Ship, Tank) craft to navigate the tricky and shallow river. During this same period a series of supporting logistical commands were established at strategic points along both of the major rivers, most notably at the mouth of the Cua Viet and at Tan My astride the entrance of the Perfume River.

The difficulty of the transit from Danang to Dong Ha cannot be over emphasized. Unprotected, underpowered and often loaded with explosive cargo, the slow and aging logistics craft made the ninety-mile journey through often-treacherous weather. The monsoon season brought fifteen-foot swells and pounding rain, stretching the transit time to Dong Ha from ten to up to thirty-six hours.<sup>48</sup> While shorter and less risky, the

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<sup>46</sup> Collins, "Maritime Support of the Campaigns in I Corps," 205.

<sup>47</sup> COMNAVFORV Monthly Historical Summary January 1968 (Saigon: February 1968), 73.

<sup>48</sup> Collins, "Maritime Support of the Campaign in I Corps," 205.

Danang-Hue transit was similarly difficult. Richard Schreadley, a U.S. Navy officer in Vietnam and veteran of the brown water navy, later one of its most notable historians provided perhaps the finest tribute to these sailors, noting, “Some of the unsung heroes of this war are the captains who guided low-powered and frequently age-weakened ships and craft through the treacherous white water of the Cua Viet inlet, and other equally hazardous channels in northern I Corps.”<sup>49</sup>

This intricate and complex naval logistics system proved essential for I Corps. After the initial landing of two Marine battalions in March 1965 the American ground presence in the zone continued to swell, and with it came enormous supply needs. By June 1965 the Marines in I Corps numbered seven battalions and were reorganized into the III Marine Amphibious Force.<sup>50</sup> After several major and brutal operations against the growing NVA presence in I Corps, the Marines were reinforced in October 1966 by the first Army combat units, most importantly the 108<sup>th</sup> Artillery Group, equipped with some of the most modern and powerful weaponry in the US arsenal.<sup>51</sup> In February 1967 the area was further reinforced with the arrival of elements of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne and 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Divisions.<sup>52</sup>

The American military was far from alone in reinforcing I Corps. After years of infiltration through Laos and the DMZ the NVA forces in I Corps had also grown far stronger, and by the close of 1967 were estimated to number 30,000 NVA regulars and

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<sup>49</sup> Schreadley, “The Naval War in Vietnam,” 293.

<sup>50</sup> Willard Pearson, *The War in the Northern Provinces, 1966-1968* (Washington, DC: Vietnam Studies, Department of the Army, 1975), 6.

<sup>51</sup> Villard, *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles of Quang Tri City and Hue*, 5.

<sup>52</sup> Pearson, *The War in the Northern Provinces, 1966-1968*, 13.

over 20,000 guerillas.<sup>53</sup> The situation in I Corps had in many ways come to resemble that of Guadalcanal in 1942, a race to resupply and reinforce troops fighting on a critical piece of ground. As a consequence two well-trained and equipped military juggernauts engaged each other on the “compact battlefield” of northern I Corps, which had become a very crowded place indeed.

During these two years Navy brown water units played no major role in I Corps. The Mekong Delta and IV Corps was the priority for COMNAVFORV, and while the security of Danang and logistics supply were the Navy priorities in I Corps, little impetus existed to provide much in the way of protection for the logistics craft. With few PBRs or other assets to spare and a lack of concerted opposition, COMNAVFORV saw little need to escort the logistics craft on their journey. The sole exception to this strategy was Operation Green Wave. A trial to determine if the PBRs could operate successfully in the narrow and poorly charted rivers of I Corps, Green Wave began in late September 1967 when the converted LST (Landing Ship Tank) USS *Hunterdon County* and her ten onboard PBRs began conducting operations in Cua Hai Bay, eighteen miles south of Danang. Patrolling the narrow Cua Dai River, the patrol boat crews encountered both considerable NVA resistance and persistent shoal water, as groundings in the unfamiliar river were common. After numerous engagements with communist forces ashore but with little for the PBR crews to show for their efforts, the operation was cancelled on October 7<sup>th</sup>. A cautious and half-hearted operation, Green

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<sup>53</sup> Villard, *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles of Quang Tri City and Hue*, 5.

Wave demonstrated that without better navigational knowledge and logistical support, dominating the rivers of I Corps with Navy patrol craft would be problematic.<sup>54</sup>

As 1967 drew to a close the Mekong Delta was a familiar watery battlefield to the men of Game Warden and the MRF. Up and down South Vietnam, despite the vast numbers of US military men and weapons assembled and the optimistic projections of Westmoreland, American forces were stuck in an apparent stalemate. The sole river incursion into I Corps had proven inconclusive, but MACV's decision to increase the strength of American personnel in the northern provinces meant that the logistics requirements for the region would only increase. The need to establish Task Force Clearwater would soon become imminent.

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<sup>54</sup> Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 273-74.

## CHAPTER II

## THE RIVER WAR MOVES NORTH

*“Nine times out of ten an army has been destroyed  
because its supply lines have been severed.”*  
- General Douglas MacArthur, August 23rd, 1950

As 1967 ended the American military situation in South Vietnam appeared bleak and discouraging to those in power in Washington. After a long running series of disagreements with the Johnson Administration Robert McNamara resigned as Secretary of Defense in November 1967.<sup>55</sup> The president himself, despite proclaiming full support for the war that same month, was also losing confidence. Fierce disagreements about war strategy roiled the relationship between the Johnson Administration and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, a situation that had worsened since 1965 and encouraged U.S. Army general and Vietnam war historian Phillip Davidson to remark that, “An observer, even now, wonders where, in 1965-66, the real war was being fought – in the jungles and skies of South Vietnam or in the corridors of the Pentagon.”<sup>56</sup>

General William Westmoreland’s strategy of attrition and limited war through search and destroy ground missions and sustained air offensives such as Operation *Rolling Thunder* had failed to achieve its stated goals by any objective measure.<sup>57</sup> The top ranking U.S. military officer in South Vietnam had hoped to utilize American superior firepower and mobility to his decisive advantage and grind his enemy down.

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<sup>55</sup> See Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

<sup>56</sup> Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History 1946-1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 390.

<sup>57</sup> Operation Rolling Thunder began on March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1965, continuing until November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1968 when the massive and intra-service aerial offensive was finally terminated.



By the close of 1967 his window of opportunity was closing, however, and the strategic limitations of further escalation threatened. Fearful of Chinese and Soviet intervention, restrained by the warfighting limitations of a democracy and his own president, and faced with an enemy that was adept at fighting a guerilla war, Westmoreland possessed limited options. Unlike most previous conflicts traditional American military advantages of firepower, mobility and supporting arms had not proven effective in Southeast Asia, and the United States had become trapped in an indeterminate war of attrition with no end in sight.

With no viable options that could pass political approval Westmoreland remained committed to his current strategy. Meanwhile, under the tightest secrecy the North Vietnamese leadership in Hanoi began to develop a new counter strategy. Discouraged by limited but painful American gains in 1966-67, the North Vietnamese Politburo and General Staff came to believe that only a massive and decisive thrust could shake American confidence, destabilize the RVN government, and accelerate their final victory. As a consequence a bold and aggressive plan was formed. The strategy that has become known to history as the Tet Offensive began to take shape as early as April of 1967. In the official North Vietnamese history of the war the strategy that emerged, “called for us to concentrate our military and political forces to launch a simultaneous surprise attack against the enemy’s weakest point: his urban areas.”<sup>58</sup> Though an exact record of their deliberations continues to elude historians, in December 1967 the DRV

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<sup>58</sup> As quoted in Pribbenow, Merle L., trans., *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People’s Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 207.

Politburo issued a resolution for the approval of the general offensive.<sup>59</sup> Pushed forward by several influential party leaders the *Tong Cong Kich-Tong Khoi Nghia* (General Offensive-General Uprising) emerged as a risky but powerful gamble to win the war.<sup>60</sup>

Many details about the General Offensive continue to puzzle historians. Despite considerable scholarship on the subject much of the grand strategy for the offensive remains enigmatic, in large part due to the heavy price paid in blood by the North Vietnamese and various revisionist interpretations among generals and historians. Most historical evidence reveals that the offensive involved three distinct phases, though considerable controversy remains over their precise timing and objectives.<sup>61</sup> The first phase was a series of border attacks launched in the fall of 1967, while the second was the Tet Offensive itself in January 1968. The third phase, planned for April 1968, would come to be known as mini-Tet by the Americans.<sup>62</sup> The cumulative effect of the three-phase strategy was designed to incite a Viet Cong uprising in South Vietnam and cripple American military morale, enabling a negotiated settlement favorable to the North and enabling the final reunification of Vietnam. By July most of the plans for the offensive had been finalized, and over the next six months the North Vietnamese reinforced the National Liberation Front and Vietcong cadres with significant numbers of men and

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<sup>59</sup> William J. Duiker, *Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam* (New York: MacGraw-Hill Publishing, 1995), 209. Also see Lien-Hang Nguyen, "The War Politburo: North Vietnam's Diplomatic and Political Road to the Tet Offensive," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1, no. 1-2 (Fall 2006).

<sup>60</sup> James H. Wilbanks, *The Tet Offensive: A Concise History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 11.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>62</sup> Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 553-54.

supplies.<sup>63</sup> The Viet Cong's numbers in South Vietnam grew from 204,000 to nearly 280,000, with a corresponding increase in infantry weapons and explosives.<sup>64</sup>

Vietnam War scholar James H. Wilbanks, author of *The Tet Offensive: A Concise History*, argues in his study that the subsequent offensive went far beyond wresting the initiative away from the United States. Instead he contends that, "The Tet Offensive of 1968 was the pivotal event of the long Vietnam War."<sup>65</sup> Wartime journalist Don Oberdorfer echoed this view in his oft quoted study of the offensive, writing that, "The Tet Offensive of 1968 was the turning point of the U.S. war in Vietnam."<sup>66</sup> Most scholars of the Vietnam War concur and argue that Tet marks a precise and immovable dividing line, one that separates the Vietnam War into two distinct stages. The first were the years (1965-67) in which some form of military victory was still possible for the United States. The military situation was stalemated, but Westmoreland nevertheless possessed the time and resources to finish the war on acceptable terms. Once the war had entered its post-Tet offensive phase, however, this outcome no longer seemed feasible. Politically, military, and socially too much had become weighted in opposition

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<sup>63</sup> The National Liberation Front (NLF), formed in December 1960, was the political organization in South Vietnam founded by a mixture of Vietminh officials and various communist leaders dedicated to the eventual reunification of Vietnam under a communist government. Over time its guerilla fighters and insurgent personnel became popularly known as *Viet Cong*, or "Vietnamese Communists." Its relationship with the DRV Communist Party remains controversial, but during the Vietnam War NLF leaders attempted to minimize the public perception that their organization was controlled by Hanoi. Source: William J. Duiker, *Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam*, 132-33. For the best analysis of the NLF's organization see Douglas Pike, *Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1966).

<sup>64</sup> Pribbenow, *Victory in Vietnam*, 211.

<sup>65</sup> Wilbanks, *The Tet Offensive: A Concise History*, xv.

<sup>66</sup> Don Oberdorfer. *Tet! The Turning Point in the Vietnam War* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press 2011), xi.

to the American war effort. For the average U.S. Marine, soldier or sailor in I Corps, however, any thoughts about the politics of the war soon took a backseat to surviving the ensuing offensive.

### **Khe Sanh**

Before the launch of Phase II of the offensive much of MACV's attention in the northern provinces was focused on a small U.S. Marine firebase about seven miles east of the Laotian border. Khe Sanh, a former French base and the site of a U.S. military presence since 1962, was the home of the 5,000 man 26<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment, augmented by the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 9<sup>th</sup> Marines, an ARVN Ranger Battalion, and the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 13<sup>th</sup> Marine Artillery.<sup>67</sup> The base was isolated from ground transportation except for a single road leading up from Route 9, plagued by terrible weather and equipped with only a single narrow landing strip. Located on a plateau surrounded by several hills, which would become of critical importance to both sides, Khe Sanh had by January 1968 become a remote island in a sea increasingly surrounded by PAVN troops. These facts would set the stage for what would become among the most storied battles in the U.S. Marines history and one of the most controversial of the Vietnam War.

In the closing months of 1967 two experienced NVA infantry divisions numbering between 20,000 and 25,000 men had established positions around Khe Sanh. Two additional under strength NVA divisions were kept in reserve just across the border, for a combined total of almost 40,000 personnel.<sup>68</sup> Why had the NVA devoted

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<sup>67</sup> Summers, *Historical Atlas of the Vietnam War*, 138.

<sup>68</sup> Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 552.

so much manpower to overwhelm a single base so far from the urban centers of South Vietnam? Despite considerable research on Khe Sanh much of the North's plan remains inscrutable even today. In his history of the famous siege Vietnam War scholar John Prados notes that, "Hanoi's original intentions are not knowable now and may never be."<sup>69</sup> From the best modern evidence available it appears that Giap's original plan was to use the assault on the base as a test case to ascertain America's response to the ensuing offensive, stymie any attempt by the Americans to invade Laos, and if possible capture the base and deliver a crushing blow to American morale. As intelligence reports revealed the buildup of North Vietnamese forces an increasingly obsessed President Johnson told his cabinet that, "I don't want any damn (sic) Dienbinphoo."<sup>70</sup> The specter of a repeat of Dien Bien Phu would become a haunting theme to many Americans, one that Giap hoped to exploit.<sup>71</sup>

In the early morning hours of January 21<sup>st</sup> the surrounding NVA divisions opened the siege with an intense mortar and rocket barrage. One Marine freshly arrived to the base described the bombardment in his memoirs, writing, "The deafening roar in the center of a pitched battle nearly defies description: a seamless earsplitting blend of chattering bursts of semi-automatic rifles, the oscillating knock of machine guns, teeth-

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<sup>69</sup> John Prados and Ray Stubbe, *Valley of Decision: The Siege of Khe Sanh* (Boston: Houghlin Mifflin, 1991), 452.

<sup>70</sup> As quoted in James S. Olson, Randy Roberts. *Where the Domino Fell: America and Vietnam, 1945-2004*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Brandywine Press, 2004), 182.

<sup>71</sup> Giap's precise intentions for Khe Sanh are still debated by military historians. Various interpretations of his strategy are that the siege was a costly diversion, an opportunity to emulate Dien Bien Phu, or something in between. Most of the more recent assessments support a flexible strategy in which after enduring devastating U.S. airstrikes and committing a series of tactical errors, Giap decided to withdraw and cut his losses. The general assessment provided here is based upon the work of historians John Prados, John Walker, Phillip Davidson, and others.

jarring detonations of rocket-propelled grenades, and the deep, reverberating thump of exploding mortar shells.”<sup>72</sup> One particularly accurate mortar round hit the main ammunition dump, detonating over 1500 tons of ordnance in a vast explosion. A subsequent shortage of ammunition would prove crucial in the months to come.<sup>73</sup>

For the next seventy-seven days the Marines and ARVN Rangers endured a hellish siege. Mortar and artillery rounds were a constant threat but deep in the bunkers huge rats were even more ubiquitous. Cut off, isolated and under constant attack, the defenders of Khe Sanh refused to yield any ground, and supported by devastating artillery and aerial bombardment consistently beat back every assault. The siege of Khe Sanh has inspired a large volume of historical literature as well as controversy, and historians continue to debate the merits of the siege and the relative intentions of both sides. A full account of the siege and its various interpretations are beyond the boundaries of this study but a brief analysis is useful. Many historians accuse both Giap and Westmoreland of significant errors of judgment during the siege. John Prados gives credit to the NVA and Giap for flexibility but acknowledges that the North Vietnamese suffered greatly with little to show for it, and like many others ponders why the Marines’ vulnerable water supply was never targeted.<sup>74</sup>

Others Americans argue that Westmoreland wasted valuable time and manpower that could have been better employed elsewhere. General Victor Krulak, the head of the Pacific Fleet Marine Force and a staunch opponent of Westmoreland’s search and destroy strategy, noted that the siege had pinned down enormous U.S. personnel and

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<sup>72</sup> As quoted in John Archer, *A Patch of Ground*, 84.

<sup>73</sup> John Walker. “77 Days Under Fire at Khe Sanh,” *Military Heritage* 6:6 (2005): 32-40.

<sup>74</sup> Prados, *Valley of Decision*, 452.

resources while the NLF and Vietcong executed their larger offensive. Krulak had long advocated a more flexible plan he referred to as the “spreading inkblot” strategy that limited the establishment of isolated and vulnerable outposts.<sup>75</sup> As to the high NVA casualties Krulak noted bitterly that, “Their only investment was blood, to which they assigned a low importance. And when it was over, nothing had changed.”<sup>76</sup>

Philip Davidson, in marked contrast to General Krulak argued in *Vietnam at War* that instead of tying the hands of American units, the 6,000 Marines and ARVN Rangers at Khe Sanh immobilized 32,000 to 40,000 of *Giap*’s best troops. Yet in January 1968 Westmoreland did not have the benefit of hindsight. He viewed Khe Sanh as a rare opportunity to devastate exposed NVA troops with overwhelming firepower. Popular attention has often focused on the spectacular B-52 Arclight missions that decimated the NVA positions and turned the surrounding countryside into a lifeless crater-filled landscape. Yet to keep the Marines fighting Westmoreland needed logistical support in the form of airlift. As the siege continued it was calculated that the combined five battalions at the base would require 185 short tons every day, and with the base surrounded ground resupply via Route 9 was not possible.<sup>77</sup> Beyond the Marines’ stoic defense of the base under such adverse conditions, the airlift of men and material into Khe Sanh was perhaps its most impressive aspect.

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<sup>75</sup> For a full account of General Krulak’s views on Marine Corps strategy in South Vietnam see Victor H. Krulak, *First to Fight: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps* (Annapolis, MD: US Naval Institute Press, 1999).

<sup>76</sup> As quoted in John Walker, “77 Days Under Fire at Khe Sanh,” 81.

<sup>77</sup> Claudius Watts, “Aerial Resupply for Khe Sanh,” *Military Review* 52, no.12 (December 1972): 83.

During the seventy-seven day siege Air Force C-130's and C-123 transports landed or air dropped 12,430 tons of cargo to the base.<sup>78</sup> Marine Corps aviation utilized their CH-46 and UH-34 helicopters to move 4661 tons of ammunition and supplies directly to the hills surrounding Khe Sanh in a remarkable feat of aerial resupply. In an article written in 1972 a US Air Force major noted with considerable professional pride that the combined use of both aerial bombardment and airlift was the key to the siege. "There is no doubt that air power played a decisive role in the defense of Khe Sanh. But other authorities are quick to point out that the action at Khe Sanh demonstrated not only the epitome of joint action, but joint combined action. The US Marine Corps, the US Air Force, the various support agencies, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, and the US Army each contributed to the effort."<sup>79</sup>

Nowhere in this list of accolades is there any mention of the U.S. Navy's role in the siege. From a ground perspective the Navy did have little invested in Khe Sanh. Supporting the Marines were a detachment of Navy doctors and corpsmen, a handful of chaplains, and one Naval Gunfire Liaison Officer, responsible for coordinating artillery and naval air support.<sup>80</sup> Sea power, however, did play a role in Khe Sanh, though one not as visually impressive as that of the Marine riflemen or Air Force crews. At the most basic level the airlift of Khe Sanh would not have been possible without U.S. Navy control of the Cua Viet River. No airlift could have been implemented without the availability of the seaborne logistics traffic from Danang to Dong Ha, site of the primary

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<sup>78</sup> Burl W. McLaughlin, "Khe Sanh: Keeping an Outpost Alive," *Air University Review* 20, no. 1 (1968): 67.

<sup>79</sup> Watts, "Aerial Resupply for Khe Sanh," 79.

<sup>80</sup> Bernard D. Cole, "A Noglow in Vietnam, 1968: Air Power at the Battle of Khe Sanh," *The Journal of Military History* 64, no. 2 (January 2000): 143.



staging ground for the Air Force and Marine corps air transports and a short flight to the encircled base.

The escalation of the brown water navy in I Corps was a gradual process, much like the overall Navy experience in South Vietnam. Like the Air Force, which developed several innovative methods to supply Khe Sanh in the face of opposing ground fire and poor visibility, the Navy also adapted to its new mission in I Corps. And like so much else in the Vietnam War, the siege of an isolated base and the subsequent Tet Offensive changed the role of the brown water navy in the northern provinces and expanded its reach and responsibilities far beyond any originally intended.

### **The Tet Offensive**

For his 1968 New Year radio greeting Ho Chi Minh declared from Hanoi that, “This springtime certainly will be more joyous than all such previous seasons, for news of victories will come from all parts of the country. North and South, our people and our soldiers will compete in the anti-American struggle. Forward we go, and total victory will be ours.”<sup>81</sup> Around 3am on January 31<sup>st</sup> over eighty thousand Communist troops launched a series of coordinated attacks on most of South Vietnam’s cities and provincial capitals. Although at various levels MACV was expecting some form of attack, the scale and ferocity of the offensive proved to be an enormous shock.<sup>82</sup>

Far to the north in I Corps the majority of the attacks were concentrated on two urban centers, Quang Tri City and Hue. Of limited strategic and economic importance

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<sup>81</sup> Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 131-32.

<sup>82</sup> Wilbanks, *The Tet Offensive*, 30-31.

Quang Tri was located less than thirty miles from the DMZ, and morning of January 31<sup>st</sup> three NVA battalions and supporting sapper teams began their assault. In a rare piece of good fortune, U.S. and ARVN intelligence had received detailed plans of the attack a few days prior, and had made significant preparations for the offensive in Quang Tri. Over the course of the following week the U.S. Army's 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division launched a superbly successful counterattack, routing the NVA forces holding the city and inflicting over a thousand casualties.<sup>83</sup> The success of the American led counterattack can be placed upon the shoulders of the ARVN forces defending the city, the exceptional intelligence obtained prior to the battle, and of tactics employed by the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division.<sup>84</sup> Superbly executed, this operation deserves far greater historical remembrance than it currently holds.

To the south of Quang Tri City lay Hue. Much more than a mere supply terminus along the Perfume River, Hue was the visually inspiring heart of ancient Vietnam. Its historic center, the Old Citadel, covers three square miles and contains the beautiful towers and pagodas of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century imperial palace.<sup>85</sup> Even more importantly than Hue's architecture was the its sacred nature to many Vietnamese. Exactly two years before the offensive General Westmoreland had voiced deep concerns about Hue in a conversation with President Johnson. Pointing out the city's profound significance to the Vietnamese psyche, he laid out the possibility of its capture by the communists with candor, arguing that, "Taking it would have a profound psychological

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<sup>83</sup> Villard, *The 1968 Tet Offensive Battles of Quang Tri City and Hue*, 24-25.

<sup>84</sup> Pearson, *The War in the Northern Provinces*, 57.

<sup>85</sup> Andrew Lawler, "The Battle for Hue," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, 125:7 (July 1999): 92.

impact on the Vietnamese in both the North and the South, and in the process the North Vietnamese might seize the two northern provinces as bargaining points in any negotiations.”<sup>86</sup>

In the early morning hours of January 31<sup>st</sup> three NVA battalions began the assault on Hue with a mortar and infantry attack on the Old Citadel. Due to its unique status Hue was lightly defended by ARVN personnel and had been declared off limits to American troops prior to 1968. Within hours the citadel was captured and a yellow NLF flag placed atop the fortress gate.<sup>87</sup> An American led counterattack soon began, and for the next month Marines and ARVN soldiers would be thrust into the most horrific urban battle since Stalingrad, paying to recapture the historic city yard by bloody yard.

As the offensive burst forth across South Vietnam the U.S. Navy in I Corps was ill equipped to respond. The overwhelming majority of brown water strength was still deployed in the Delta, and only a handful of assets were in place to help stem the tide of the enemy offensive. With considerable prescience the senior I Corps ground commander had seen the need for additional Navy support months earlier. Early in 1967 General Lewis W. Walt, the commander of the III Marine Amphibious Force (MAF) in I Corps had made several requests to COMNAVFORV for a significant brown water contribution to the northern provinces. Walt requested a force of about 30 to 40 PBRs to provide protection for the logistics craft in I Corps.<sup>88</sup> Attacks on logistics craft had risen

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<sup>86</sup> As quoted in George W. Smith, *The Siege at Hue* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999), xvii.

<sup>87</sup> Summers, *Historical Atlas of the Vietnam War*, 134.

<sup>88</sup> Schwartztrauber, “River Patrol Relearned,” 375.

on the Perfume and Cua Viet Rivers, escalating from the occasional rocket and small arms ambush to attacks far more sophisticated.

Part of the reason for the increased attacks was a sharp rise in the volume of river traffic from Danang. In December 1965 Danang had begun operations with fewer than fifty smaller logistics craft. By the start of the Tet Offensive this number had grown to over two hundred and fifty, along with dozens of support craft such as barges and floating cranes.<sup>89</sup> This increased number of craft, coupled with ever growing demand ashore resulted in over 419,000 short tons being delivered by sea to the combined I Corps ports in January 1968, a new monthly record.<sup>90</sup> Even with defensive measures such as convoying being implemented, the transports represented a more numerous and attractive targets.

Mines had also become an increasing problem. Mining of the rivers had been sporadic and largely ineffective in previous years, but in January 1968 the NVA and Viet Cong launched a more coordinated campaign against the river traffic. Many of the floating mines used by the NVA during this period were quite crude, in some cases little more than five gallon trash cans containing 75mm mortar rounds and a basic contact fuse.<sup>91</sup> Yet they did the job. The most intense attacks took place from January 20<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup>. On the 20<sup>th</sup> while transiting up the Cua Viet an LCM-8 hit a floating mine, triggering a secondary explosion that disabled all propulsion and injured one crewmember. The river convoys endured several additional mine attacks, culminating on the 24<sup>th</sup> when another LCM hit an especially powerful mine and quickly sank, killing

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<sup>89</sup> Collins, "Maritime Support of the Campaign in I Corps," 207-8.

<sup>90</sup> COMNAVFORV Monthly Historical Summary, January 1968, 73.

<sup>91</sup> MACV Historical Summary, 452.

two sailors onboard.<sup>92</sup> While most of the U.S. logistics craft survived the attacks due to their sturdy construction, it had become clear that additional protective measures beyond convoys would be required to protect the transports.

COMNAVFORV had not been deaf to General Walt's request for assistance. Though reluctant to part with any brown water assets, Rear Admiral Veth responded to the Marines' request, albeit slowly. In preparation for a contingent of PBRs to be deployed northwards, two PBR Mobile Support Bases were constructed in the U.S. for use in I Corps. Mobile Support Bases were composed from a series of Ammi barges, 30 by 90 foot pontoons that could be configured to provide a temporary base that supported messing and berthing, logistics, and command and control facilities. The first of these, MB-I, arrived in Danang on December 2<sup>nd</sup>.<sup>93</sup> A new division of PBRs, River Division 55, was activated in the Delta later in the month and by January both the new RivDiv and MB-I were in place at Tan My. At first the Perfume River was the primary concern, and on January 9<sup>th</sup> the ten PBRs began patrolling the river from Tan My to Hue.<sup>94</sup>

The newly christened I CTZ River Patrol Group soon found that their ten boats were insufficient to protect the growing logistics traffic on both rivers. Ambushes with B-40 rockets from the shorelines of both rivers were becoming more common,<sup>95</sup> and numerous command and control problems existed as a new convoy river escort system was developed. A little more than one day before the Tet Offensive erupted

COMNAVORV sent a message to General Walt requesting information on coordination

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>93</sup> Charles E. Rogers, "Vietnam River Patrol," Charles E. Rogers Collection, VA, 34.

<sup>94</sup> Schwartztrauber, "River Patrol Relearned," 375.

<sup>95</sup> The B-40 was a Chinese made version of the Soviet RPG-2 (Rocket Propelled Grenade), commonly used by NVA and VC forces during the Vietnam War.

between ground forces and the PBR crews. Acknowledging some of the communication difficulties General Walt's staff replied that efforts were being taken to alleviate the problem, and that the efforts of the PBR crews were much appreciated, noting that, "Naval Support Activity Cua Viet now provides daily convoy on the first run up the river."<sup>96</sup> Despite these reassurances coordinating the complex interaction of Army and Navy assets in a fluid river environment was becoming more challenging, even before the Tet Offensive, threw much of I Corps into chaos.

The capture of Hue presented a potential disaster to the American logistics system in I Corps. For the month of January the Perfume/Hue supply route delivered nearly 24,000 short tons of supplies. While far from enormous in light of the combined I Corps total of 419,000 tons for the month, the loss of Hue put the entire supply line into Thua Thien province in jeopardy.<sup>97</sup> With its strategic location astride both the river and Route 1, Hue was ideally placed as a supply terminus for all of I Corps and its loss could seriously jeopardize the counter-offensive effort.

In the afternoon of January 31<sup>st</sup> the River Patrol Group got its first opportunity to counter the Tet Offensive. In an effort to recover access to the logistics ramp on the south side of the river eight PBRs raced down the Perfume River to assist ARVN troops and Marines in their counterassault on the city. Encountering heavy rifle and mortar fire, they laid down suppressing fire for much of the afternoon until the Marines and ARVN forces secured the northern bank later that night, finishing the day's operations

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<sup>96</sup> As quoted in Military Assistance Command, Vietnam *Command History, Vietnam* (Saigon, 1968), 460.

<sup>97</sup> COMNAVFORV Monthly Historical Summary, February 1968, 73.

with only one naval casualty. The south LCU ramp would remain in American hands for the duration of the offensive.<sup>98</sup>

### **A Critical Need**

Logistical access to Hue would prove more vital than anyone in MACV had suspected. On February 2<sup>nd</sup> the weather in I Corps worsened, bringing a sharp drop in temperatures and heavy rain.<sup>99</sup> This bad weather partially shut down the airports at Quang Tri and Phu Bai, limiting air transport when it was needed the most. By the first week of the offensive U.S. forces in I Corps were using up to 2,600 tons of supplies per day. This was compounded by a series of NVA attacks on land bases logistics. As the offensive began elements of three NVA divisions had effectively cut off all traffic on Route 1 north of the Hai Van Pass and saboteurs had cut a key aviation oil pipeline from Tan My to Hue. While it remains unclear exactly how much the attacks on the logistics and transportation network was central to North Vietnamese planning, one conclusion is obvious: the NVA regarded American supply and communication lines as one of its most vulnerable points.<sup>100</sup>

On February 1<sup>st</sup> Rear Admiral Veth sent a congratulatory message to all units of Naval Forces, Vietnam. Pointing out the high casualties already incurred by the enemy he declared that, “The NVA/VC have taken a disastrous beating and heavy losses over Tet. They are undoubtedly in a state of confusion and disorganization. Urge all units

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 24-25.

<sup>99</sup> John Walker, “Chaotic Battle for Hue,” *Military Heritage*, 10:4 (2009), 26.

<sup>100</sup> Pearson, *The War in the Northern Provinces*, 58.

take advantage of the situation to further disrupt and destroy the enemy.”<sup>101</sup> While North Vietnamese propaganda was often the height of hyperbole, Veth’s message also seemed to invoke a surfeit of wishful thinking. Most U.S Navy sailors in I Corps who read the message probably shook their heads and smiled, certain that the admiral was only referring to action in the Mekong Delta. To the south in IV Corps the Mobile Riverine Force and the PBRs of Game Warden, benefitting from a premature launch of the offensive in the Delta fought back tenaciously against the Viet Cong onslaught, inflicting heavy casualties during the first forty-eight hours. Within a few days both task forces would play key roles in a highly successful Delta counteroffensive.<sup>102</sup>

To the north the situation was more problematic for those opposing the General Offensive. For the first days of February a positive outcome for the U.S. and ARVN forces fighting in Khe Sanh and Hue hung by a narrow thread. On February 7<sup>th</sup>, in the first confirmed use of tanks in the war by the North NVA forces overran the U.S Special Forces outpost at Lang Vei east of Khe Sanh. Ten Army Green Berets were killed and half of the five hundred Bru Montagnard irregulars were killed or wounded when the outpost fell.<sup>103</sup> The double blow of the loss of Lang Vei and use of armor gave the beleaguered defenders of Khe Sanh considerable pause. Yet in typical Marine Corps fashion shock quickly gave way to preparation. Many of the exhausted Marines re-familiarized themselves with the instruction manuals to their Light Anti-Tank Weapon

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<sup>101</sup> COMNAVFORV Monthly Historical Summary February 1968 (Saigon: March 1968), iii.

<sup>102</sup> William B. Fulton, *Vietnam Studies: Riverine Operations, 1966-1969* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, Department of the Army), 148-150.

<sup>103</sup> Walker, “77 Days Under Fire at Khe Sanh,” 38.



(LAW) rockets in the base armory, while others simply traded anti-personnel grenades for high explosive versions, and waited.<sup>104</sup>

A few days after the fall of Lang Vei a fuel laden C-130 from Dong Ha crash-landed at Khe Sanh after taking heavy fire. Landing the giant transports was hence deemed too risky, forcing the Air Force to use only the less vulnerable but smaller P-23 Provider transports, further straining the resupply system.<sup>105</sup> At Hue the Marines had taken to blowing holes in various buildings to force their way through the Citadel, but a heavy influx of NVA reinforcements stalled the Marine/ARVN counteroffensive on the night of February 6<sup>th</sup>.<sup>106</sup>

On the rivers the situation was only getting worse. Far from disorganized the NVA campaign to disrupt the daily river convoy runs was becoming more sophisticated. During the first two weeks of February the level of rocket and mining attacks was relatively light along the I Corps waterways. Yet on February 14<sup>th</sup> this abruptly changed. Two LCMs were hit by recoilless rifle fire while transiting upriver to Hue, and while no personnel casualties occurred these attacks were the forefront of a sharp rise in ambushes along the vital waterway. Over the next six days the logistics craft endured unceasing attacks as they attempted to offload their vital cargo. As the casualties increased LCM crews took to piling sandbags around their pilothouses and available

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<sup>104</sup> Robert Pisor, *The End of the Line: The Siege of Khe Sanh* (New York, W.W. Norton and Company), 199.

<sup>105</sup> Moyers S. Shore, *The Battle for Khe Sanh* (Washington DC: US Marine Corps Historical Branch, 1969), 76.

<sup>106</sup> Walker, "Chaotic Battle for Hue," 28.

Marines resumed their original function of manning the rails on the long ride upriver.<sup>107</sup> The worst period was February 17-19. Over these seventy-two hours fifteen separate LCUs and YFUs were hit and damaged by rocket or mortar fire, killing three and wounding seventeen. As a galling coup de grace on the 19<sup>th</sup> LCU-1482 was sunk by mortar fire while offloading cargo at the Hue ramp.<sup>108</sup>



Figure 8. YFU making the transit to Hue, February 1968. Source: Edward J. Marolda, *The U.S. Navy in the Vietnam War: An Illustrated History*, 193.

Convoys transiting up the now crowded Cua Viet River faced even heavier opposition from the NVA and Viet Cong. With only a few miles separating them from the Demilitarized Zone the Cua Viet base was well within range of NVA artillery, and on February 4<sup>th</sup> eight artillery and rocket rounds hit the Cua Viet LCU ramp. Damage was slight but the attack was just a sample of what was to become a fact of life at Cua

<sup>107</sup> Peter Braestrup, "Vietnam River Rats Run Enemy Gauntlet," *Washington Post*, March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1968.

<sup>108</sup> COMNAVFORV Monthly Historical Summary, February 1968, 91-92.

Viet NSAD. Scattered mortar and rocket attacks on both the ramp and logistics craft continued for the next two weeks of February resulting in nine casualties. Then, on February 19<sup>th</sup>, a major rocket attack was launched against the base, damaging an LCM and LST and destroying much of the base fuel capacity.<sup>109</sup>

As the American and ARVN forces continued to battle their way into Hue with heavy losses, the Khe Sanh Marines had become limited to one C-ration meal per day. The “C-Rats” were the forerunner of the MRE (Meals Ready to Eat), and like their replacements were often categorized into tasty or inedible versions. New combat uniforms or hot meals were unheard of luxuries, as fuel and ammo received airlift priority.<sup>110</sup> With much of MACV and the world’s attention focused on I Corps the heightened importance of the Perfume and Cua Viet Rivers logistical lifelines became even more apparent.

By the third week in February the logistics capacity of I Corps was strained to the breaking point. With considerable foresight General Abrams had ordered that only supplies necessary for warfighting be brought into I Corps, and warned that, “Anyone who brings in nonessentials is interfering with the conduct of this war.”<sup>111</sup> Moving even these essentials was proving ever more difficult, as the attacks on both I Corps river convoys took their toll (see Figure 8). The Perfume River convoys delivered less than 5,700 tons to Hue in the month of February, one quarter of January’s total.<sup>112</sup> Yet each

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 93-94.

<sup>110</sup> Cole, “A Noglowlow in Vietnam, 1968: Air Power at the Battle of Khe Sanh,” 155.

<sup>111</sup> Pearson, *The War in the Northern Provinces*, 59.

<sup>112</sup> COMNAVFORV Monthly Historical Summary, February 1968, 97.

ton delivered was priceless, and only by keeping these critical lines of communication open and functional could the flow of supplies in I Corps be maintained.

### **The New Task Force**

Exactly thirty days after the siege of Khe Sanh began General Abrams sent a pointed directive from his forward command at Phu Bai to Rear Admiral Veth in Saigon. Abrams described the situation in I Corps with little ambiguity: “There is an immediate requirement to improve the naval supply of the troops fighting the Battle of Hue. The principal problem is the coordination of movement of LCUs and LCMs from Tan My to Hue. Additionally there is the problem of moving troops, supplies, and equipment north from the ramp southeast of Hue for offloading at the northeastern ramps.” Abrams went on to describe the lack of defensive naval assets requested previously by III MAF, such as PBRs and ASPBs, as well as a lack of coordination with aviation assets and artillery.

Concluding his message Abrams laid out his demand for COMNAVFOR: “Therefore, it is mandatory that a task force be organized to insure full coordination of these assets in order to keep the waterways secure. This Task Force will direct its immediate attention to improving naval supply of forces fighting the Battle of Hue. This same force can simultaneously coordinate operations in the Cua Viet River area.”<sup>113</sup> Abrams’ firm request required that the new task force be operational within three days.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> As quoted in MACV 1968 *Command History*, 461-62.

<sup>114</sup> Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 140.

Unlike the previous request from General Walt this order could not be delayed. Though fully engaged in the Mekong Delta Veth moved quickly and directed that the task force be established at the earliest opportunity. New personnel and equipment were flown to Dong Ha, and only twenty-four hours after the deadline had ended the basic elements were in place. Setting up his headquarters onboard Mobile Base I at Tan My on February 24th U.S. Navy Captain Gerald W. Smith assumed command of the new task force in a brief ceremony. For reasons that are still unclear the new task force was never assigned a number, only a name: Clearwater.<sup>115</sup> After more than a year of delays and missteps, Task Force Clearwater, a brown water U.S. Navy command that would be responsible for the whole of I Corps inland maritime operations, had finally come into existence.

From its inception the new task force faced all but insurmountable problems. PBRs were in short supply and reinforcements were more than a week away from delivery. Another difficulty was the task force's new headquarters. By February 1968 NSAD Tan My was well established as a satellite supply base for Danang. Located at the northwest tip of the barrier Vinh Loc Island adjacent to the sheltered entrance of the Perfume River, the supply base consisted primarily of a bladder fuel farm and a Marine security detachment.<sup>116</sup> Much of the 50,000-barrel fuel farm had been destroyed during the first few days of the offensive and was still being rebuilt by mid-February.<sup>117</sup> Tan My's critical importance lay in its function as the eastern terminus of the aforementioned fuel pipeline that ran to Hue and then Phu Bai, which had been cut but then repaired

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<sup>115</sup> Swartztrauber, "River Patrol Relearned," 376.

<sup>116</sup> Collins, "Maritime Support of the Campaign in I Corps," 214.

<sup>117</sup> Pearson, *The War in the Northern Provinces*, 58.

during the offensive. Other than Mobile Base I, which had been moored at the mouth of the Perfume a few miles from Tan My, the base had little infrastructure in place to support a brown water task force.<sup>118</sup>

Upon taking command Captain Smith made a number of immediate decisions for the task force. Although initially created to protect the passage to Hue, less than a day after being created TFCW (Task Force Clearwater) was also tasked with the securing traffic along the Cua Viet River. In response to that directive—on February 29<sup>th</sup>—Smith divided his limited forces administratively into two groups: the Hue River Security Group and the Dong Ha River Security Group. In a move that reflected the changing situation on the rivers and the poor suitability of Tan My, that same day overall command headquarters of the task force was shifted to NSAD Cua Viet.<sup>119</sup>



Figure 9. Aerial view of Cua Viet Base. Photo courtesy Herman Hughes.

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<sup>118</sup> Swartztrauber, “River Patrol Relearned,” 398.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 376.



Figure 10. Cua Viet Base Ramp, March-April 1968. Photo courtesy of Herman Hughes

Strategically located on the sandy south bank of the river's mouth, Cua Viet was a dreary place, more resembling a ramshackle boomtown than a U.S. Navy installation (see Figures 9,10). The base expanded considerably from its founding in the summer of 1967, and in the words of one naval officer had been, "transformed from a beautiful, white, unoccupied, sandy beach into an ugly, but thriving, cantonment of plywood huts and mess halls."<sup>120</sup> Richard Schreadley was far less poetic, calling Cua Viet, "one of the grimmest places to pull duty in all Vietnam."<sup>121</sup> Of the omnipresent sand he noted that, "When the rain stopped falling, the sand, fine-grained and gritty, began to blow, accumulating in drifts before the huts, sifting through screens and under doors, finding

<sup>120</sup> As quoted in Collins, "Maritime Support of the Campaign in I Corps," 213.

<sup>121</sup> As quoted in Schreadley, "From the Rivers to the Sea," 141.

its way into lockers and between sheets and even into the food the men ate.”<sup>122</sup> Within the extreme range of NVA artillery and subject to punishing storms, Cua Viet was indeed less secure and hospitable than Tan My. Yet despite the miserable conditions, weather, and exposure to enemy fire the move to the more northerly base would soon prove prescient.

From this new staging area Captain Smith was tasked with providing waterborne security for all inland waterways between Danang and the DMZ. While nominally under the administrative command of COMNAVFORV, TFCW reported operationally to General Abrams at Phu Bai in I Corps. Fortunately for Captain Smith a squadron of helicopter gunships, ground artillery batteries, and a contingent of Marines were promptly placed under his direct command to defend the logistic transports. Several LCM-6 craft from Danang converted to perform minesweeping duties were also placed at his disposal. COMNAVFORV also directed Captain Richard Salzer, the head of the Mobile Riverine Force, to transfer one of his river divisions north. Loaded onboard a U.S. Navy amphibious warship this force of ten ATCs, three monitors, and one CCB was set to arrive at Tan My in early March.<sup>123</sup>

### **Keeping the Rivers Open**

While the growth and administrative development of TFCW unfolded the daily convoy runs to Hue and Dong Ha continued unabated, as did the increasing attacks. On February 24<sup>th</sup>, the first full day of Clearwater’s existence, the daily convoy to Hue

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<sup>122</sup> Schreadley, “The Naval War in Vietnam,” 293.

<sup>123</sup> Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 140.



consisting of nine logistics craft escorted by two PBRs came under rocket attack from both sides of Perfume River. After passing the final bend to the Hue ramp two LCUs took RPG fire to their starboard side, killing one and wounding two crewmembers. After offloading their cargo the convoy was again attacked on the return leg. LCU-1517, already hit on the upriver transit, had the misfortune to take yet another RPG round to starboard. This second round of attacks did not result in any casualties, however, and all of the convoy craft managed to reach Cua Viet safely.<sup>124</sup>

The U.S. Navy summary message for this action included one especially important conclusion. Noting that each boat in the convoy was now equipped with the latest in tactical radios, the message concluded that, “Convoy commander was able to effectively control convoy for first time.” The message also recorded the effective cover provided by supporting U.S. Army Huey helicopter gunships, a pair of which provided suppressing fire for the convoy from overhead.<sup>125</sup> The use of effective communications between the river and aviation assets would prove one of the new task force’s greatest strengths.

The command and control changes continued, and by the end of February the communications improvements were only part of a now systematized convoy system put in place. Both river security groups quickly adopted a two-part convoy plan, consisting of a movement unit and an escort unit. The movement unit was comprised of the logistics craft, typically three or four LCMs or LCUs. The escort unit was initially limited to only PBRs, but as more forces arrived the task force incorporated ATCs and

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<sup>124</sup> (CTF Opsum) 241500Z FEB 1968.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

CCB craft as well. All fell under the control of a single convoy commander who coordinated air, artillery, and mine countermeasure support.<sup>126</sup>

Along the Perfume River the establishment of the new task force had an almost immediate effect on convoy operations. The official report from the February 26<sup>th</sup> convoy provides a good example of how much river operations had improved in a few short days. An especially large convoy of six U.S. Navy and four VNN logistics craft departed Tan My at mid morning, escorted by four PBRs and one LCM-6 minesweeper. Aerial support was provided by two Army UH-1 gunships. After leaving Tan My the message reads, "Preplanned artillery missions fired into ambush sites as the convoy moved up the river. At 1100H the convoy came under B-40/41 attack. Fire was suppressed by combined fire of gunships, PBRs, and convoy craft." Two U.S. Army personnel were wounded in the attack but the convoy reached the ramp at Hue without further incident. After returning to Tan My a second convoy transited upriver that afternoon. Although the convoy took fire near the same ambush site as the morning convoy no hits were reported. The convoy reached Hue to offload and made an uncontested transit back to Tan My.<sup>127</sup>

This February 26<sup>th</sup> message contained several elements of note. The preplanned bombardment of suspected shoreline ambush sites, complex control of artillery and air assets, and swift offloading of supplies demonstrated remarkable teamwork and coordination. Proactive rather than reactive measures were becoming common. Yet the shoreline ambushes along the Perfume continued. The following day the afternoon

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<sup>126</sup> COMNAVFORV Monthly Historical Summary, March 1968 (Saigon: April 1968), 77.

<sup>127</sup> (CTF Opsum) 261130Z FEB 1968.

convoy came under rocket fire before reaching Hue, and on this occasion the B-40 rockets found their mark. Hit by three rockets, YFU-12 became engulfed in flames and exploded, wounding four crewmembers and damaging a nearby PBR, which had to be towed to Hue to prevent its sinking. The YFU was a total loss.<sup>128</sup>

Despite these casualties the Hue River Security Group achieved its primary mission, providing supplies to enable the recovery of Hue. On March 2<sup>nd</sup>, after U.S. and ARVN forces secured the Citadel and pushed out the last remaining NVA personnel, the battle for Hue was declared over. Most of the once beautiful Citadel lay in ruins, and forty percent of the surrounding city was decimated. Civilian loss of life was enormous—not just from combat but also from the systematic execution of local South Vietnamese government officials and Catholic priests deemed to be enemies by the Communists and their supporters. Over 2,800 were tortured and executed in the first week of the siege. Military casualties were also heavy. The Marines lost 147 dead and almost 900 wounded, while the ARVN battalions suffered the loss of virtually twice as many casualties, 384 men dead and 1,800 wounded.<sup>129</sup>

On the opposing side the losses were far greater. The combined NVA and Viet Cong dead at Hue has been estimated at over five thousand, with an unknown number of wounded. Compounded with this was the psychological loss of Hue itself, a high prize in the Vietnamese psyche. One analysis of the battle complimented the North's initial execution but criticized them for their subsequent failures, noting "The North Vietnamese had orchestrated a sound plan of attack to enter the city-but once inside, they

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<sup>128</sup> (CTF Opsum) 271250Z FEB 1968.

<sup>129</sup> Walker, "Chaotic Battle for Hue," 66.

failed to secure the city's centers of gravity. Specifically, they failed to seize the South Vietnamese headquarters in the Citadel, the MACV compound, and the boat ramp on the south side."<sup>130</sup>

Of these three, the failure to capture the LCU ramp was most damaging. The U.S. Navy's ability to deliver men and supplies to a point directly adjacent to the Citadel proved fatal to the North's efforts to hold Hue. Even before the city was officially declared secure this ability to deliver logistics directly to the battle had been recognized. Lieutenant General John Cushman, who had relieved General Walt as the head of the III MAF, commended the men of Clearwater with this message dated February 28th: "The outstanding manner in which badly needed supplies are transported to Dong Ha through the Cua Viet waterway, and to Hue via the Perfume River is indicative of the bravery and superb leadership of all the boat crews involved in this critical combat operation. The battle at Hue depended heavily on this effort, as does support of the large forces in the Dong Ha area. Despite considerable harassment by the enemy and in the face of great danger, you performed magnificently."<sup>131</sup>

The loss of Hue was a major blow to the communist momentum in I Corps. This defeat combined with the enormous casualties incurred throughout South Vietnam proved devastating to the Viet Cong. Losses were so great that the southern cadres were decimated for years, forcing much of the responsibility for war on the NVA.<sup>132</sup> Many of the surviving Viet Cong units in Thua Thien Province melted into the jungles or fled

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<sup>130</sup> Lawler, "The Battle for Hue," 93.

<sup>131</sup> CG III Marine Amphibious Force DNG Message 281102Z FEB 1968.

<sup>132</sup> Note: Casualties for the Viet Cong during the offensive have been conservatively calculated as over 15,000 killed and over 20,000 wounded.

across the border to Laos, and with their retreat U.S./ARVN forces were finally available in sufficient numbers to secure the banks of the Perfume River. In the days after the recapture of Hue attacks on the logistics convoys fell to levels not seen in over a year, and on March 3<sup>rd</sup> the use of convoys was discontinued along the river in favor of individual transits. As an indication of just how much security had changed during the remainder of the month only single attack occurred, when on March 25<sup>th</sup> when an LCU was hit by rocket fire four miles from Hue. Except for this incident the Perfume River was oddly tranquil for the month of March.<sup>133</sup>

On the Cua Viet the situation was very different. Rocket and mine attacks continued into March, but these methods were not the only measures of resistance employed, and on March 4<sup>th</sup> a convoy from Cua Viet discovered a new problem. In the early morning hours NVA engineers had constructed an ingenious underwater wire and bamboo obstruction spanning a narrow portion of the Cua Viet River.<sup>134</sup> Upon reaching the sturdy barrier the convoy commander wisely chose to reverse course and return to Cua Viet, as “approximately 20 people in black dress” believed to be NVA were observed preparing to set up mortars on the shoreline. The obstruction was soon destroyed by an airstrike and the convoys resumed, but the use of this barrier marked one of the rare occasions when no daily convoy reached Dong Ha.<sup>135</sup>

The following day the daily logistics run incurred an unusual loss. The convoy commander, Lieutenant Barry Hooper, suffered fatal wounds while leading his convoy through heavy small arms fire. Two other sailors were wounded but his was the only

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<sup>133</sup> COMNAVFORV Monthly Historical Summary, March 1968, 79.

<sup>134</sup> (CTF Opsum) 040310Z MAR 1968.

<sup>135</sup> (CTF Opsum) 040638Z MAR 1968.

fatality.<sup>136</sup> A very different attack took place on the morning of March 10<sup>th</sup>. An NVA artillery strike scored several direct hits on the Cua Viet base, exploding over one hundred tons of ammunition and igniting fires throughout the complex. Casualties were light but the infrastructure damage, which included the mess hall and the communications center, was extensive. With quick repairs, however, communications were restored and sixty percent of the base rebuilt by the end of March.<sup>137</sup>

Despite the regular attacks, a quiet day along the Cua Viet was not unknown. One the best accounts of such a transit was documented by Peter Braestrup, a journalist later known for his account of the media coverage of the Tet Offensive.<sup>138</sup> Drawing on an interview with Petty Officer Gilbert Hirshaeuer, Braestrup described a daylight logistics run from Dong Ha to the Cua Viet base. The green river was “full of shallow draft vessels,” he wrote, and once the LCM reached “the straight stretch of the river,” the tension onboard grew considerably. Hirshaeuer threw on his helmet as enemy artillery rounds landed a few hundred yards away. Another crewman readied the heavy machine gun but the NVA guns quickly fell silent. At one point Hirshaeuer pointed to broken hull of an LCM sunk by a mine the previous month, telling the journalist that, “Right now we worry more about home-made mines than anything else.” After the remainder of the transit proved uneventful he brought his LCM alongside the anchored LST USS *Bullock County* to move his cargo of a damaged tractor onboard. Asked what his return

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<sup>136</sup> (CTF Opsum) 050608Z MAR 1968.

<sup>137</sup> COMNAVFORV Monthly Historical Summary, March 1968, 83-85.

<sup>138</sup> See Peter Braestrup, *Big Story: How the American Press and Television reported and interpreted the crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington*. (Novato, CA: Presidio Press).

trip cargo would be Hirshaeuer responded that he didn't know, but ever the blunt sailor he quipped, "When we carry fuel we can't get any Marines to ride with us."<sup>139</sup>

The American media were not the only ones who recognized the importance of the Cua Viet. In a North Vietnamese editorial entitled "Glorious Exploits by Heroic Cua Viet," the attacks on the U.S. logistics traffic were recounted mixed with grand hyperbole. The author noted that over the course of the war communist forces, "sank or damaged more than 200 warships, and buried thousands of American and puppet troops as well as hundreds of thousands of tons of military equipment." Grandiose embellishment notwithstanding the editorial did contain one accurate assessment: "Facing multiple difficulties in rear-line logistics, the Americans and their puppets are trying to use to the maximum the rivers, hoping to break the deadlock found in ground transportation and to reduce the burden of air transport costs." Excluding the word "puppets," most U.S. military supply officers would have agreed with this.<sup>140</sup>

The real story of the Cua Viet in March 1968 lay between these divergent accounts. Rocket and small arms attacks continued throughout the month, but as Hirshaeuer noted the fear of mines was well-founded. On March 14 the Dong Ha River Group recorded its largest single daily loss when an ATC minesweeper hit a large contact mine two miles northeast of Dong Ha. Estimated at over nine hundred pounds, the mine's detonation upended the seventy-foot armored craft and killed six crewmembers.<sup>141</sup> This loss resulted in adjustments to minesweeping tactics along the

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<sup>139</sup> Braestrup, "Enemy River Rats Run Enemy Gauntlet."

<sup>140</sup> As quoted in Editorial, "Glorious Exploits by Heroic Cua Viet," Hanoi *Quan Doi Nhan Dan* (People's Army Newspaper), September 16, 1970, 4.

<sup>141</sup> (CTF Opsum) 140243Z MAR 1968.

river but in spite of the diverse obstacles the supplies continued to get through, and at the close of the month over 46,000 short tons of material had been delivered to Dong Ha.<sup>142</sup>

The continuous movement of supplies upriver from Cua Viet to the airfield at Dong Ha remained vital following the recapture of Hue because that airfield was originating point for helicopter flights to Khe Sanh. The five battalions at the besieged outpost at Khe Sanh, deprived of everything but ammunition and C-rations, continued to throw back repeated NVA assaults. Operation Pegasus, the joint U.S. Army/ARVN/Marine Corps operation to reopen Route 9 and lift the Khe Sanh siege, began on April 1<sup>st</sup>. By that date many of the opposing NVA infantry had retreated or had fallen dead to the 100,000 tons of ordnance released from above,<sup>143</sup> a bombardment so destructive that one American general remarked that the burnt ground surrounding Khe Sanh was “like the surface of the moon.”<sup>144</sup> Elements of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marines and ARVN airborne troops moved west along Route 9, encountering light resistance. On the 8<sup>th</sup> the supporting U.S Army 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division linked up with the 26<sup>th</sup> Marines at Khe Sanh, finally reopening the land route to the base, thus ending the siege.

Upon his arrival at what remained of Khe Sanh the commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division, Major General John Tolson was stunned at the conditions he encountered. “It was a very distressing sight,” he later described, “completely unpoliced, strewn with rubble, duds, and damaged equipment, and with the troops living a life more similar to rats than human beings.” Just over four hundred Marine and ARVN personnel perished

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<sup>142</sup> COMNAVFORV Monthly Historical Summary, March 1968, 81.

<sup>143</sup> John Walker, “77 Days Under Fire at Khe Sanh,” 81.

<sup>144</sup> As quoted in James Olson, Randy Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell*, 196.



in the siege. Precise North Vietnamese casualties have never been ascertained, but most estimates place them at between ten and fifteen thousand personnel.<sup>145</sup>

For the first three months of 1968 U.S. Navy casualties on the rivers of I Corps numbered twenty-three dead and just over a hundred wounded.<sup>146</sup> Compared to the hundreds of Marine and ARVN casualties incurred to push back the Tet Offensive in the northern provinces these losses may appear miniscule, but the operations conducted by the men and vessels of the task force had an impact far beyond their numbers. Their efforts kept the supply lines open. Perhaps the most heartfelt tribute to the U.S Navy sailors in I Corps came from Marine Corps Lieutenant General Victor Krulak. The head of the Fleet Marine Force Pacific thanked the brown water sailors in a message dated April 10<sup>th</sup>, wrote with his customary bluntness, “The Cua Viet and Perfume Rivers are critical to the operational survival of our forces. The enemy knew this and, from the start of the Tet Offensive, was determined to cut them both. That they were unsuccessful is largely due to the gallant determination of the Navy forces operating the landing ships, landing craft and river fire support crafts. Despite the most determined enemy resistance, and in the face of continuing casualties, they kept the supplies moving. In doing so, they once again earned the gratitude of their brothers in the Navy-Marine Corps team.”<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Walker, “77 Days Under Fire at Khe Sanh,” 81.

<sup>146</sup> COMNAVFORV Monthly Historical Summary, January 1968; COMNAVFORV Monthly Historical Summary, February 1968; COMNAVFORV Monthly Historical Summary, March 1968.

<sup>147</sup> As quoted in CG Fleet Marine Forces Pacific Message 100042Z APR 1968.

## CHAPTER III

## HARSH DUTY AND DIVERSE THREATS

*“Since its inception, the Cua Viet base had been subjected to frequent shellings and occasional attempted intrusions by sappers. The prudent man was never very far from his helmet, flak jacket, or personal weapon.”* Thomas J. Cutler, “Brown Water, Black Berets”

In his study of modern shipboard life historian Ronald Spector observed that, “The [U.S.] navy, preoccupied with supercarriers and Polaris submarines, had no desire to design and build really effective small combatants for its unwelcome brown-water war in South Vietnam.” For all of their improbable success the sailors of the brown water navy relied on the old and untested. The monitors of the Mobile Riverine Force may have been destructive river behemoths but at their core were tired assault craft of previous wars. Even the sublimely effective PBR, while new, was a hastily conceived modification of a civilian design. Yet Spector conceded that while they lacked the best technology and funding the men who manned the LCMs and PBRs possessed something their blue water counterparts did not, writing, “Unlike the thousands of sailors deployed aboard ships in the Tonkin Gulf, who seldom saw the coast of Vietnam, riverine sailors had little doubt they were in a real war.”<sup>148</sup>

Close quarters combat, an experience little known by U.S. Navy sailors since the Second World War, was commonplace on the rivers of South Vietnam. As naval weaponry advanced the likelihood of sighting, let alone shooting at any enemy in visual range fell dramatically. Yet in Vietnam sailors previously trained to launch missiles at distant targets were called upon engage an enemy at the naval equivalent of arm’s

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<sup>148</sup> Ronald H. Spector, *At War at Sea: Sailors and Naval Combat in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 359-362.

length. A late 20<sup>th</sup> century version of maritime shock combat provided participants with a shared sense of danger that gave sailors in the brown water navy a unique culture within the larger service and in which many were called upon to lead and take risks.

Assignment to duty with the riverine forces in Vietnam was less than popular with many officers. Having been trained for a confrontation with the Soviet Navy on the open ocean, they resisted serving on the rivers of Vietnam. One Navy captain who served on the COMNAVFORV staff recalled this trend, noting that many young officers were not, “afraid to go to Vietnam, but they just did not see how it was going to help their careers.”<sup>149</sup> A tour as a gunnery officer or department head was seen as the ticket to advancement rather than the messy and dangerous world of Operation Game Warden or Market Time. This deprived the brown water river divisions of much needed leadership, so to fill the void sailors not yet old enough to buy a beer back home found themselves pushed into roles few had anticipated. This newfound leadership status, coupled with their distinctive mission and proximity to combat, gave the brown water sailors a harsh but unique experience in a long and brutal war.

Nearly all brown water sailors were volunteers, often bored with life aboard ship and possessing the desire to take up a different challenge. Petty Officer David White, onboard the dock landing ship USS *Monticello* (LSD-35), was typical of this group. He volunteered for the PBRs after a port visit to Danang in early 1968, less than two years after joining the Navy. White signed up for river patrol duty because he felt, like many

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<sup>149</sup> As quoted in Howard Kerr, interview by Paul Stillwell, October 9, 1982, transcript, Elmo Zumwalt Oral History Collection, 56.

before him, that “everybody secretly probably wants to know what combat’s like.”<sup>150</sup>

During three months of PBR training at Mare Island, California, White learned the techniques of river seamanship, weapons fundamentals, and other basic boat skills.

Taught by veterans of Operation Game Warden, this PBR program was followed by two weeks of survival training and Vietnamese language school. Within a week of arriving at Tan Son Nhut Airport in Saigon, White was patrolling the waters of the Mekong Delta.<sup>151</sup>

White’s story is typical of the sailors of Task Force Clearwater. Like so many others he arrived in an alien environment far different from anything he had previously experienced in the Navy. Most sailors who trained for the brown water navy did so with the understanding that the Mekong Delta would be their future home, but in time some were transferred to the north, possibly expecting it to be an improvement over the hot and fetid Delta. But duty on the northern rivers of I Corps was often harsher than that of the Mekong. In terrain, mission, and environment the men of Task Force Clearwater lived and worked in an isolated world of their own, beaten down by both the enemy and the elements while serving at a base only four miles from the DMZ.

### **Life on the Northern Rivers**

By April 1968 the tempest of the Tet Offensive had subsided and a gradual sense of dull routine, punctuated by deadly attacks, began to develop on the northern rivers of I Corps. Along the Perfume River communist activity was at low ebb at the end of March

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<sup>150</sup> David White, interview by Richard Veronne, no date, transcript, Texas Tech Vietnam Archive Oral History Collection, 6.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-9.

and on April 3<sup>rd</sup> the commanding officer of Task Force Clearwater discontinued the convoy system in favor of individual escorted transits to Hue. The sole ambush of the month occurred on April 25<sup>th</sup> when an LCU took damage from a RPG attack about four miles from Hue.<sup>152</sup> Along the Cua Viet ambushes were still common in March but had also fallen off considerably. Five logistics craft and the 300-foot gasoline tanker USS *Genessee* (AOG-8) anchored at Cua Viet sustained damage from rocket and mine attacks during the same period.<sup>153</sup>

During the first week of March, River Assault Division 112, a MRF Division, was redeployed to the Cua Viet River from the Mekong Delta. Comprised of ten ATCs (Armored Transport Carriers), three monitors, and one CCB (Command/Communications Boat),<sup>154</sup> the division was assigned to the Dong Ha river group, while the Hue force continued to use the ten PBRs already present and five LCMs converted into minesweepers.<sup>155</sup> The welcome addition of the riverine craft from the Delta (see Figure 11) led the leadership of TF Clearwater to reassess the unit's roles in light of its new capabilities. In early April a message to COMNAVFORV noting that in addition to its previous mission of protecting logistics traffic along the Cua Viet River, the Dong Ha security group could now provide naval gunfire from the monitors to

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<sup>152</sup> MACV Command History, 463.

<sup>153</sup> COMNAVFORV Monthly Historical Summary, April 1968, 69.

<sup>154</sup> The CCB was designed as a riverine floating command boat, with one assigned to each Mobile Riverine Force squadron. Externally similar to the monitors, but lacking the main armament of the 105mm howitzer and 81mm mortar, they had a command and control console instead and carried extra communications equipment to coordinate brown water operations. Source: W.C. Wells, "The Riverine Force in Action, 1966-67," 57.

<sup>155</sup> Thomas J. Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets: Coastal and Riverine Warfare in Vietnam* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press), 277-78.

support the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Division, “utilize ATCs for quick insertion of troops in area suspected to be occupied by enemy,” and its vessels had commenced night patrols to stop enemy mine laying operations on April 1st.<sup>156</sup>



Figure 11. Dong Ha River Security Group Monitor. Photo courtesy Herman Hughes.

The riverine sailors who had previously served on the vast and risky Delta soon discovered that the smaller northern rivers were just as dangerous, and that navigating the tricky currents of the Cua Viet was a challenge in and of itself. The slow riverine craft had little room to maneuver in the narrow waterway, and while the monitors brought unprecedented firepower to I Corps the lack of bunkers and emplacements along

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<sup>156</sup> (CTF Opsum) 061305Z APR 1968.

the river provided few targets. Instead the large and slow riverine craft became targets themselves.

Just like the Delta, however, the threat from mines and rocket attacks was quite real. Though equipped with significantly more armor than the PBRs the riverine craft were far from invulnerable. One ATC sailor interviewed after the war described an RPG attack, recalling that while watching the shoreline a concealed Viet Cong abruptly, “stood up with one of the B-40 rocket launchers, took his time to aim at my boat, released the rocket in a puff of black smoke, and it was the typical slow motion thing. The rocket came, missed me by about six feet, missed our boat by about six inches.” Other times his ATC was not so fortunate, however, and he remembered later inspecting the damage from a hit to his boat’s armor plate, “It would look like you had a cutting torch and you would cut a piece of one inch metal.” During the worst hits shrapnel from the rocket would ricochet around the interior of the craft, killing or injuring nearly everyone inside.<sup>157</sup>

The presence of the monitors and most of the ATCs would turn out to be short-lived. On May 1<sup>st</sup> five more PBRs were delivered to Cua Viet, and at the end of May most of the riverine craft there were transferred back to the Delta. Capable of only eight knots the monitors’ and ATCs sluggishness proved to be an impediment in I Corps where the greater speed of patrol boats was deemed more essential. Another factor was that repair facilities for the larger craft were less available on the northern rivers. Most important, with the threat to the logistics craft on the northern rivers diminished

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<sup>157</sup> Michael Harris, interview by Stephen Maxner, August 22, 2000, transcript, Texas Tech Vietnam Archive Oral History Collection, 27-28.

COMNAVFORV decided the boats would be of better use in future riverine operations in the Delta. Six of the ATCs remained behind for a few months, but by the year's end they had been replaced by LCM-6 craft specially modified for minesweeping.<sup>158</sup>

The existing PBRs of Clearwater were soon augmented by two brown water craft that could not have been more dissimilar. The first, eight Landing Craft Personnel, Large (LCPL) boats were assigned to Tan My in May. The poorly named LCPL (see Figure 12) was in some ways an older and larger cousin of the PBR. Originally designed as a command boat to direct amphibious landing craft to their targeted beach, in 1965 a number of the mothballed craft were converted for river patrols as a stop-gap measure before the PBRs arrived in South Vietnam the following year. Navy engineers, in the words of brown water veteran Thomas Cutler, “stripped off years of accumulated paint, reinforced rust-thinned areas, repaired the tired old diesels, and mounted a veritable arsenal of weapons,” on the thirty-six foot boats.<sup>159</sup> The LCPL's deeper draft of almost four feet made them poorly suited for river operations, however, and the boats were used primarily as harbor patrol craft at Danang and Saigon. Still, desperate for more resources Task Force Clearwater took possession of eight of the rebuilt craft before the close of the year.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> COMNAVFORV Monthly Historical Summary, 79.

<sup>159</sup> Thomas J. Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 143.

<sup>160</sup> MACV Command History, 463.





Figure 12. LCPL. Source: Edward J. Marolda, *The U.S. Navy in the Vietnam War: An Illustrated History*, 253.

As June drew to a close three of the most unusual vessels in the history of the U.S. Navy made their debut in I Corps when a trio of Patrol Air Cushion Vehicle (PACV) hovercraft became operational with the Hue river group. Nicknamed the ‘monster,’ the forty-foot PACV (see Figure 13) was developed from a seven-ton British civilian design. Only six saw service in the course of the Vietnam War, three with U.S. Navy and three with the Army.<sup>161</sup> Supremely fast (up to fifty knots) and armed with multiple heavy machine guns, the hovercraft’s speed was only matched by its noise, with some witnesses reporting hearing the strange craft over seven miles away. Mechanical problems and high acquisition and operating costs also limited their availability.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Norman Friedman, *U.S. Small Combatants Including PT-Boats, Subchasers, and the Brown-Water Navy: An Illustrated Design History* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1987), 308-09.

<sup>162</sup> For the cost of just one PACV (\$1 million US in 1966) the Navy could purchase ten of the latest Mk II PBR’s. Source: Schwartztrauber, “River Patrol Relearned,” 390.



Figure 13. PACV. Source: Norman Friedman, *U.S. Small Combatants*, 309.

The PACV's were first tested in the Mekong Delta, where the thick rice paddies and narrow canals limited their effectiveness. Following their arrival in I Corps, however, the speedy craft found a true home, as the lagoons and open bays surrounding Hue proved ideal for their capabilities.<sup>163</sup> The hovercrafts' quickness made them the perfect craft for the rapid insertion of personnel into hostile areas, and on July 22<sup>nd</sup> two PACV's rapidly inserted a combined U.S. Marine and ARVN patrol team into a village near Tan My, marking the hovercrafts' debut in an offensive capacity. The psychological impact of the bizarre craft, noisily hurtling down a waterway at forty knots, was another aspect of their presence hard to deny.<sup>164</sup> One naval intelligence officer who accompanied a PACV on patrol recorded that the monstrous craft terrified Vietnamese fisherman, and recalled that his boat, "looked like a giant dragon, and we

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<sup>163</sup> Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 280-81.

<sup>164</sup> COMNAVFORV Monthly Historical Summary, July 1968, 92.

came roaring up to this fishing boat, and I've never seen such frightened people in all my life."<sup>165</sup>

This amalgam of the rebuilt old and the unorthodox new epitomized Task Force Clearwater's reputation as an organization that had to fight for everything in its arsenal. The combined total force of eight LCPLs and three PACVs nevertheless proved quite useful on the northern rivers, and over time became key components of the task force. For the heart of the river war, however, the PBRs remained the workhorse of choice. Even before the Tet Offensive PBR crews in the Mekong Delta had earned a lasting reputation. One U.S. naval officer described them as an inimitable component of the maritime effort in South Vietnam, writing, "The PBRs form a truly remarkable organization, without precedent in the U.S. Navy. Born of necessity, developed in bitter individual combat, and seasoned by countless examples of courageous and heroic performances by the PBR crews, Operation Game Warden has challenged the Viet Cong in their own environment, and has defeated them."<sup>166</sup> Noted for their bravery and dedication under fire many PBR sailors were decorated for their actions. In 1968 one Medal of Honor, six Navy Crosses, twenty-four Silver Stars, and seventy-eight Bronze Stars were awarded to members of Game Warden, many posthumously. The PBR crews who transferred north to I Corps carried this unique sense of identity and duty with them.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Herman Hughes, phone interview by author, August 30<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

<sup>166</sup> W. C. Wells, "The Riverine Force in Action, 1966-1967," *Naval Review*, 52.

<sup>167</sup> James Lambert, "The History of the Brown Water Navy," Jimmy Lambert Collection, Texas Tech Vietnam Archive, 6.

A PBR river patrol was often a harrowing experience. The boats' fiberglass hulls and thin ceramic armor afforded little protection against mines or rockets. Night patrols, instituted by Task Force Clearwater in April 1968, tested even the most veteran brown water sailor. One officer who accompanied a PBR crew on a midnight patrol considered it, "the scariest experience I had in Vietnam."<sup>168</sup> Motoring forward at a few knots on a hostile river in darkness required a strong nerve, and to overcome this the PBR crews developed some of the deepest camaraderie seen in the Vietnam War.<sup>169</sup> The tiny crews depended upon each other to an exceptional degree to return home alive. Commander Sayre Schwartztrauber, one of the commodores<sup>170</sup> of Task Force Clearwater later promoted to rear admiral described the men of the PBRs with pride, noting, "Their morale is the highest of any this writer has ever seen in the service," and continued by noting that this was present despite miserable conditions, long hours and constant exposure to danger. Schwartztrauber concluded that, "These collective stimuli of great responsibility, hard work, discomfort, danger, and adventure, accompanied by selective personal assignment procedures, have developed a remarkably serious-minded and skillful corps of sailors with a keen sense of purpose."<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Michael Taylor, telephone interview by author, August 5, 2011.

<sup>169</sup> The unofficial motto of the PBR's was "Proud, Brave, Reliable." Another less known unofficial motto was "Paps Blue Ribbon," a brand of beer popular with brown water sailors in Vietnam. Source: Tom Leiser, telephone interview by author, August 11, 2011.

<sup>170</sup> In modern usage commodore denotes a title rather than a rank. Most commodores are senior U.S Navy Captains who command a squadron or task force. The term is unofficial but used extensively by the modern U.S. Navy.

<sup>171</sup> S. A. Swartztrauber, "River Patrol Relearned," US Navy Institute *Proceedings* 96:5 (May 1970), 383.

Each PBR had a standard crew of four personnel: patrol boat captain (or coxswain), engineer, a gunner, and crewman.<sup>172</sup> Though every crewmember was assigned an individual position each possessed interchangeable skills. All PBR sailors were well qualified with the weapons and operating systems of the boat, a requirement that became useful in when the boat came under enemy fire.<sup>173</sup> Often crewmembers had grab the controls when the coxswain was wounded. Casualties were a fact of life on the rivers, and by 1970 one in three PBR sailors had been wounded in action.<sup>174</sup>

PBR patrols were often high on boredom, sweat, and fatigue. Though shorter in comparison to the Delta, the daily sweep patrols along the northern rivers were full of long hours and high temperatures, but in most circumstances the crews' morale remained good. One PBR boat captain recalled that, "Guys sweat, get bored, and become grouchy, which is [to be] expected, but the majority seem to keep a cool head and perform efficiently."<sup>175</sup> Most PBR patrols would operate in pairs, with the lead boat sweeping ahead and the following boat providing cover from the rear. On longer patrols the small confines of the boat were typically filled with ammunition, weapons, and

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<sup>172</sup> The boat captain was often a First Class petty officer, a senior mid-level enlisted rank.

<sup>173</sup> The speed and armament of the PBR were its primary advantages in brown water warfare. The PBR Mark II, an improved version of the craft introduced in 1967-68, had a speed of up to 28 knots and was usually armed with a twin .50 caliber machine gun mount forward, a single .50 caliber mount aft, a mounted Mark 18 grenade launcher, and several hand held M-79 grenade launchers, M-16 rifles, and a shotgun. Source: Thomas Mustin, "The River War," *Ordnance*, no. 290 (September-October 1968), 176.

<sup>174</sup> Schwartztrauber, "River Patrol Relearned," 382. Note: As a testament to this over five hundred Purple Hearts were awarded to PBR sailors during the Vietnam War.

<sup>175</sup> As quoted in Spector, *At War at Sea*, 362.

supplies. Passengers such as U.S. Navy SEAL teams, South Vietnamese sailors, or an interpreter also often crowded onboard the thirty-one foot boat.<sup>176</sup>

As the river war progressed more and more junior sailors were called upon to take on leadership roles, a situation that many relished. The opportunity to be in charge of the boat carried a powerful responsibility, and while the traditional hierarchical structure of the tradition minded blue water navy was less evident the average brown water sailors shared the desire for command. One brown water engineer provided a particularly apt summary of what it meant to be in charge on a PBR, observing that, “As patrol officer if you’re out on [river patrol] you made the decision and decided whether those people were going to be alive or dead in the next two minutes.”<sup>177</sup>

Not all missions involved lethal combat or dull patrols. Some of the most memorable work done on the northern rivers was humanitarian in nature. The Medical Civic Action Program (MEDCAP), an effort to provide medical and dental care to South Vietnamese civilians, was instituted along the northern rivers towards the close of 1968. MEDCAP (see Figure 14) had been one of the more successful humanitarian campaigns of the war, and the arrival of U.S. Navy doctors and corpsmen was eagerly awaited along the rivers and tributaries. Richard Schreadley, who accompanied Navy personnel on several MEDCAP missions in I Corps, recalled, “vividly the lines of people, mostly women, children, and old men, waiting patiently to see a doctor, a dentist, a nurse, or as was most often the case, a navy corpsmen.”<sup>178</sup> In November two PBRs from Cua Viet

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<sup>176</sup> Thomas Mustin, “The River War,” *Ordnance* 53, no. 290 (September-October 1968), 176.

<sup>177</sup> As quoted in Spector, *At War at Sea*, 362.

<sup>178</sup> As quoted in Richard L. Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 252.

ferried three Navy corpsmen and two nurses to the village of Long Kim. During the visit the medical personnel treated over two hundred Vietnamese civilians and distributed three hundred bars of soap. The official report of the visit ended, “People seem to appreciate MEDCAP’s very much.”<sup>179</sup>

The lower level of enemy activity on the Perfume River after the Tet Offensive gave the Hue river group more time and resources to perform a variety of humanitarian and psychological missions than was available to naval operations elsewhere. In the aftermath of the massacre of civilians during the battle for Hue several initiatives were enacted to gain trust among the local population, and one of the most effective was the adoption of a powerful emblem. The dragon symbolized strength and honor to the tradition minded population of Hue, and consequently the PBRs began to fly a dragon headed flag on patrols. The South Vietnamese soon dubbed them *Tau Rong* or Dragon Boats. Combined with the MEDCAP and other aid programs these initiatives improve cooperation and mutual trust considerably.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> (CTF Opsum) 030440Z NOV 1968.

<sup>180</sup> Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 279-280.



Figure 14. MEDCAP Inspection. Captain Shaw (center), Task Force Clearwater commander, accompanying a MEDCAP team at a South Vietnamese village along the Cua Viet River, April-May 1968. Photo courtesy Herman Hughes.

The crowded rivers sometimes called for one of the most ancient of maritime traditions, coming to those in aid. U.S. Navy craft were far from the only boats to transit the Cua Viet and Perfume Rivers. The northern waterways were crowded with all manner of watercraft, and on more than one occasion PBR sailors responded to assist a sampan in distress. The traditional Vietnamese craft were often in poor condition and barely seaworthy, and on a few unfortunate occasions the presence of the brown water boats was the indirect cause of a tragedy. One such example occurred on the morning of March 10<sup>th</sup>, 1968 when a sampan ferrying refugees on the Cua Viet River capsized. The



dangerously overloaded craft overturned after narrowly missing a nearby PBR. Twenty-five to thirty Vietnamese were thrown into the river by the PBR's wake and subsequently rescued from the water by Navy personnel. Three passengers of the sampan drowned, however, but the quick response of the PBR crews was greatly appreciated by the survivors.<sup>181</sup>

### **Mine Warfare**

With little to work with PBR crews often found innovative ways to mitigate the vulnerability of their boats. One such approach was to redesign the forward gunner's chair. After removing the standard metal chair boat engineers would install a lighter version fitted with four reinforced metal springs. A Navy brown water supply officer described the purpose of the modified seat, recalling that, "What would happen is if a PBR did hit a mine the bow gunner was the one that was most likely to be killed or injured." The new seat made for a bumpy ride for the forward gunner but helped ensure that a mine detonation "wouldn't break his back or compress his spine."<sup>182</sup>

The naval mine threat, long present on the northern rivers, changed considerably after the Tet Offensive. Following their failure to effectively close the rivers during the offensive—coupled with their defeat at Hue—the NVA and Viet Cong were left with limited options to stem the flow of logistical supplies to American positions situated inland from coastal supply depots. With greater manpower available from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Division and improved river patrols the riverbanks of both the northern

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<sup>181</sup> (CTF Opsum) 120130Z MAY 1968.

<sup>182</sup> Edwin Oswald, interview by Laura Calkins, April 30th, 2004, transcript, Texas Tech University Vietnam Archive, Oral History Collection, 98-99.

waterways became increasingly inhospitable for PAVN personnel. Consequently underwater weapons became the greatest threat to the brown water navy in I Corps. Like convoys of later wars that dealt with hidden explosive devices on desert roads, the sailors of Clearwater encountered a diverse variety of concealed waterborne hazards.

Proximity to the DMZ made the Cua Viet River the most accessible to PAVN mine laying teams. U.S. and ARVN air and naval surveillance and ground patrols along the Perfume River, coupled with improved military-civilian cooperation led PAVN forces to concentrate their efforts elsewhere. As a result the more northern waterway became the most heavily mined waterway in South Vietnam. The seriousness of the new mining offensive on the Cua Viet became apparent soon after the siege of Khe Sanh ended. Destruction of an ATC by a large contact mine on March 14<sup>th</sup>, was followed by six weeks of relative calm, but this interlude did not last.

On the second day of May the sailors of Clearwater discovered that the contact mines encountered previously had been superseded by more dangerous versions.<sup>183</sup> While on patrol, two PBRs spotted a large group of NVA on the north side of the Cua Viet as well as several large cylindrical objects at the water's edge. Opening fire on the targets, the PBR killed a number of the suspected NVA soldiers were killed and destroyed the mines. During the next few days U.S. Navy EOD (Explosive Ordnance

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<sup>183</sup> Though classifications vary widely, naval mines are often categorized by their method of detonation or their location in the water. The most common detonator types are contact, magnetic or influence, or command detonated. Contact mines explode when struck by a large object, while magnetic or influence mines possess a sensor set to detonate when the presence of a large metal object passes nearby. Command detonated mines are set off by a radio signal, often replaced by cell phones today. Location categories can be classified into moored, bottom, or floating mines. On the Cua Viet River nearly all of these categories of mines were encountered.

Disposal) teams recovered several of the mines intact. They proved to be advanced magnetic mines of Soviet origin, weighing an estimated eighty hundred and fifty pounds each, powerful enough to “sink a battleship,” in the words of one U.S. intelligence officer.<sup>184</sup> An NVA operative from among the group captured on May 2<sup>nd</sup> later admitted under interrogation that he was part of a four-man team trained specifically in the use of the magnetic mines. He described how the mines were broken down into components north of the DMZ, man packed south to the river’s edge under cover of darkness, and then reassembled.<sup>185</sup> The teams would then attach flotation bladders to the large mines and deploy them into the river, for the explicit purpose of impeding the flow of logistics traffic from Danang.<sup>186</sup>

Another-NVA operative captured in early 1969 provided far greater details on these mine-laying teams. All carefully screened Communist party members, the teams received over five months of intensive training in North Vietnam on how to operate, transport, and plant the mines. Using four man teams, they would drag a handful of the large mines south from the DMZ at night. After lying in wait for Clearwater patrols to pass, they would float the mines out into the river then conceal themselves in hidden bunkers until darkness and walk back to the DMZ.<sup>187</sup>

These sophisticated magnetic mines were supplemented with a wide variety of improvised waterborne explosives, making the task of identifying a deadly mine from harmless flotsam difficult. Almost any buoyant object was potentially dangerous. In his

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<sup>184</sup> The exact classification of these mines was the Soviet H18-2 anti-ship mine.

<sup>185</sup> Herman Hughes, phone interview by author, August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2011.

<sup>186</sup> MACV Command History, 453.

<sup>187</sup> Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 246-47.

history of the brown water Navy Richard Schreadley noted that on the Cua Viet, "Floating objects, regardless of their innocent appearance, had to be treated with the utmost caution. C-Ration boxes, tree limbs, cans, drums, plastic spheres and fish floats, a bright blue swim fin, and other flotsam and jetsam of no particular distinction – all might conceal or buoy a floating mine." Many of these floating objects were destroyed by rifle fire from a PBR, which sometimes resulted in a large explosion that often shook the fiberglass craft to its core. Though none was sunk during the month of May six separate logistics craft suffered damage from mines.<sup>188</sup>

The North Vietnamese soon added to their arsenal of weapons by including swimmers trained in the use of underwater explosives such as limpet mines.<sup>189</sup> The addition of these sappers made July an especially difficult month. The worst day of the month, July 27<sup>th</sup>, signaled an escalation in the North's campaign to disrupt the river traffic to Dong Ha. On that day coordinated sapper attacks disabled three LCM craft moored to a buoy near the Cua Viet base. Though all three of the damaged logistics craft were recovered with only a single human casualty, the attack demonstrated the growing capability of the PAVN sapper teams. Like the specially trained river mine teams they received detailed preparation for their missions, and as the months continued so did their attempts to halt the river logistics traffic.<sup>190</sup>

To counter the mine threat Task Force Clearwater began daily sweeps of the Cua Viet. PBRs on patrol searched for suspicious floating objects and the LCMs modified

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 246.

<sup>189</sup> The limpet mine is a general name for a small underwater mine, usually a chemical charge attached to a ship or boat with magnets.

<sup>190</sup> MACV News Release, July 29<sup>th</sup>, 1968: Saigon, South Vietnam, 2.

for minesweeping used chain sweeps to cut moored mines. When located the EOD teams would be summoned to dispose of larger floating mines or anything the brown water sailors refused to touch. Other minesweeping boats were also equipped with magnetic sweeping gear that could locate and disable the especially dangerous influence mines. A message summarizing the mine countermeasures employed on the northern river noted that beyond the use of the magnetic sweep gear, “chain drag sweeping, bank security, and vigilant river patrols remain the only effective response to these continuing threats.”<sup>191</sup>

### **“Little Better than Moles”**

Dangerous and unpleasant as they regularly were, the minesweeping patrols were often preferable to life at the home base of the Dong Ha River Group. At the close of 1968 NSAD Cua Viet resembled a turn of the century border town of dilapidated cantonments, bereft of any organizing principle or layout.<sup>192</sup> Occupying the north edge of a small peninsula that jutted into the Gulf of Tonkin, Cua Viet consisted of a few dozen wooden and prefabricated buildings connected by wooden walkways, to permit passage on the deep and ever shifting sand. Nothing was built beyond the most essential structures due to the danger of artillery bombardment from the north.<sup>193</sup> Around a dozen PBRs, ATCs, and assorted logistics craft were typically tied up just north of the beach,

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<sup>191</sup> (CTF Opsum) 171500Z May 1968.

<sup>192</sup> The best photographs of Cua Viet can be found in Edward M. Marolda’s *The U.S. Navy in the Vietnam War: An Illustrated History* (Washington, DC: Brassey’s Inc, 2002); Frank Collins “Maritime Support of the Campaign in I Corps,” in *Vietnam: The Naval Story*, ed. by Frank Uhlig (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1986).

<sup>193</sup> Schwartztrauber, “River Patrol Relearned,” 377.

alongside temporary piers. Forced to endure regular artillery attacks most buildings had been built deep into the sand and fortified with countless bags of the readily available material. The conditions at the base caused naval historian Richard Schreadley to remark, “The men at Cua Viet lived little better than moles in heavily bunkered huts burrowed down among the sand dunes.”<sup>194</sup>

Life at the exposed location was harsh. The sand blasted barracks were the embodiment of austerity, and few diversions existed other than playing cards or discussing the last patrol in the mess hall, where as a precaution most inhabitants of Cua Viet took their meals wearing their helmets and flak jackets.<sup>195</sup> One of the most telling accounts of life at the detachment can be found in a letter from a junior naval officer to his inbound relief. The letter began with some humorous advice, noting, “The best way to prepare for coming to Cua Viet is to go to Canada.”<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Richard L. Schreadley, “The Naval War in Vietnam, 1950-1970,” 293.

<sup>195</sup> Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 272.

<sup>196</sup> Michael W. Taylor, *A Reminiscence of One Year's Service as a United States Naval Officer in South Vietnam, 1970-1971*, Michael Taylor Collection, Texas Tech University Vietnam Archive, 7-9.

He went on to describe the harsh conditions such as “a hell of a lot of beautiful shifting, blowing white sand,” the lousy climate, and the poorly aimed but still dangerous rocket attacks from the north, make living here a “pain in the a\_\_.” Despite the hardships he also wrote fondly of his fellow sailors and Marines, noting, “There is a correspondingly greater camaraderie among the officers and men. If something has to be done, it’s easy to find the right person.” He recommended bringing plenty of books, and then ended the letter abruptly with, “When the h\_\_l are you getting here?”<sup>197</sup>

Cua Viet was unusual not only for its unforgiving location but also for its shared joint command responsibilities and personnel. Over a dozen separate units were present, including Army and Marine Corps security platoons, an Army signal detachment, and a Marine searchlight platoon.<sup>198</sup> Intra-service rivalries over defense of the base were a constant source of tension, and these frustrations as well as anger about the living conditions and the war itself occasionally spilled over leading to occasional acts of vandalism and sabotage. The struggle to maintain morale was a constant one. After a visit to Cua Viet in 1969 Richard Schreadley noted that, “One can well imagine how these circumstances affected not only the tradition-bound senior officers at the base, but the large majority of men there who were trying to do a job to the best of their ability.”<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 7-9.

<sup>198</sup> Schwartztrauber, “River Patrol Relearned,” 376.

<sup>199</sup> Richard L. Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 244.



Figure 15. Cua Viet Base Barracks. Photo courtesy of Herman Hughes





Figure 16. Artillery Damage to Cua Viet Barracks. Captain Shaw, Commander of Task Force Clearwater, inspects damage to his office, March-April 1968. Photo courtesy of Herman Hughes.

Cua Viet became a byword for the toughest possible living conditions in the brown water navy. Sailors in the Delta often heard horror stories of the base, which was often compared to survival among the trenches of Verdun or Passchendaele (see Figure 15). The barbed wire emplacements, regular artillery attacks, and barracks covered by sandbags did much to reinforce the view that Cua Viet was one of the worst places to be assigned in all of South Vietnam.<sup>200</sup> Most destructive were the irregular artillery bombardments, a persistent nuisance (Figure 16). Periodically North Vietnamese artillery pieces would lob inaccurate but destructive rounds onto Cua Viet. Admittedly none of these bombardments equaled the destructiveness of March 10<sup>th</sup>, 1968, when almost half the base was destroyed, including the mess hall, communications bunker, and sickbay.<sup>201</sup> This attack made clear both the vulnerability of the base and the irregular nature of the North's long-range artillery capabilities. Following a March B-52 Arclight strike that devastated their positions inside the DMZ, the North Vietnamese were forced to move their weapons further north, outside effective range of Cua Viet. Any round that did hit the base could be attributed to pure chance.<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Michael Taylor, telephone interview by author, August 5, 2011.

<sup>201</sup> (CTF Opsum) 231315Z APR 1968.

<sup>202</sup> In an interesting account from then Lieutenant Herman Hughes, U.S. Navy, who served as intelligence officer at Cua Viet from March through May 1968, the COMNAVFORV staff members were skeptical that the NVA had artillery pieces in the ostensibly 'demilitarized' DMZ. After discovering an unexploded 152mm artillery shell one morning after a bombardment, Hughes had an EOD team detonate the shell then pieced back the fragments "like a puzzle." Along with an assistant he transported the heavy shell fragments back to COMNAVFORV headquarters in Saigon, and in his words, "I walked in and plunked that thing down on the intelligence officer's desk and said, 'That's what they're hitting us with.'" The shell fragments had the desired effect, as a week later the B-52 strikes were launched on the DMZ artillery positions. Source: Herman Hughes, phone interview by author, August 30<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

The majority of post-Tet Offensive bombardments lasted less than an hour with a few dozen rounds impacting on or around the base, inflicting little physical damage but extracting a significant psychological toll. One of the heaviest bombardments took place on the morning of May 25<sup>th</sup>, when over a hundred rounds landed in close proximity to Cua Viet, resulting in negligible damage and no casualties.<sup>203</sup> During the first three weeks of June, six separate attacks occurred, with most of the damage confined to the base fuel farm. A summary message noted that by that time the NVA artillerymen had developed improved techniques to direct their fire, possibly employing a spotter on the north side of the river, noting, “During each attack the initial barrage consisted of four to six rounds which landed both long and short of the target. After a short pause a steady barrage was received with increasing accuracy.” On June 24<sup>th</sup> sailors and Marines again rushed to their sandy bunkers to ride out another bombardment. This time, however, almost half of the North Vietnamese rounds failed to explode, leaving dozens of half-buried shells in the sandy hills surrounding the base, later disposed of by ordnance disposal teams. The bombardments subsided in the fall of 1968 but memories of the exploding shells remained long after the guns had fallen silent.<sup>204</sup>

Aside from the stress and exploding ordnance another nuisance was the presence of a female radio personality heard around the base. A North Vietnamese version of Tokyo Rose, the American dubbed Hanoi Hannah made regular propaganda broadcasts predicting the imminent defeat of U.S. and ARVN ‘puppet’ forces. On occasion she singled out the Cua Viet base, especially its singularly unfortunate mess hall. Over the

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<sup>203</sup> COMNAVFORV Monthly Historical Summary, May 1968, 77.

<sup>204</sup> (CTF Opsum) 240440Z JUN 68.

course of its existence the base endured the loss and subsequent reconstruction of numerous mess halls, each destroyed by uncannily accurate NVA artillery fire. On July 6<sup>th</sup>, 1968 the crews of Cua Viet enjoyed a rare dinner of steak and lobster tails, the “finest cuisine in northern I CTZ - in spite of Hanoi Hannah’s recent radio pronouncement to the men at Cua Viet that they would never get to eat a meal in the mess hall being constructed.”<sup>205</sup> A few months after this feast, however, this fourth mess hall to be built was destroyed by another direct hit. Quickly rebuilt, the fifth mess hall was named in honor of a cook killed inside, the structure’s only casualty.<sup>206</sup>

Conditions at Tan My were quite different. Since its short-lived establishment as the headquarters of Task Force Clearwater in February 1968 the primary base of the Hue river group had become an enviable place to work. With some creative engineering an LCM was modified to transport PBRs from Cua Viet to Mobile Base I, the artificial island of Ammi barges in place at Tan My.<sup>207</sup> By the end of 1968 only twenty PBRs were available in I Corps, and keeping the boats operational was a high priority.<sup>208</sup> Mobile Base I had advantages beyond its repair facilities, however. The ‘temporary’ floating base and headquarters of the Hue River security group was considered one of the best places to pull duty in I Corps, described by one observer as, “air conditioned, clean, and for the most part run like a taut navy ship.” With the exception of the

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<sup>205</sup> (CTF Opsum) 061400Z JUL 68.

<sup>206</sup> Thomas J. Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 271.

<sup>207</sup> Schwartztrauber, “River Patrol Relearned,” 376.

<sup>208</sup> MACV Historical Summary, 463.

occasional mortar or sapper attack Tan My was also far safer than its counterpart to the northwest.<sup>209</sup>

The unforgiving conditions at Cua Viet eventually compelled TFCW leadership to consider seriously a regular crew rotation system for the base. These concerns were spelled out in a message from River Flotilla Five in October 1968, and explained that the, “Rationale behind rotation plan is principally founded in austere and primitive living conditions at Cua Viet, and constant threat of in-coming artillery, both on patrol and at the base, the constant strain, high temperature, and lack of creature comforts make it necessary to ease the pressure on these men.” The message recommended that all brown water personnel be rotated out every six months to limit the stress of duty at Cua Viet.<sup>210</sup> Yet often this opportunity to escape was turned down, as many sailors chose to remain at the base and finish their full tour.<sup>211</sup>

The dangers and privations shared by the sailors, soldiers, and Marines who served in Task Force Clearwater led to the development of a unique brown water culture. Duty on both the Cua Viet and Perfume Rivers brought a deep sense of élan to the men who patrolled their muddy waters. Commodore Schwartztrauber offered perhaps the most fitting summary to these sailors, declaring that, “Merely to serve with these units, is to be greatly impressed with the men’s qualities of ingenuity, courage, professional skill, and patriotic dedication to duty.” Courageous and dedicated personnel, not boats or organization, were what defined this unique group.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 250.

<sup>210</sup> Commander River Patrol Flotilla Five Message 110621Z OCT 1968.

<sup>211</sup> Schreadley, “The Naval War in Vietnam, 1950-1970,” 293.

<sup>212</sup> As quoted in Schwartztrauber, “River Patrol Relearned,” 377-78.

## CHAPTER IV

## THE SLOW DRAW DOWN

*“In the previous administration we Americanized the war in Viet-Nam. In this administration we are Vietnamizing the search for peace.”*

Richard M. Nixon, November 3, 1969

From their vantage point the politics of the Vietnam War may have seemed remote to the men of Task Force Clearwater, but in the summer and fall of 1968 they began to exert a powerful influence. Events both near and far would cast a long shadow on their operations. Racial and political tensions back home in the United States were at a boiling point. The aftermath of the Tet Offensive heralded increasing national disillusionment with the long war, visceral anger directed at the political establishment and social upheavals at home. In their sometimes forgotten corner of South Vietnam the brown water sailors would hear of the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy, fierce protests against the war, and an upsurge in violence which would cause one of the most respected scholars on Vietnam to observe that, “Rioting in the cities, a spiraling crime rate, and noisy demonstrations in the streets suggested that violence abroad had produced violence at home.”<sup>213</sup>

A series of upheavals in military and political leadership also took place. For their 37<sup>th</sup> Commander-in-Chief the United States would elect a former vice-president who campaigned on the promise of “peace with honor.”<sup>214</sup> General Creighton Abrams

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<sup>213</sup> George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 213.

<sup>214</sup> Republican Party candidate Richard M. Nixon would be elected President of the United States on November 5<sup>th</sup>, 1968, beating out Democratic Party nominee Hubert Humphrey.

had succeeded General William Westmoreland as the MACV commander in June of 1968 and was assigned the colossal task of turning the defense of embattled South Vietnam over to its own citizens. Most importantly, the brown water sailors of I Corps soon found themselves under the command of a new and dynamic leader, who would later become one of the most influential U.S. naval officers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Enter Elmo Zumwalt**

On the last day of September 1968, Rear Admiral Kenneth Veth, who had served as Commander Naval Forces, Vietnam, since April 1967, was relieved of command by Vice Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt.<sup>215</sup> In many ways the elevation of Admiral Zumwalt led to the greatest operational and administrative shift of America's Southeast Asia naval strategy since the creation of Operation Market Time in 1965. The youngest vice-admiral in U.S. Navy history in 1968, he was considered one of the service's most capable leaders.<sup>216</sup> Unorthodox and controversial, he devoted his considerable energies to the development of new strategies and tactics for the brown water navy in South Vietnam. In short he came to win.<sup>217</sup>

This aggressive approach set him apart from his predecessor. Though in many ways an outstanding officer, Rear Admiral Veth never seemed comfortable with his role

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<sup>215</sup> Commander U.S. Naval Forces Vietnam News Release, Saigon: September 30<sup>th</sup>, 1968.

<sup>216</sup> A Vice-Admiral (3 stars) is the second highest rank in the post-1945 U.S. Navy, and equivalent to a U.S. Army or Marine Corps Lieutenant General. Vice Admiral Zumwalt would later earn his fourth star and would serve as the Chief of Naval Operations, the highest post in the U.S. Navy, from July 1970 to July 1974.

<sup>217</sup> Leslie Julian Cullen, "Brown Water Admiral: Elmo R. Zumwalt Jr. and United States Naval Forces, Vietnam, 1968-1970" (PhD dissertation, Texas Tech University, 1998), 15.

as COMNAVFORV or in the world of brown water warfare. Described by a junior member of his staff as “a real gentlemen,” Veth was perhaps too conservative for the unconventional and demanding war in Vietnam.<sup>218</sup> Even those who appreciated his traditional leadership style described him as defensively oriented and “totally unaggressive.”<sup>219</sup>

Admiral Veth had a poor working relationship with the General Abrams, a serious impediment to intra-service cooperation. During Zumwalt’s first meeting with General Abrams in Saigon Veth was all but ignored by the MACV commander, who by most accounts was eager for his departure from the country.<sup>220</sup> Yet for all his faults Veth was partly the victim of the Navy’s fixation with the expanding Soviet Navy, and on more than one occasion his passivity gave way to decisive action. His quick response to the Tet Offensive in I Corps deserves commendation. Without his initiative Task Force Clearwater would not have been created during the crisis weeks of February 1968.

Another of Veth’s shortcomings was his tendency to manage the naval war primarily from his headquarters in Saigon. The tradition bound officer rarely ventured to his subordinate commands. In marked contrast soon after his arrival in Saigon Admiral Zumwalt conducted a whirlwind inspection of nearly every major naval installation, including Danang, Cua Viet, and Tan My. Along with members of his staff he even spent one night in a muddy bunker near the Cua Viet base, learning firsthand

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<sup>218</sup> W. Lewis Glenn, interview by Paul Stillwell, May 16<sup>th</sup>, 1984, interview 1, transcript, Elmo Zumwalt Oral History Collection, Texas Tech University Vietnam Archive, 4.

<sup>219</sup> Earl Rectanus, interview by Paul Stillwell, November 19<sup>th</sup>, 1982, interview 1, transcript, Elmo Zumwalt Oral History Collection, Texas Tech University Vietnam Archive, 14.

<sup>220</sup> Leslie Julian Cullen, “Brown Water Admiral,” 67.



from the Marines what conditions on the DMZ truly were.<sup>221</sup> The admiral's good rapport with sailors, especially those in the brown water fleet, soon earned him a deep measure of trust and admiration, as well as the nickname the "Sailor's Admiral." Following his tour Zumwalt's efforts were soon fixed on reemphasizing the U.S. Navy's original mission, preventing sea-borne infiltration into South Vietnam. To this end he soon launched a series of aggressive brown water operations in the Mekong Delta, including his centerpiece effort, Operation SEALORDS.<sup>222</sup>

SEALORDS (Southeast Asia Lake, Ocean, River, and Delta Strategy) represented the operational embodiment of Zumwalt's command style and creativity. Realizing that the 38,000 personnel and hundreds of river craft under his command were simultaneously at the peak of their strength but also underutilized, he advocated an audacious new strategy that would play to their strengths. This new plan would employ over five hundred U.S. Navy brown water vessels from all three of the major maritime task forces (Market Time, Game Warden, and the Mobile Riverine Force), six hundred VNN patrol boats, and aerial support to establish a series of river barriers as part of a powerful interdiction line in the Mekong Delta. For the first time these previously separate task forces would operate jointly as a single team, the newly created Task Force 194. Once the barriers were in place in January 1969 the effort led to a series of blows against the Viet Cong and a sharp decrease in communist infiltration in comparison to previous years.<sup>223</sup> Of his innovative plan Zumwalt argued simply that brown water

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 67-68.

<sup>222</sup> Thomas J. Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 285-86.

<sup>223</sup> Harry G. Summers, *The Historical Atlas of the Vietnam War*, 150.

warfare required inherent flexibility and that, “You must change strategies frequently in order to keep the enemy from exploiting you.”<sup>224</sup>

Admiral Zumwalt was the leader that the brown water navy in Vietnam had been waiting for, an innovative strategist who was unafraid to jettison old ideas. The admiral’s energetic leadership was a jolt to nearly all levels of the Vietnam brown water navy, and his creative approach in IV Corps was undoubtedly effective. One analysis of Operation SEALORDS concluded that, “By concentrating naval forces athwart the major infiltration routes along the Cambodian border, SEALORDS effectively cut enemy communication lines into South Vietnam and severely restricted enemy attempts at infiltration.”<sup>225</sup> Yet one key brown water task force would be largely left out of this resurgence. With the majority of his time and resources devoted towards the Mekong Delta the new COMNAVFORV could spare little for his tiny brown water flotilla in I Corps. As it had since its inception, Task Force Clearwater would continue to fulfill its multitude of responsibilities with both distinction and steadily dwindling resources.

### **An Ever Evolving Mission**

At the close of April 1968, as a prelude to their larger countrywide ‘mini-Tet’ offensive in May, Quang Tri province was the site of a large and little understood battle

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<sup>224</sup> Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 286.

<sup>225</sup> William C. McQuilkin, “Operation Sealords: A Front in a Frontless War: An Analysis of the Brown-Water Navy in Vietnam” (Thesis, US Army War College, 1997), 66.

whose exact purpose continues to puzzle scholars.<sup>226</sup> Like Khe Sanh the original intentions of the North Vietnamese remain obscure, though some historians consider the battle a poorly executed attempt to capture Dong Ha.<sup>227</sup> For years military historians could not even give the enigmatic battle a proper title, and in the words of historian Ronald Spector, “It long remained a battle with no name.”<sup>228</sup>

The battle of Dai Do, named years later for a tiny village along the Bo Dieu tributary to Dong Ha, began with a rocket attack on an LCU headed upriver on April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1968. This act forced the temporary closure of the Cua Viet River and alerted the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marines to the presence of the North Vietnamese 320<sup>th</sup> Division, entrenched near the village of Dai Do. For much of the next month several battalions of Marines would engage in vicious fighting north of Dong Ha, eventually pushing the North Vietnamese out of an impressive line of fortifications and preventing a potential takeover of the hub of their logistics network in I Corps. During the course of the “confused and bloody” battle, by some estimates the largest single engagement of the war, the men and boats of Task Force Clearwater played a peripheral role. The monitors provided fire support and

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<sup>226</sup> Mini-Tet, or the May Offensive, as military historians have named it, was the third phase of the overall offensive begun in November 1967. A smaller and far less successful version of the far better known January -February Tet Offensive, the May Offensive was comprised of attacks on 119 provincial and state capitals and major cities, including Saigon. Unlike the Tet Offensive the May attacks failed to achieve tactical surprise and were repulsed with heavy casualties. Harry G. Summers, *The Historical Atlas of the Vietnam War*, 142.

<sup>227</sup> Military historian Ronald Spector, in his study of the post-Tet military situation in South Vietnam, argues that the initial objective of the NVA 320<sup>th</sup> Division at Dai Do may indeed have been to capture Dong Ha. He concedes, however, that whatever intention the NVA made a severe blunder by announcing their position with an attack on the Navy logistics traffic on April 30<sup>th</sup>. Ronald H. Spector, *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 142-156.

<sup>228</sup> Ronald H. Spector, *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 148.

the patrol craft to guard the logistics traffic, but the overwhelming brunt of the fighting was borne by the outnumbered Marines, who suffered 1,500 casualties compared to over 3,000 North Vietnamese killed or captured. Though not an enormous tactical victory for the U.S., the battle's strategic result was to leave the eastern half of the DMZ under American control for the first time since 1965.<sup>229</sup>



Figure 17. LT Hughes Inspecting NVA Sapper Gear. Photo courtesy Herman Hughes.

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<sup>229</sup> Spector, *After Tet*, 155-56.

The exact objective of the NVA offensive has never been made clear, but by piecing together some of the more disparate pieces of evidence a plausible answer emerges to this riddle. During the early morning hours of May 2nd a PBR patrol east of Dong Ha encountered a large group of heavily equipped NVA infantrymen on the northern riverbank, including five suspected sappers.<sup>230</sup> The group was immediately taken under fire and what was estimated to be a large mine destroyed. During the next few days several more mines were found and recovered by U.S. Navy EOD teams, apparently abandoned by NVA sapper teams. As mentioned in the previous chapter, these were a set of six complete Soviet H18-2 magnetic mines, the most sophisticated yet encountered in I Corps, and deployed by mine laying team specially trained in North Vietnam (see Figure 17).

Captured a few days after the recovery of the Soviet mines, a North Vietnamese sailor revealed under interrogation that the mines were part of a larger combined strategy. He detailed a plan in which a few days prior to a communist assault on Dong Ha his team was to place the magnetic mines in the Cua Viet River, in the hopes of sinking several of the LCM and YFU craft transiting to Dong Ha. The theory was that if enough of the larger logistics craft were sunk and both sides of the river captured, the waterway would be blocked to all traffic, limiting reinforcements from Cua Viet and permitting the NVA division to capture Dong Ha with limited interference.<sup>231</sup>

This bold plan never reached fruition, in large part due to the alert reaction of the PBR crews. In a phone interview Herman Hughes, an intelligence officer assigned to

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<sup>230</sup> COMNAVFORV Monthly Historical Summary, May 1968,

<sup>231</sup> Herman Hughes, phone interview by author, August 30<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

Cua Viet, he acknowledged the debt the Marines owed to the brown water navy, recalling that the PBR sailors, “discovered what the North Vietnamese were wanting to do, and would have done had we not took them under fire in the middle of the night.”<sup>232</sup> The NVA plan was unlikely to succeed, yet it was certainly plausible, and even a brief disruption to the supply routes in I Corps could have been troubling, if not disastrous. The fall of Dong Ha would have been even more problematic. In *After Tet*, Ronald Spector speculates that, “The seizure of Dong Ha, even for a few days, would have been a major psychological victory similar to Hue or the attack on the U.S. Embassy during Tet.”<sup>233</sup>

The months following this successful defense of I Corps brought both a decrease in the level of fighting and significant changes to Task Force Clearwater. From its beginnings as an improvised command Clearwater had quickly matured into a small but capable task force. The high water mark of Clearwater’s operations on the northern rivers was undoubtedly the late spring and early summer of 1968. With the failure of the May Offensive the threat to Dong Ha and the whole of I Corps diminished considerably, and as the summer of 1968 progressed the reach of the task force was extended into the tributaries of both rivers and the surrounding lagoons and bays in I Corps.<sup>234</sup> Although the logistics craft from Danang continued to attract mine and rocket attacks the task force had established a measure of positive control over the waterways.

With only a fraction of the resources available to Operation Game Warden the northern task force’s small fleet began performing joint operations with both the Marines

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<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> Spector, *After Tet*, 156.

<sup>234</sup> S.A. Swartztrauber, “River Patrol Relearned,” 377.

and 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division. Psychological operations to dissuade Viet Cong infiltration as well as the ever-popular MEDCAP missions became more common. At the same time the task force's most unusual craft were used with spectacular success in the bays and lagoons surrounding Hue. Capitalizing on their speed the PACVs were often used to cut off the escape routes of Viet Cong units fleeing from the American paratroopers. Their unique ability to operate on both land and sea enabled the killing or capture of dozens of Viet Cong personnel, more than making up for their high price in both maintenance hours and operating costs.<sup>235</sup>

The summer of 1968 would mark the peak of the Clearwater's operations. The arrival of the PACVs and an increase in the number of available PBRs enabled the task force to move beyond the defensive missions of logistical escort and river patrol. This apex in operational strength proved short lived, however. Though the hovercraft did mark an uptick in available boats this increased strength was misleading. Mechanically demanding, the hovercraft became more and more troublesome as time passed, and as their psychological shock value gradually diminished the large craft became conspicuous targets. By the summer of 1969 the aging craft would be retired and shipped back to the United States.<sup>236</sup>

By this time the threat to the logistics traffic had eased and the majority of I Corps was firmly in U.S. and ARVN hands. This new situation meant that that the task force was not the priority it had once been. Operationally preoccupied with his offensives in the Mekong Delta, Admiral Zumwalt's priorities lay elsewhere. This focus

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<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 390.

<sup>236</sup> R. L. Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 251.

on IV Corps is understandable, since during the months following the battle of Dai Do and the subsequent May Offensive the communists turned their attention to other targets in South Vietnam. After months of hazardous patrols the task force had partially achieved its objectives. Both of the northern rivers had become more secure arteries of transportation, and supplies flowed largely unimpeded to Hue and Dong Ha. Rocket attacks on the traffic transiting to Hue or Dong Ha occasionally broke the calm of I Corps waterways but they were infrequent, and the artillery bombardments on Cua Viet base were more infrequent and ineffectual. Though they remained geographically at the North Vietnamese doorstep, the rivers of I Corps had become a backwater of the war.

Despite the decrease in enemy activity the mine threat remained very real, as did the casualties. On January 16<sup>th</sup>, 1969 the first major tragedy of the year occurred, when a YFU logistics craft transiting to Dong Ha sunk after striking a large mine. Five sailors were killed and four others were wounded.<sup>237</sup> At the close of January a conference to discuss the mine threat met in Danang, attended by the commander of Task Force Clearwater, Captain Sayre Schwartztrauber, and the base's commander, Rear Admiral Emmett P. Bonner. The conference concluded that the primary threat would continue to come from contact detonated mines, and recommended that additional mine sweeping resources be made available to the Dong Ha River Group. Over time three fifty-seven foot fiberglass hulled MSBs (Mine Sweeping Boats) from Mine Division 112 were detached from Danang to assist the task force. A request to the Seventh Fleet for more effective MSL (Minesweeping Launch) boats was denied, as they were deemed too valuable to risk in the dangerous Cua Viet River. As the river remained the most heavily

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<sup>237</sup> (CTF Opsum) 160250Z JAN 1969.



mined waterway in South Vietnam this decision likely resulted in more than a few angry voices of protest, but even so the task force continued to operate with the limited available resources.<sup>238</sup>

While resources to combat the mine offensive remained limited, Naval Forces Vietnam leadership did recognize the need for command personnel with greater expertise in this neglected component of naval warfare. Subsequently Captain Frederick Jewett II, a specialist in mine warfare, was chosen to relieve the popular and effective Captain Schwartztrauber in February 1969. At the time of his accession to command Jewett had available nine converted LCM-6 minesweepers, four on the Perfume River and five on the Cua Viet. The LCMs were an enlarged version of the classic Higgins boat of the Second World War. Slightly smaller than the more common LCM-8 “Mike” boats used so effectively on the northern rivers, the craft were designated MSM (Minesweeper, River) after their conversion, which simply involved the installation of sweep gear towed from the stern of the craft. Three of the more specialized MSBs were assigned to the north in early 1969, for the express purpose of sweeping the mouth of the Cua Viet River.<sup>239</sup>

Based on an assessment of the mines encountered to that time, Jewett made several improvements to the sweep gear being used by the MSMs.<sup>240</sup> Like his predecessor the Clearwater commodore improvised to protect both his own boats and the river traffic from Danang. When American supplies of concussion grenades ran low he

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<sup>238</sup> R. L. Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 247-48.

<sup>239</sup> Schwartztrauber, “River Patrol Relearned,” 390-91.

<sup>240</sup> At the close of 1969 two of the MSM’s were further improved with the installation of a mine hunting sonar called Shadowgraph. Source: Thomas Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 281.

ordered his supply officer to obtain a shipment of a British version of the explosive, one that worked quite effectively on the innovative but still primitive mines on the Cua Viet River.<sup>241</sup>

By the time of Jewett's tenure as commodore, minesweeping on the Cua Viet had become a daily routine. Typically a twenty foot Boston whaler (chosen for its non-metal construction) would depart Cua Viet and drop the British made 'scare' charges at high speed, hoping to destroy the less sophisticated contact or 'basket' mines that floated just below the surface. After completing their high speed run the whaler was followed by the MSMs towing their river mine sweep gear, hoping to locate and disable any influence or magnetic mines unaffected by the charges dropped by the whaler. Piloting an MSM down the mine-infested river required an iron nerve, as their pilots knew full well that at any moment an underwater explosion could rip their craft apart. Summarizing the remarkable success of these MSM crews Richard Schreadley noted that, "It took both raw courage and luck for the minesweeping effort to succeed as well as it did."<sup>242</sup>

Shortly after Jewett assumed command a new type of mine was encountered along the Cua Viet River. The first was discovered in March, and though their exact construction varied the new type was more difficult to detect than earlier versions. One Clearwater message described two such devices, saying that, "both mines contained approximately 75 lbs. of plastic explosive in a wicker basket approximately 2 feet square and one foot deep."<sup>243</sup> Crudely constructed, these mines could be quickly assembled and then dropped in the river to drift with the prevailing tides and currents. Though far less

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<sup>241</sup> R. L. Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 248.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, 248-49.

<sup>243</sup> (CTF Opsum) 110200Z March 1969.

sophisticated than the larger influence mines employed in past months, the ‘basket mines’ would prove difficult to locate and destroy.<sup>244</sup>

The majority of the mines placed in the Cua Viet River were laid there at night. Consequently PBR night patrols were instituted to interdict this practice. A dawn to dusk curfew had been in place on the northern rivers since the Tet Offensive, and any person or craft seen after sunset could be shot on sight. By 1969 standard practice called for night patrols of two PBRs and a single LCPL. The broad, stable design of the LCPL made it ideal for the installation of large equipment, and after being assigned to Clearwater the craft were equipped with a surveillance platform that consisted of a 24-inch xenon infrared searchlight. Six personnel manned the boats: two Marines trained in the use of the searchlights and a standard crew of four sailors.<sup>245</sup>

The trio of boats would extinguish all lights prior to getting underway and the LCPL embarked Marines would visually sweep the riverbanks for any sign of activity. When movement was spotted they would switch on their searchlights and engage the enemy. On more than one occasion the patrol would encounter suspected North Vietnamese mine laying teams on the banks of the Cua Viet. On the night of February 11<sup>th</sup> one such patrol discovered a group of five suspected sappers carrying a large object on the north bank of the river. When brought under rifle and grenade fire from the boats, the party quickly retreated. Such an encounter would be typically followed at first light

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<sup>244</sup> Schwartztrauber, “River Patrol Relearned,” 391.

<sup>245</sup> Schwartztrauber, “River Patrol Relearned,” 394-95.

by a detachment of Marines pursuing the suspected NVA soldiers in the hope of either discovering their location or gathering intelligence.<sup>246</sup>

Despite these efforts the underwater weapons exacted a considerable toll. Five river craft were sunk or damaged by mines in 1969, including three PBRs.<sup>247</sup> In one of these incidents a mine explosion lifted a PBR completely out of the water, yet amazingly no one onboard was injured and the boat received minor damage.<sup>248</sup> Most encounters with the mines were not so forgiving, however, as twelve sailors were killed and over thirty wounded over the course of the year.<sup>249</sup> Yet the task force also likely escaped more damage due to improved relations with South Vietnamese civilians. In July a group of children discovered an unarmed pressure mine and turned it over to a passing PBR patrol.<sup>250</sup> During the same month a large limpet mine was recovered in the fishing nets of a Vietnamese sampan, which was also quickly turned over by a passing patrol boat to an Explosive Ordnance Disposal team.<sup>251</sup>

North Vietnamese mines were not the only threat in I Corps. The 1969 monsoon season was more intense than in years past, and on the morning of September 2<sup>nd</sup> Typhoon Doris came ashore near the DMZ.<sup>252</sup> The high winds and heavy seas resulted in some significant damage to the Cua Viet base, including the destruction of a security tower and much of the perimeter fencing.<sup>253</sup> With some irony, however, the PBRs of the

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<sup>246</sup> (CTF Opsum) 112055Z February 1969.

<sup>247</sup> R.L. Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 248-49.

<sup>248</sup> (CTF Opsum) 230245Z February 1969.

<sup>249</sup> R.L. Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 248-49.

<sup>250</sup> (CTF Opsum) 221410Z July 1969.

<sup>251</sup> (CTF Opsum) 100915Z July 1969.

<sup>252</sup> COMNAVFORV Monthly Historical Summary, September 1969, 88.

<sup>253</sup> R. L. Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 249.

Dong Ha group fared better than those moored at Tan My due to the recent construction of a protective lagoon. Fortunately most of the Clearwater's river craft escaped undamaged, and within two days the task force resumed operations on both of the northern rivers.<sup>254</sup>

Duty with the Hue River Group in 1969 was a more laid back experience than its northwest counterpart. Ironically the river that had sparked the creation of Task Force Clearwater had become all but devoid of enemy activity by the summer of 1968. The Perfume River was continually swept for mines and the occasional firefight did take place between PBRs and Viet Cong, but logistics transits from Tan My to Hue went largely unopposed. The river group instead continued to focus on its psychological and MEDCAP operations, considered to be among the most successful of their kind in all of South Vietnam.<sup>255</sup>

In *Brown Water, Black Berets* Thomas Cutler offers perhaps the best analysis of Task Force Clearwater's mission in 1969, summarizing it simply: "The enemy continued to mine, and Clearwater forces continued to sweep, patrol, and escort."<sup>256</sup> The North Vietnamese mining campaign of the Cua Viet is little remembered today, yet it was one of the most intensive efforts of the war to deny a line of communication to an enemy in modern times. In the months that the enemy mining offensive on the Cua Viet intensified the mission of Task Force Clearwater always remained the same, to keep the rivers open and navigable. Due to their efforts the rivers remained firmly under U.S. and ARVN control, and with the failure of the May 1968 offensive the NVA made no further

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<sup>254</sup> COMNAVFORV Monthly Historical Summary, September 1969, 88.

<sup>255</sup> R. L. Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 250-51.

<sup>256</sup> Thomas Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 281.

attempts to challenge them for control of I Corps. As a consequence of the patrols by Clearwater and improved mine hunting efforts, the rivers were kept open.

### **ACTOV and Mission's End**

A force in some ways even more powerful than the North Vietnamese military soon ended the U.S. Navy's mission in I Corps. The withdrawal of the American military presence from South Vietnam soon overtook Task Force Clearwater, as did the enormous effort to train the small navy of South Vietnam. The latter effort had begun as far back as the summer of 1968, when the COMNAVFORV staff began drawing up plans for a potential turnover to the South Vietnamese.<sup>257</sup> Subsequently in a tense meeting at MACV headquarters in Saigon on November 2<sup>nd</sup>, General Creighton Abrams forcefully informed his subordinates that the political situation in the United States demanded a strategy for rapid withdrawal. When an Air Force staff officer informed him of their plan to complete turnover to the South Vietnamese by 1976, Abrams stunned the crowded briefing room by angrily smashing his fist on the conference table. After directing several choice expletives at the Air Force he denounced their timetable as completely unacceptable and declared that, "He [President Johnson] has no consensus of support for this war. What support he has is dwindling. It's clear that the policy is to get us out of this war and turn it over to the Vietnamese."<sup>258</sup>

Immediately after this exchange the new COMNAVFORV, Admiral Zumwalt, briefed General Abrams on his own withdrawal concept, and following its approval

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<sup>257</sup> "The Vietnamese Navy" Vietnam Bulletin, March 1970: Embassy of Vietnam, 1.

<sup>258</sup> As quoted in Cullen, "Brown Water Admiral," 4.

proceeded to execute a remarkable campaign to both withdraw the U.S. Navy from South Vietnam and also to train and prepare the VNN (South Vietnamese Navy) to defend the rivers and coastlines.<sup>259</sup> One of the most important factors in executing this program, soon designated Accelerated Turnover to the Vietnamese (ACTOV), was the admiral's strong friendship with Commodore Tran Van Chon, his counterpart in the VNN. In letter dated April 1970 Zumwalt thanked Chon for the great progress in building up the VNN since the early months of 1969, of which he wrote "I attribute this almost entirely to your wonderful leadership, and I must confess that what you have done has exceeded what I had optimistically felt possible."<sup>260</sup>

Without Chon's assistance ACTOV would have been far more difficult to accomplish. The program called for turning over virtually all of the U.S. Navy's operational tasks in South Vietnam by June 30<sup>th</sup>, 1970.<sup>261</sup> It involved two main phases and targeted the summer of 1972 as the date when the VNN would be materially and operationally capable of conducting naval operations without U.S. assistance. Next to Operation SEALORDS, the ACTOV program was Admiral Zumwalt's greatest accomplishment in South Vietnam. Under enormous political pressure he managed to reach his goals in some ways even sooner than anticipated. As one biographer of the admiral notes, "Zumwalt, though he did not yet know it, would make his name not so much on the Sea Lords strategy that bears his stamp, but on being the mind that

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<sup>259</sup> Ibid., 5-6.

<sup>260</sup> Elmo Zumwalt, letter to Tran Van Chon, April 28, 1970. Charles F. Rauch Collection, Texas Tech University Vietnam Archive, 1.

<sup>261</sup> Cullen, "Brown Water Admiral," 252.

developed the best construct – the ‘winning’ idea – for disengaging the United States from its Vietnamese agony.”<sup>262</sup>

Throughout 1969 the training of the VNN sailors proceeded quickly, as did the turnover of brown water craft to newly designated units under South Vietnamese command. The Mobile Riverine Force of the Mekong Delta was officially disbanded in August, as were the first river divisions of PBRs.<sup>263</sup> One of the largest turnover ceremonies took place on October 10<sup>th</sup>, when eighty PBRs were ceremonially handed over to the VNN in Saigon. At the close of the month thirteen PCF “Swift” boats of Operation Market Time were also added to the VNN inventory.<sup>264</sup> Similar turnover ceremonies continued throughout the year, and by January 1970 the South Vietnamese Navy had increased from 8,000 to over 26,000 personnel.<sup>265</sup>

Despite the apparent success of ACTOV, the departure of U.S. forces from South Vietnam left some naval personnel bitter and discouraged. Richard Schreadley, who served with Zumwalt in Saigon, doubted that the South Vietnamese could ever be truly successful in the independent defense of their country, and wrote painfully that, “In retrospect, many of us in Saigon were living in a dream world. Despite what some of us were seeing with our own eyes, we could not believe in our hearts that the tremendous investment America had made was being written off and that North Vietnam would be allowed to triumph.”<sup>266</sup> Others veterans of the brown water fleet felt otherwise, including Thomas Cutler, who argued that ACTOV was perhaps politically rushed and never given

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<sup>262</sup> Ibid., 245.

<sup>263</sup> Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 350.

<sup>264</sup> “The Vietnamese Navy” Vietnam Bulletin, 1-3.

<sup>265</sup> Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 351-52.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid., 324.



a fair test and that despite the changing politics the U.S. Navy-trained sailors of the VNN performed well during the 1972 Easter Offensive.<sup>267</sup>

Less than a month after his April 1970 letter to Commodore Chon, Admiral Zumwalt was relieved of command by Vice Admiral Jerome King at a large ceremony in Saigon harbor.<sup>268</sup> Zumwalt, chosen over dozens of more senior admirals, was on his way to assume the Navy's highest post, Chief of Naval Operations. In his farewell speech he thanked Commodore Chon, the men and women under his command, and the people of South Vietnam. Yet he saved his most heartfelt praise for the "sacrifices and heroism" of the brown water navy. Halfway through his speech Zumwalt paid a brief tribute to the brown water sailors of I Corps, "As I look back over these 20 months, I see a map of South Vietnam with the Navy operating along the edges. In the Cua Viet River just south of the DMZ, in the Naval Support Activity Danang – providing the sustenance to our Marine associates."<sup>269</sup>

This task of the U.S. Navy providing logistical support along the rivers of I Corps would soon be a thing of the past. The officers and men of Task Force Clearwater, separated geographically from the intensive ACTOV operations in IV Corps, played a far smaller role in training their VNN counterparts than those in the Mekong Delta. However, after the November evacuation of most of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Division from I Corps as part of Operation Keystone Cardinal, the need for the task force became far less apparent, and the task force was slated to disband in the summer of

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<sup>267</sup> Cutler, *Brown Water, Black Berets*, 358-59.

<sup>268</sup> Admiral Zumwalt was relieved by Vice Admiral King on May 15<sup>th</sup>, 1970, onboard the USS *Page County* (LST-1076), in the Saigon Naval Shipyard.

<sup>269</sup> R. L. Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 325.

1970. Much of the evacuation of the Marines was accomplished under the watchful eye of the task force, and for much of October and November the harbor and logistics craft ferried the equipment and Marines themselves from Dong Ha to Danang.<sup>270</sup>

For the first half of 1970 much of Task Force Clearwater's effort was directed at turning over its small fleet and meager resources to the VNN. With the withdrawal of the majority of Army and Marine Corps personnel who once guarded the base, Cua Viet became all but a ghost town, reduced to an assortment of a few hundred personnel. The headquarters of the task force was shifted to Mobile Base I at Tan My on February 14<sup>th</sup>, 1970 and most of the patrol craft were soon turned over to the VNN.<sup>271</sup> Mortar and rocket attacks became more and more infrequent, as the North Vietnamese patiently waited for the U.S. to withdraw. On June 1<sup>st</sup> the boats and equipment slated for turnover were in Vietnamese hands, and exactly one month later the Stars and Stripes were hauled down for the final time at Tan My and replaced by the yellow and red flag of South Vietnam. Twenty-eight months after its hasty inception, the task force had, "successfully completed its mission" in the congratulatory message from Admiral King. The United States Navy's inland role in I Corps was over.<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> (CTF Opsum) 140735Z June 1970.

<sup>271</sup> R. L. Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 250.

<sup>272</sup> COMNAVFORV Message 270413Z June 1970.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Few wars have proven more contentious than the one the United States fought in Vietnam. The bitterness of America's failure in Southeast Asia lingers on, as do recriminations about alternatives to the strategies pursued by the United States during the long war. Historians can only agree that many reasons are evident for the war's outcome, including perhaps the most obvious, that the communist banner of national reunification proved more powerful than anything the United States or South Vietnam could provide. Another commonly cited cause, the physical and political geography of Southeast Asia, has also been considered as a key factor. The region's dense jungles and long coastline encouraged a war of attrition and inhibited American air and naval power. The Ho Chi Minh Trail, the primary artery of land infiltration into South Vietnam, was another geographic advantage. Concealed behind the western borders of Vietnam and largely invisible to attack from the air, this supply route proved to be one of the most insoluble problems for American war planners. North Vietnam's immunity from invasion, primarily due to its proximity to China, also proved of immense advantage to the communists.

Geography, however, did not always work to the communists' benefit. In I Corps the existence of navigable rivers proved enormously useful to the United States Navy. The ability to transport large quantities of supplies by water from Danang and safely deliver them deep within partially occupied territory was of immense importance in holding the northern provinces. In hindsight one of the most important decisions reached by the staff of Commander Naval Forces, Vietnam, in the first years of

Americanization was that to utilize both of the northern rivers as lines of supply and communication. This geographically favorable system of supply, more secure than roads or airfields, facilitated logistical support of the growing American military presence in I Corps.

The ability to resupply armies via inland waterways has long been recognized by theorists of war and strategy. In his iconic treatise *The Art of War*, Antoine de Jomini discussed the obvious advantages of river supply, pointing out that, “Navigable streams and canals, when parallel to the line of operations of the army, render the transportation of supplies much easier, and also free the roads from the incumbrances of the numerous vehicles otherwise necessary. For this reason, lines of operations thus situated are the most favorable.”<sup>273</sup> These words echo the U.S. Navy’s brown water mission in I Corps with an almost prescient quality, as if the nineteenth-century Swiss master of strategy had foreseen the river war in Vietnam.

By even the most rigid standards the positive impact of the U.S. Navy’s inland operations in I Corps is difficult to deny. During the 1968 Tet Offensive with its key battles of Hue and Khe Sanh a resistant line of supply proved to be critical to the American cause, and the final outcome of the campaign was in part due to the task force’s ability to maintain control of both rivers. With some irony the mission for which Task Force Clearwater was originally created, ensuring the Perfume River supply line to Hue, became far less important after the recapture of the strategic city in early March. Narrow and isolated, the Cua Viet River came to consume more and more of the task

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<sup>273</sup> Baron Antoine Henri de Jomini, *The Art of War*. London: Greenhill Books, 1996, 145.

force's resources, as well as to become the source of the largest proportion of its casualties. Despite a two-year struggle by communist forces to deny the river to U.S. naval forces, the northernmost waterway in South Vietnam remained open and navigable throughout Clearwater's existence.

The missions of the brown water navy in the northern and southern provinces of South Vietnam proved to be very different from each other. The various Mekong Delta offensives such as SEALORDS were designed to fulfill the brown water navy's original mission in Southeast Asia, limiting seaborne infiltration into South Vietnam. Operation Game Warden in particular was conceived of as a means to prevent the Viet Cong from moving supplies to their cadres throughout the Delta. The mission of Clearwater contained a very different goal. Instead of preventing infiltration, the task force was obligated to defend the river logistics craft so vital to its supply network along the inland waterways of South Vietnam.

While Clearwater's operations during the Vietnam War confirm the critical importance of logistical supply in wartime, they also illustrate a troubling modern misperception. During the 1991 Gulf War the United States demonstrated the ability to rapidly move enormous quantities of men and supplies to a distant battlefield. Since then much of the American civilian population considers the supply of armies in the field a now routine practice. Attacks on logistics convoys during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have not seriously altered the belief that the safe movement of the supplies that fuel armies is both simple and easy. Few civilians are aware of the enormous effort required to transport the material necessary for modern war. A generation ago supply by air was less reliable and more risky, and in Vietnam the lines of communications and

supply were far more contested and vulnerable than in recent wars. This fact made the inland supply responsibility of Task Force Clearwater even more demonstrative of its overall importance.

Aside from its overall mission the task force had a number of unique qualities that set it apart from other brown water operations in Southeast Asia. First, the northern task force was an improvised command, quickly established to ensure the safe passage of logistics traffic in a time of crisis. In less than a week the task force went from nonexistent to one of the key factors in the U.S. Navy's response to the Tet Offensive. Despite the short time between conception and the testing under heavy enemy pressure that heightened the learning curve its personnel made it perhaps the most successful of the inland naval operations of the war. Although the SEALORDS task force proved to be well-organized and more successful than previous operations, preventing seaborne infiltration from Cambodia proved to be difficult to achieve even for a leader of Admiral Zumwalt's talents. Similarly the efforts of Operation Market Time failed to deliver truly decisive results.

The second significant difference was in size. Throughout its existence Clearwater rarely operated more than twenty working patrol boats and a handful of minesweepers. This was less than ten percent of the forces allocated to Operation Game Warden in the Mekong Delta, which at its peak operated more than two hundred PBRs. Despite repeated requests for additional craft, especially minesweepers, the phrase "operating on a shoestring" was very applicable. However the task force's contribution to the war effort was far out of proportion to its numbers. Task Force Clearwater was in modern military parlance a force multiplier. It was able to ensure both the resupply of

ground forces in I Corps and assist in preventing any incursion from the north. Without positive control of both the Perfume and Cua Viet Rivers it would have been difficult, if not impossible for the U.S. military to maintain its grip on the northern provinces, especially during the critical year of 1968.

The final component of the task force's unique contribution was in countermine warfare. Along with the Long Tau River that connects Saigon to the South China Sea, the Cua Viet River was the most heavily mined waterway in South Vietnam. The threat to PBRs and logistics craft transiting to Dong Ha was a never ending one, and demanded courage, determination, and innovation. Despite the vast array of mines employed by the Viet Cong the effort to shut down the Cua Viet was defeated, and through this effort the Navy gained a wealth of experience in mine warfare. Regretfully, however, this knowledge—purchased at a high price—was soon forgotten. Mine warfare languished in the fleet during ensuing decades, with painful and deadly consequences. Naval historian Edward Marolda argued that overconfidence fueled this trend, and noted that, “With a small fleet of 1950’s-built ocean minesweepers and minesweeping helicopters in the Navy inventory, the United States was not prepared to deal with the hundreds of sea mines that the Iranians dropped into the gulf during the Iran-Iraq War.” Mine damage to several major warships during the 1991 Gulf War also demonstrated the Navy’s failure to capitalize on its mine warfare experience in Vietnam.<sup>274</sup>

Less than six months after the turnover of naval assets to the VNN began, the final PBR was officially handed over to the Vietnamese Navy in a ceremony in Saigon,

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<sup>274</sup> Edward M. Marolda, “Crucible of War: The U.S. Navy and the Vietnam Experience,” 21.

ending the four-year role of American inland sea power in Southeast Asia.<sup>275</sup> The turnover symbolized far more than the ownership of a few patrol boats, however. In many ways it represented a return to form for the U.S. Navy in its abandonment of brown water operations. Devoid of an obvious mission during the Cold War confrontation with the expanding Soviet Navy during the 1970s and '80s, the U.S. brown water navy all but disappeared.

Emphasizing ships and technologies that could challenge the Soviet fleet, priority was placed on radar technicians and nuclear engineers, not patrol boat gunners. As an example in 1972 Admiral Hyman G. Rickover, the powerful and politically savvy head of the Navy's nuclear propulsion program, declared before Congress that he was facing a shortfall in trained nuclear engineering personnel, and pressed for more funds to keep their valuable skills in the service.<sup>276</sup> Nuclear-powered cruisers, submarines and aircraft carriers were the future, and as the fleet moved past its trying experience in Vietnam American naval planners wanted little to do with the river war in Southeast Asia. The last remaining naval personnel left South Vietnam in the spring of 1973, and on March 29<sup>th</sup> Naval Forces Vietnam was officially disbanded.<sup>277</sup>

The boats and places left behind by Task Force Clearwater did not fare well. Less than a year after the July 1970 turnover of its in-country assets to the Vietnamese Navy, the enemy mining campaign along the Cua Viet River had become a worsening problem, the during the month of May 1971 seventeen mine incidents occurred on the

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<sup>275</sup> Iver Peterson, "U.S. Navy's River Fleet Ends Operations in South Vietnam," *New York Times*, December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1970.

<sup>276</sup> "The Navy Game," *New York Times*, October 9<sup>th</sup>, 1972.

<sup>277</sup> R. L. Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 379.



river. The VNN proved unable or unwilling to combat the mines as effectively as their advisers had done. The Cua Viet base itself was overrun by North Vietnamese soldiers in their 1972 Easter Offensive, with many of the American-trained VNN sailors fighting hard until being killed or captured. Though I Corps was largely retaken by U.S. and ARVN forces the failed NVA offensive signaled what was to come three short years later.<sup>278</sup>

Even before the fall of Saigon the brown water mission seemed to have little future in the U.S. Navy. Admiral Zumwalt, its most gifted champion, retired after completing his tour as Chief of Naval Operations in 1974. Most of the brown water sailors in the fleet returned to duty onboard cruisers or destroyers, and over time the brown water navy of Vietnam developed an almost mythical quality. On the concluding pages of Richard Schreadley's study, the former naval officer describes a post-war trip to Vietnam. Bitter and nostalgic, he looked eagerly for any sign of his beloved brown water fleet, but encountered only a ghostly presence of the boats and men he once knew, and concludes that, "The Great Green Fleet of the Delta, the brave PBRs, the Swift boats, and the Brown Water Sailor himself all belong to the past. Only the rivers and the memories remain."<sup>279</sup>

Few remnants of the American river campaigns in Southeast Asia exist today. Of Task Force Clearwater very little can be found. The base at Tan My is long gone, and to the north a lighthouse now occupies the beach where the Cua Viet base once stood. Nearby a recently constructed bridge at the river's mouth connects the banks of the once

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<sup>278</sup> Ibid., 257.

<sup>279</sup> R. L. Schreadley, *From the Rivers to the Sea*, 387.

treacherous waterway. Danang, a bustling financial and industrial center, is more known as a hub for tourism than as the burgeoning former logistics terminus for the U.S Navy. Yet in many ways the brown water navy of Vietnam has lived on. Changing threats and tactics prompted the U.S. Navy to reevaluate its brown water capabilities after the war. Control of the shallow waters surrounding land, the littorals, was a buzzword on every sailor's lips by the early 1990's. The attack on the USS *Cole* in October 2000 galvanized the U.S. Navy's blue water strategists into providing brown water craft for harbor patrol and defense.

Today the brown water sailors of Vietnam are represented by the Riverine Group of Naval Expeditionary Combat Command, which was established in 2006. Combining elements of both Operation Game Warden and the Mobile Riverine Force, its men and vessels are tasked with, "protecting and maintaining brown water environments and destroying hostile forces." Equipped with sophisticated boats of considerable technology and firepower, the three squadrons of the Riverine Group soon proved their worth in Iraq, patrolling the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers and maintaining a strong presence at the Haditha Dam, the primary water source for Baghdad and much of central Iraq. Modern capabilities such as Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) add considerably to Riverine Group's ability to sweep the rivers free of opposing forces on both the land and water. Like Task Force Clearwater these modern brown water squadrons enabled the safe passage of men and material down the ancient waterways and contributed to the success of the famous Iraq War "surge" of American military personnel in 2007-2008.<sup>280</sup>

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<sup>280</sup> "Riverine Fact Sheet," [www.necc.navy.mil](http://www.necc.navy.mil), 1-2.

The brown water mission is one that has proven both important but transitory in the history of the U.S. Navy, rising and falling according to the maritime and strategic needs of the time. During the Vietnam War it played a vital but often overlooked role, and of the major brown water task forces Clearwater has been the least remembered. Yet this river force played a key role far out of proportion to its size and place in historical memory. Far from a footnote to history, the men and boats of this small brown water fleet are inseparable parts of America's searing experience in Vietnam.

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## APPENDIX A

## KEY ACRONYMS

ACTOV	Accelerated Turnover to the Vietnamese
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
ASPB	Assault Support Patrol Boat
ATC	Armored Troop Carrier
ATSB	Advanced Tactical Support Base
CINCPAC	Commander in Chief, Pacific
COMNAVFORV	Commander Naval Forces, Vietnam
COMUSMACV	Commander US Military Assistance Command Vietnam
CNO	Chief of Naval Operations
CTG	Commander Task Group
CTZ	Corps Tactical Zone
DMZ	Demilitarized Zone
DRV (DRVN)	Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam)
EOD	Explosive Ordnance Disposal
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
LCM	Landing Craft, Medium
LCPL	Landing Craft, Personnel (Large)
LCU	Landing Craft, Utility
LSD	Landing Ship, Dock
LSM	Landing Ship, Medium
LST	Landing Ship, Tank
MAAG	Military Assistance Advisory Group
MACV	Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
MAF	Marine Amphibious Force
MEDCAP	Medical Civic Action Program
MRF	Mobile Riverine Force
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NLF	National Liberation Front
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
PACV	Patrol Air Cushion Vehicle
PBR	Patrol Boat, River
PCF	Patrol Craft, Fast
PRG	Provisional Revolutionary Government
RVN	Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam)
SEALORDS	Southeast Asia Lake, Ocean, River, Delta Strategy
TFCW	Task Force Clearwater
VC	Viet Cong
VNN	Vietnamese Navy (South)
VNMC	Vietnamese Marine Corps
YFU	Harbor Utility Craft

## APPENDIX B

## CHRONOLOGY

1964	January	Bucklew Report released
	August	Gulf of Tonkin Incident
1965	March	Operation Market Time established
	October 15 <sup>th</sup>	NSA Danang established
1966	April 1	COMNAVFORV established
	December	Operation Game Warden established
1967	June	Mobile Riverine Force established
	September	Operation Green Wave
1968	January 9	I CTZ River Patrol Group established
	January 21	Siege of Khe Sanh begins
	January 30/31	Tet Offensive Begins
	February 24	Task Force Clearwater established
	February 29	Dong Ha/Hue River Patrol Groups established
	March 2	TFCW headquarters moved to NSA Cua Viet
	March 10	Hue officially recaptured by US/ARVN forces
	March 8	Worst artillery bombardment of NSA Cua Viet
	April 8	Siege of Khe Sanh lifted
	April 30-May 30	Battle of Dai Do/May Offensive
	September 30	Rear Admiral Kenneth Veth relieved by Vice Admiral Elmo Zumwalt
	November	Operations SEALORDS begins
	December	ACTOV program begun
1969	August	Mobile Riverine Force disbanded
	November	3 <sup>rd</sup> Marine Division evacuated from I Corps
1970	February	Task Force Clearwater headquarters shifted to Mobile Base I at Tan My
	July 1st	Task Force Clearwater officially disestablished

	May	Admiral Zumwalt relieved as COMNAVFORV
1972	April	North Vietnamese Easter Offensive
1973	January	Paris Peace Accords signed
	March	COMNAVFORV disbanded
1975	April	Saigon falls to North Vietnam Army Operation Frequent Wind, U.S. Navy evacuation of South Vietnam

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