

THE TEN THOUSAND-DAY WAR AT SEA



THE U.S. NAVY IN VIETNAM, 1950-1975



H A M P T O N R O A D S
NAVAL★MUSEUM



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Cover: The sun sets on USS *St. Clair*
County (LST 1096). (National Archives
and Records Administration)

Two Swift boat Sailors load their 81mm
mortar while engaging a target along the
coast of Vietnam. (National Archives
and Records Administration)



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This book serves as a companion to the exhibit, *The Ten Thousand-Day War at Sea: The U.S. Navy in Vietnam, 1950–1975*. The exhibit opened on October 8, 2019 at the Hampton Roads Naval Museum in Norfolk, Virginia.



A Navy's Mission, A Museum's Duty



In 2017, the Hampton Roads Naval Museum decided to embark on a major exhibition project to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Vietnam War. The exhibit titled *The Ten Thousand-Day War at Sea: The U.S. Navy in Vietnam, 1950–*

1975 immerses visitors in the immense role played by the United States Navy during the pivotal conflict in Southeast Asia. Using the U.S. Navy's rich historical collections, personal artifacts loaned from veterans, multi-media presentations, and interactives, the exhibit educates but also recognizes the sacrifices of Sailors who served during the conflict. To our knowledge, it is the only exhibit in the country that focuses on the Navy's diverse missions on sea, air, *and* land.

For most Americans, a mention of the Vietnam War will conjure up images of Army or Marine platoons fighting through the jungles set to a soundtrack of whirring helicopter blades and popular 1960's music. Perhaps others will recall confusing war aims, the draft, distrust of elected representatives, and the protests they all engendered. Over the last half-century, a cavalcade of feature films and television shows have filled the void inadvertently left by high school history textbooks in between their cursory mentions of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and the Tet Offensive. The relatively few numbers who immediately think of the United States Navy belie the Navy's overarching presence during the war. Indeed, the Navy was a great enabling force, using its vast capabilities to project American power ashore during the long, complicated, and difficult Cold War era.

I hope Sailors and citizens look back at the Vietnam War and the Navy's role in it to draw valuable lessons

for the future. We should heed the advice of Vice Admiral Stansfield Turner (1923–2018). In 1972, speaking to students of the Naval War College, many of whom had seen service in Southeast Asia, he declared:

Studying historic examples should enable us to view current issues and trends through a broader perspective of the basic elements of strategy. Approaching today's problems through a study of the past is one way to ensure we do not become trapped within the limits of our own experience. We will not be concerned with history as chronology, but with its relevancy and application to today and tomorrow. We will start with Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. What could be more related to today than a war in which a democratic nation sent an expedition overseas to fight on foreign soil and then found that there was little support for this at home? Or a war in which a seapower was in opposition to a nation that was basically a landpower? Are there not lessons still to be learned here?¹

Turner knew that historical analysis could prepare naval officers to think critically during current and future conflicts. Since so many officers saw service in Vietnam, it was difficult to analyze it objectively in 1972. He selected the Peloponnesian War as a topic not only because it was similar to Vietnam in some respects but also because it was so remote, so removed from our national consciousness. Certainly, an examination of Vietnam today can achieve similar effects as we contemplate armed conflict in the twenty-first century.

History does not just inform the present and the future, it also connects us as a people. Through study, we discover our place in the human story. By sharing personal experiences, we learn to empathize and make connections between someone else's story

¹ Turner, Stansfield (1972) "Challenge: A New Approach to Professional Education," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 25 : No. 8, Article 1.

and our own lives. At this writing, over fifty Navy veterans volunteered to share the stories of *their* war in Vietnam. To further our mission to expand audiences for naval history and bring the American people closer to their Navy, the exhibit includes the voices of these veterans via video touch screens. The videos promote meaningful connections between these history makers and active duty Sailors, other veterans, and the public. The quotes featured throughout this companion book come directly from these oral history interviews. These videos are also available on our museum's YouTube page at www.youtube.com/user/HRNavalMuseum.

You will feel the weight of a Navy corpsman responsible for the lives of Marines on patrol.

You will know the exhaustion of being on the gun line off the Vietnamese coast and expending your ship's entire wartime ammunition allowance in a single night.

You will learn the respect one destroyer Sailor gained for his crew when they overcame an attack by five MiGs.

You will know the regret one construction electrician felt when the hospital he worked at lost power and patients died.

You will be stirred by one aviator's account of the loss of his childhood memories while enduring seven years in a North Vietnamese prison.

You will feel the shock of a B-40 rocket fired by the Viet Cong when it hits a river patrol boat's fiberglass hull.

These stories are part of the historical record that help us relate to what men and women experience while serving our Navy today.

The exhibit answers the question: What did the Navy do in Vietnam? It sounds like a simple question but it is a critical one. The United States is still a maritime nation. Water covers seventy-one percent of

the Earth's surface and ninety percent of the world's commerce travels on the seas and rivers. Given these facts, the role of the Navy could not be more vital. In understanding what the Navy did in Vietnam, we want to help people understand its role today. Rather than create a chronological narrative we decided it was best to interpret the Navy's contributions into discreet sections: Intelligence and Special Operations; Surface Forces; Air Power; Riverine Operations; and Logistics and Support. Each section has its own oral history interactive to provide personal stories that enhance the visitor's understanding of the Navy's efforts.

Finally, the exhibit reveals that Vietnam veterans are not an anomaly in naval history. The Sailors who cruised the waters off Southeast Asia and served on the shores of Vietnam are part of the very same legacy as those who served on USS *Constitution* in 1812, USS *Monitor* in 1862, and USS *Arizona* in 1941. They have much to impart about honor, courage, commitment, personal loss, post-traumatic stress, leadership, service, and sacrifice, and we should listen.

This exhibit and publication would not be possible without the support of Director of Naval History Rear Admiral Samuel J. Cox, USN (Ret.) and the assistance of the entire Naval History and Heritage Command. We also thank the museum's non-profit partner, the Hampton Roads Naval Historical Foundation, for funding select portions of the exhibit. The museum is also grateful to the veterans and friends of the Navy who loaned or donated artifacts for the exhibit. High praise is due to the staff and volunteers of the Hampton Roads Naval Museum. Their dedication turned an idea into a reality. Finally, we owe the greatest debt of gratitude to the Navy Vietnam veterans who shared their stories to teach future generations. You made a difference today just as you did fifty years ago. Thank you.

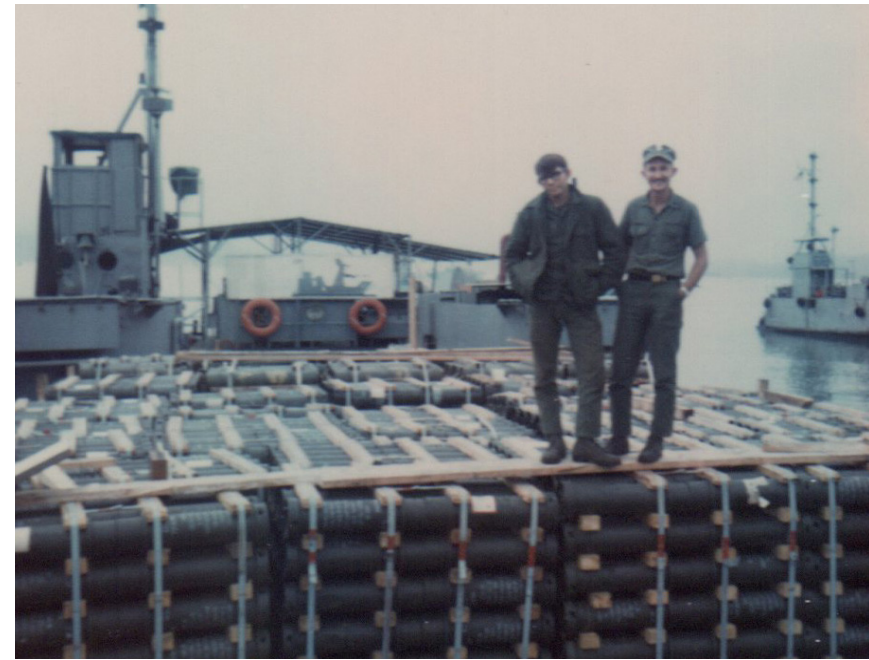
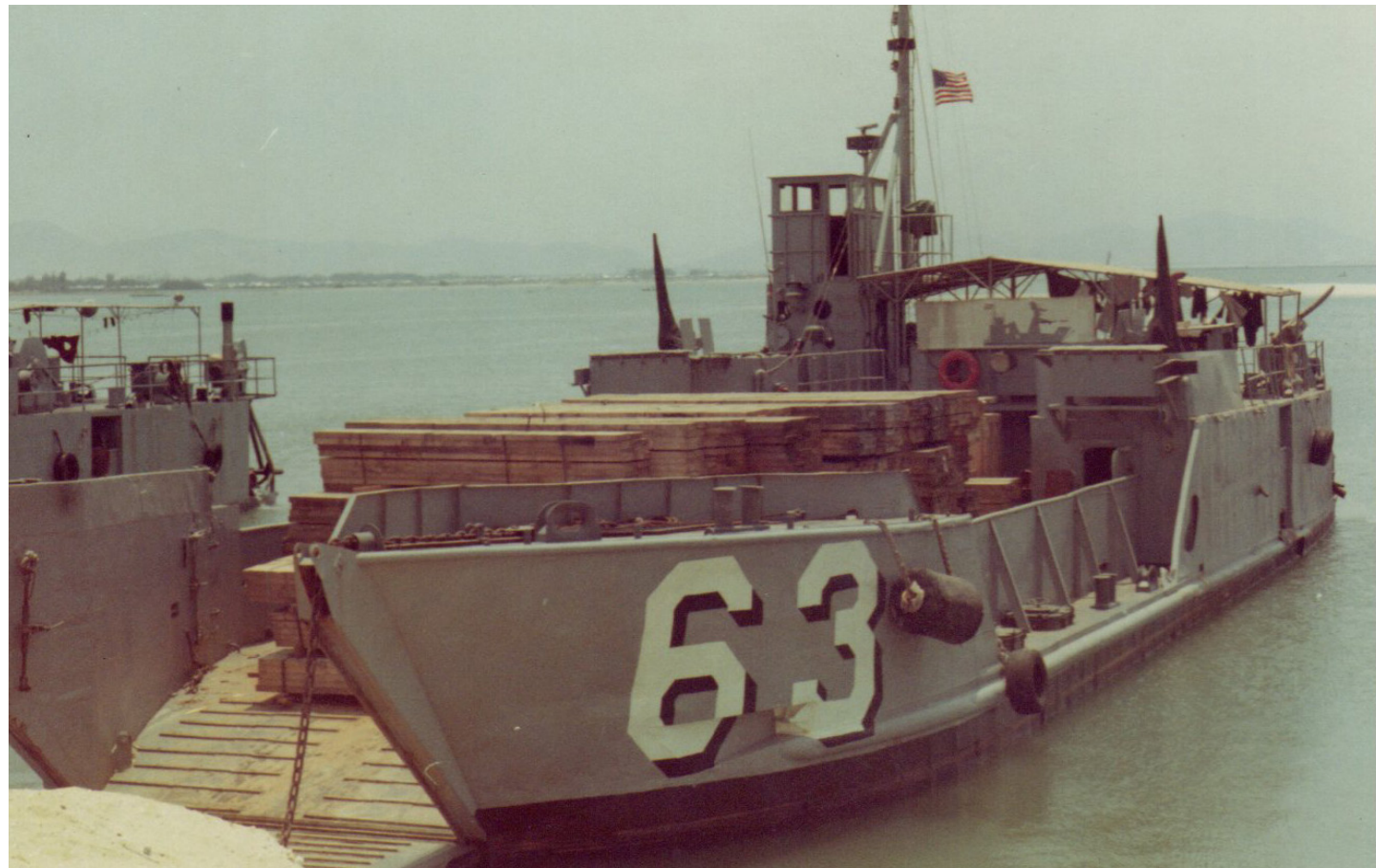
John Pentangelo
Director, Hampton Roads Naval Museum

The Vietnam War and the Changing Tide of Memory: A Sailor Remembers

From July 1968 to August 1969, I was stationed in I Corps in Vietnam. At the time of that deployment, I was a 20-year-old kid, a second class petty officer. Newly married, I was just home from a long deployment on a destroyer when I received my orders for Vietnam. Instead of setting up our home and starting a family, I headed to special weapons, counterinsurgency, and survival training in California, then immediately transferred to my duty station in Vietnam. At the time, the Vietnam War meant sacrifice: more time away from my new wife, my life and family dreams on hold, and surviving a one-year tour of duty on the rivers of a country overrun by a terribly controversial war. Now, as I look back on my experiences in Vietnam, I have come to recognize the total futility and inhumanity of war on all those

directly involved and those innocent people caught up in the absolute horror of it.

I was assigned as senior boat engineer in a River Boat Logistic Squadron based in Da Nang. Referred to as “slow targets” by my fellow Sailors, the Yard Freight Utility (YFU) boats I served on carried all manner of war materiel and supplies to Marine detachments from the DMZ in the North to China Beach in the southern part of I Corps. We carried tanks, trucks, jeeps, various field weapons, armor and artillery pieces, personnel, building supplies, ammunition, food, fuel, water, and stores to sustain large numbers of Marines. It was incredibly dangerous work, and I was lucky to make it out safely.



After I completed my twelve months on the rivers, I received orders to return to America. I was excited, overjoyed, and honored to successfully complete my tour of duty in a war zone without injury and in support of the Navy and country I loved. These feelings were short-lived, as reality soon set in while preparing for my departure. At the transfer barracks, I was told not to wear my uniform, or even look like I was in the military, as I returned home. I could not carry my orders openly or have luggage that displayed any military insignia. I was made to feel embarrassed and ashamed to have served in Vietnam.

For decades, veterans of the Vietnam War were embarrassed to openly discuss or display their service. They felt dishonored by the country and citizens they represented and served during this unpopular war. To these surviving Vietnam War veterans, it was best to simply forget this part of their military service so as not to be criticized or rebuked by a generation of Americans who protested the war. Thankfully, that has changed, and the men and women who serve our armed forces are recognized as a valuable and honored part of American society. What a wonderful cultural turnaround! Now, as a Vietnam vet, I can feel proud of my military service, as I did when I first

stepped off my boat in Vietnam those many years ago.

The Ten Thousand-Day War at Sea gives us a chance to remember those who served their country with honor. It helps visitors learn about how crucial the Navy was in every aspect of the Vietnam War—and, in turn, introduces those visitors to what the Navy does today.

Ray Weber
Vice President, Hampton Roads Naval Historical Foundation

Ray Weber served in the Navy for 25 years, as both enlisted and officer. He achieved the rating of Master Chief Engineman and rank of Lieutenant Commander. Completing two college degrees while on active duty, Weber's post-Navy career included service as Director of Fleet Service Engineering for General Dynamics, Bath Iron Works, and Director of Government Programs at BAE Systems Ship Repair.



BEGINNINGS



Americans continue to grapple with the meaning and legacy of the Vietnam War. Politics, protest, and patriotism are entwined in any conversation about this twentieth-century conflict. Literature, film, music, and television have told many stories of the war in the jungles, but often neglect America's Navy.

The service of 1.8 million Sailors (over 229,000 in Southeast Asia) empowered the United States military in virtually every aspect of the war. Their experience had lasting effects on the Navy that are still with us today. This exhibit explores the missions and contributions of the Navy at sea, on land, and in the skies over Vietnam.



Why Did the U.S. Go to War in Vietnam?

America's war in Southeast Asia was just one part of the Cold War with the Soviet Union that lasted from 1945 until 1991. After World War II, the Soviet Union dominated Eastern Europe and set up Communist governments in these countries as "satellite states." Many Americans saw Communism as opposed to the democratic ideals they upheld. When the Communist Revolution took root in China, American officials feared it spreading in Asia. The United States supported France when Vietnam's nationalist movement, led by Communist Ho Chi Minh, sought independence from French colonial rule. After the Vietnamese defeated French forces in 1954, the U.S. became increasingly involved in supporting the non-Communist South Vietnamese government's military

Painted by Navy combat artist James Scott, this watercolor entitled "Welcome to Sunny Saigon" focuses on a young Sailor, dressed in his blues, arriving in Vietnam for the first time. "Welcome to Sunny Saigon" also welcomes visitors into the Vietnam exhibit at HRNM. (On loan from Navy Art Collection, Naval History and Heritage Command)

resistance to the Communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam based in the North. American credibility as a global superpower was at stake.

The Long Road to War

The U.S. did not find itself at war with Vietnam "overnight." Involvement escalated throughout the post-war era as Communism and revolution spread through Europe and Asia. In 1941, Vietnamese revolutionary Ho Chi Minh formed the League for the Independence of Vietnam, known as the Viet Minh, to combat French rule and Japanese occupation. While



Lieutenant Harold Dale Meyerkord (far right), senior advisor to the Vietnam Navy's River Assault Group 23, was the first U.S. naval officer killed in South Vietnam, March 16, 1965. (*Naval History and Heritage Command*)

Japan's surrender to the Allies ended their occupation of Vietnam, the French refused to recognize Vietnamese independence. In 1947, as Ho Chi Minh's forces stamped out non-Communist opposition all over Vietnam, President Harry S. Truman established the "Truman Doctrine" to provide military and economic aid to countries resisting Communist expansion. Its success led to the U.S. policy of containment. Two years later, Mao Zedong declared the People's Republic of China as a Communist nation.

While peace and prosperity reigned in the United States during the 1950s, the Cold War raged in Europe and Asia. The U.S. joined other non-Communist nations to form the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). These new allies promised mutual cooperation if any member country was attacked.

In 1950, Communist North Korean forces, backed by the Soviet Union and China, invaded South Korea. That same year, Mao Zedong's Communist forces completed their takeover of China, reaching the Vietnamese border. China recognized Vietnam as independent from France and supplied weapons and equipment to the Viet Minh. Fears of Communist revolution in Asia confirmed, the U.S. increased monetary aid to the French forces fighting the Viet Minh and established the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), Indochina to oversee the transfer of ships, vehicles, weapons, and equipment to the French and non-Communist Vietnamese allies. By the end of the year, the first U.S. naval advisors reported to Saigon.

Lieutenant Tylor Field, U.S. Navy, advisor to Junk Division 33, and Ensign Le Quy Dang, Vietnamese Navy, look for suspicious fishing boats while Lieutenant Junior Grade Phu, Commanding Officer, communicates with other units of his division during a patrol. (*Naval History and Heritage Command*)



Despite this support, the French forces surrendered to the Viet Minh at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in northern Vietnam on May 7, 1954. The stunning defeat ended colonial rule in Vietnam. The Geneva Accords split Vietnam at the 17th parallel, with the Viet Minh retaining control of North Vietnam, and ordered a general election to unify the country under one government. Fearing the more populous North would win the election and form a Communist government, the U.S. and non-Communist South Vietnam refused to sign the Accords. To unify all of Vietnam under Communist rule, North Vietnam infiltrated South

Vietnam along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Communists living in the South formed the People's Liberation Armed Forces (Viet Cong) to provide military support to the campaign.

Finally in 1964, after years of continued unrest in Southeast Asia and a North Vietnamese attack on a U.S. destroyer in the Gulf of Tonkin, Congress authorized President Lyndon B. Johnson "to take all necessary steps" in the defense of South Vietnam. American involvement in Vietnam escalated rapidly over the next several years.

Naval Advisors in Vietnam

Beginning in 1950, military advisors helped the South Vietnamese resist North Vietnamese intervention. Naval advisors taught gunnery and navigation, accompanied the South Vietnamese on combat patrols, organized specialized units, and created shore establishments such as naval stations and supply centers. Despite their limited numbers, language barriers, and other obstacles, advisors helped transform South Vietnam's navy from a small collection of vessels into a modern service capable of fighting on the rivers and at sea.



This beret and patch are from the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG). (*Hampton Roads Naval Museum*)

North Vietnamese refugees boarding USS *Litchfield County* (LST 901) at Haiphong for passage south, 1954. In total, Passage to Freedom included 74 ships and 39 transports; and carried 293,000 refugees, 17,800 Vietnamese troops, 8,135 vehicles, and 68,757 tons of cargo. (Naval History and Heritage Command)



Passage to Freedom

After the 1954 Geneva Accords divided Vietnam into two zones at the 17th parallel, the U.S. Navy relocated refugees, military forces, and equipment from North to South Vietnam in a humanitarian operation known as Passage to Freedom (August 1954–May 1955). Sailors built shelters and latrines, rationed food and water, controlled the spread of disease, improved sanitation, and provided medical care at ports of embarkation and on transport ships. The nearly 311,000 people who moved south formed the core of non-Communist resistance in Vietnam.

The Seventh Fleet Arrives

In the early 1960s, the Seventh Fleet moved into Vietnamese waters to counter Communist operations in South Vietnam and Laos. It quickly earned the nickname “Tonkin Gulf Yacht Club” since most operations were based there. Ships cruised along the coast to record transmissions and identify North Vietnamese radar installations. Naval advisors in Da Nang maintained patrol craft and trained Vietnamese commandos to conduct raids and destroy enemy vessels and installations.



Lieutenant (junior grade) Thomas A. Dooley served as a doctor during Passage to Freedom. In 1961, Congress posthumously awarded Dooley with this Congressional Gold Medal for his humanitarian service in Southeast Asia. (On loan from Naval History and Heritage Command)



Lieutenant (junior grade) Thomas A. Dooley and an interpreter explain how to use the water tanks that the Americans installed for use at a Vietnamese refugee camp near Haiphong in September 1954. (Naval History and Heritage Command)



Aircraft carrier USS *Coral Sea* (CVA 43) takes on fuel from oiler USS *Navasota* (AO 106) while patrolling the South China Sea in 1961. (Naval History and Heritage Command)



The Gulf of Tonkin Incidents August 2–4, 1964

On August 2, 1964, North Vietnamese patrol boats attacked USS *Maddox* (DD 731) in the Gulf of Tonkin. Along with reports of a second attack on August 4 (later determined as false), the incident sparked the rapid escalation of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, giving the president authority to use American military forces to defend non-Communist nations in Southeast Asia without a formal declaration of war. By early 1965, fifteen ships were added to the Seventh Fleet with ten more scheduled to deploy to Southeast Asia.



A North Vietnamese P-4 torpedo boat fired this bullet at USS *Maddox* (DD 731) on August 2, 1964. (On loan from Naval History and Heritage Command)

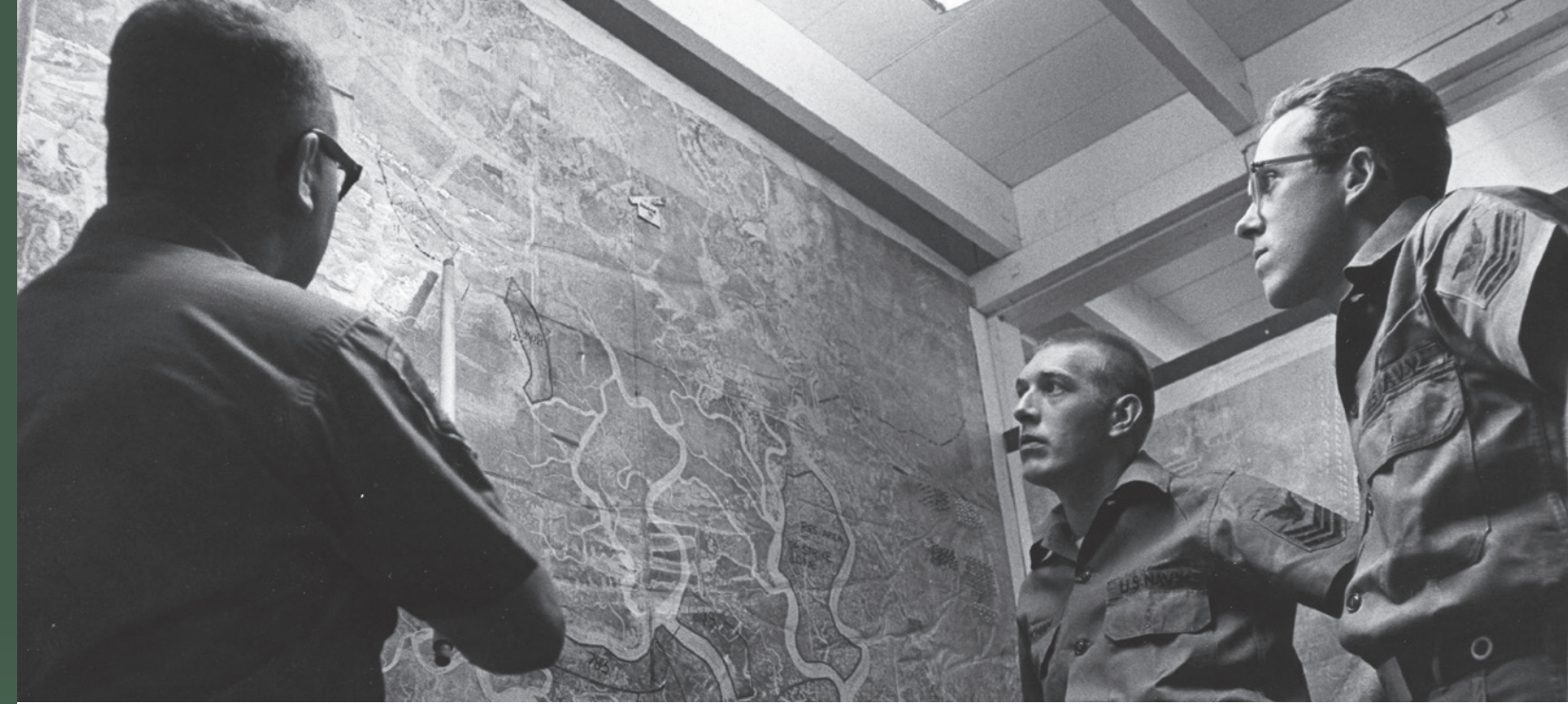
Doug Smith, an officer on USS *Turner Joy* (DD 951) remembered hearing the attack on the *Maddox* as it happened: “I’m the officer of the deck of the watch, and all of a sudden we get this radio message over the radio phones from the *Maddox*, who we knew was further up the Gulf. She said something about, ‘We are under attack from torpedo boats.’ . . . They asked permission to defend themselves, to fire a shot over the bow and so forth. And of course the *Maddox* could not communicate with the task group commander, so we were the relay. . . . Within an hour or more, I guess, the carrier had launched airplanes to come out and help resist the attack but also to investigate and see what was going on.”

Lieutenant Commander Dempster M. Jackson, *Maddox*'s executive officer, kneels next to the one enemy round that hit the destroyer on August 2, 1964. (Naval History and Heritage Command)

This wedding dress is made of French satin from Vietnam. Navy corpsman Mike O’Shea left Vietnam on June 17, 1965, after serving one year in-country. He married Hospitalman Beverly Ann Katz two months later at St. Mary’s Catholic Church in Marshall, Michigan. Beverly made this dress from the fabric Mike purchased in Saigon. When she walked down the aisle of the church to meet Mike at the altar, their war in Vietnam was over. Their Navy’s war was just beginning. (Gift of Mrs. Beverly O’Shea)



Intelligence and Special Operations



Knowing the Enemy: Naval Intelligence During the War

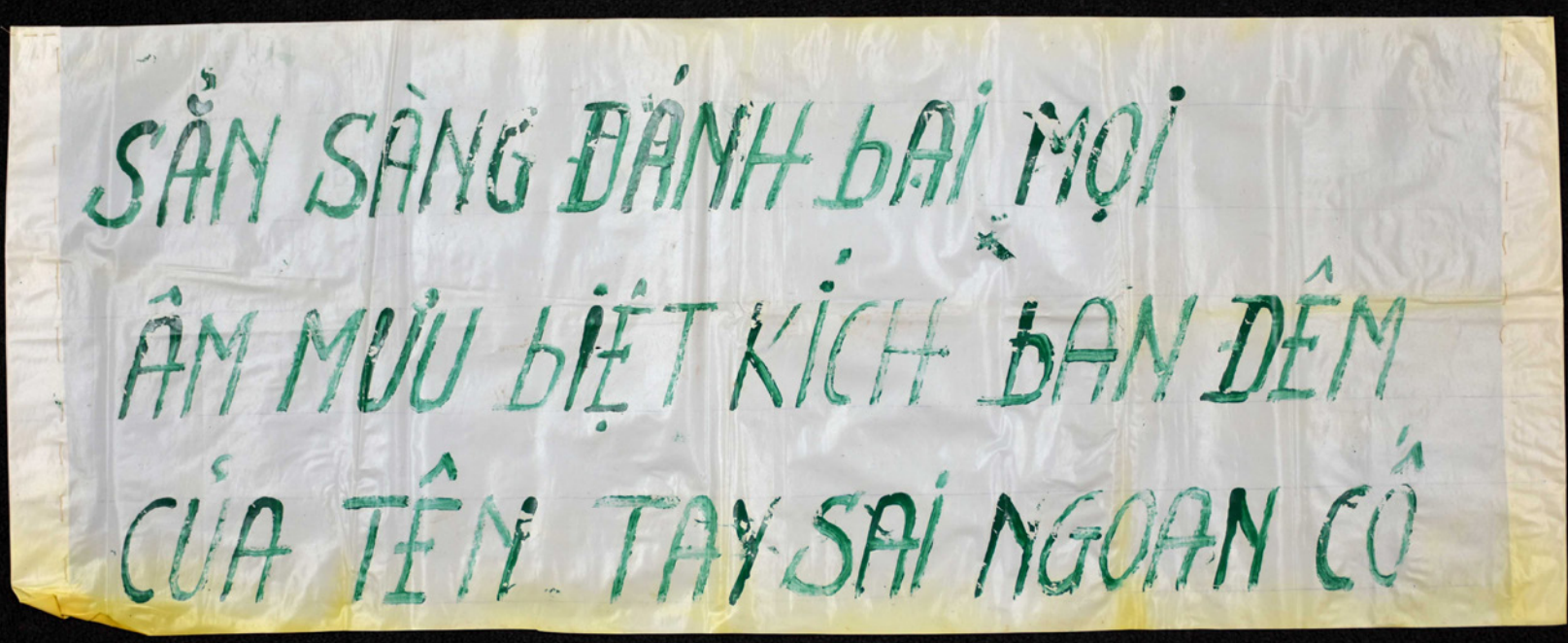
Naval personnel routinely reviewed intelligence. Lieutenant Ronald Beers briefs two U.S. Navy river patrol boat (PBR) captains, Quartermaster First Class Steward Hickman (center) and Boatswain's Mate First Class R W Guyton, on the day's river activities. The PBRs search boats for Viet Cong arms and ammunition and supplies in the rivers of the Mekong Delta and Rung Sat Special Zone. *(Naval History and Heritage Command)*

Virtually all military actions in Vietnam depended on accurate and timely intelligence. During the war, naval intelligence personnel provided information that enabled successful Navy operations, influenced tactical victories, and saved the lives of Americans and their allies. The Navy benefited from and coordinated efforts with other military branches, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, and the National Security Agency. The Office of Naval Intelligence established the Fleet Intelligence Center Pacific Facility in the Philippines to analyze and disseminate this information to naval forces in Vietnam. From the air, sea, and land, Sailors collected information about North Vietnamese and Viet Cong plans and capabilities. Their missions were dangerous and often deadly. Though certainly not without failures, naval intelligence hindered seaborne supply from North to South Vietnam, identified targets for attack aircraft, and helped riverine forces keep control of the vital Mekong Delta.



Intelligence was often gathered during the course of regular missions. A Chinese-manufactured 122mm rocket launcher is inspected by the Navy personnel who captured it. In the early morning hours of July 9, 1968, Patrol Boat River (PBR) captain Boatswain's Mate First Class Dollis Sewell, Jr. (far left) sighted an enemy sampan on the Dong Nai River approximately 10 miles east of Saigon. The sampan was promptly captured by elements of PBR River Section 551 commanded by Lieutenant Ralph Santi (far right). *(Naval History and Heritage Command)*





American forces captured this Viet Cong propaganda banner in 1970. The banner's message translates to: "We are ready to defeat any night ambush from the RVN [South Vietnamese] stubborn servants." (On loan from Naval History and Heritage Command)



This captured photo shows Viet Cong soldiers navigating part of the Mekong Delta in 1966. (United States Army)



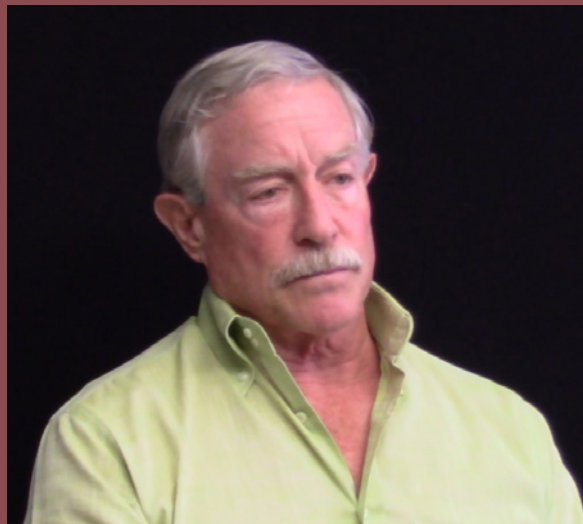
Viet Cong fighters and civilian non-combatants often wore this type of hat, along with black trousers and a shirt as their "uniform." One veteran remembered, "It was a scary kind of thing. You never knew the good guys from the bad guys." (On loan from Naval History and Heritage Command)

The Enemy

The U.S. Navy faced a more conventional uniformed military in the north and a more clandestine irregular force in the south. The North Vietnamese Army manned coastal fortifications, surface-to-air missile sites, and anti-aircraft artillery to defend North Vietnam. Army regulars also moved south of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) to fight U.S. and South Vietnamese troops. Capable of absorbing heavy losses, they were successful at hit-and-run ambushes, siege tactics, and undetected maneuvers. Before the 1968 Tet Offensive, the main antagonists south of the DMZ, especially in the Mekong Delta, were the Viet Cong. Often from rural villages, they were typically motivated by independence and home defense. They used surprise attacks and quick withdrawals to combat U.S. military superiority.



The Viet Cong made many small arms by hand, such as this 9mm pistol captured in 1966. (On loan from Naval History and Heritage Command)



Navy SEAL Rick Woolard remembered a typical patrol: “The idea was you never lose contact with at least the guy in front and to the rear of you. We’d just move along, very slowly and very quietly. . . . You could tell by a man’s silhouette at night exactly who he was, you knew what the guy smelled like in the dark. You’d get to your objective area, and it didn’t take a lot of direction to get guys set up where they wanted, whether it was on a hooch or on a canal bank, or anyplace else. You just knew what to do. You’d wait until [you engaged the enemy], or you grabbed the person you wanted to grab, or you shot the people that deserved to be shot, or until nothing happened at all, in which case you’d patrol out through a different path and then get picked up in the morning before first light.”



SEALs

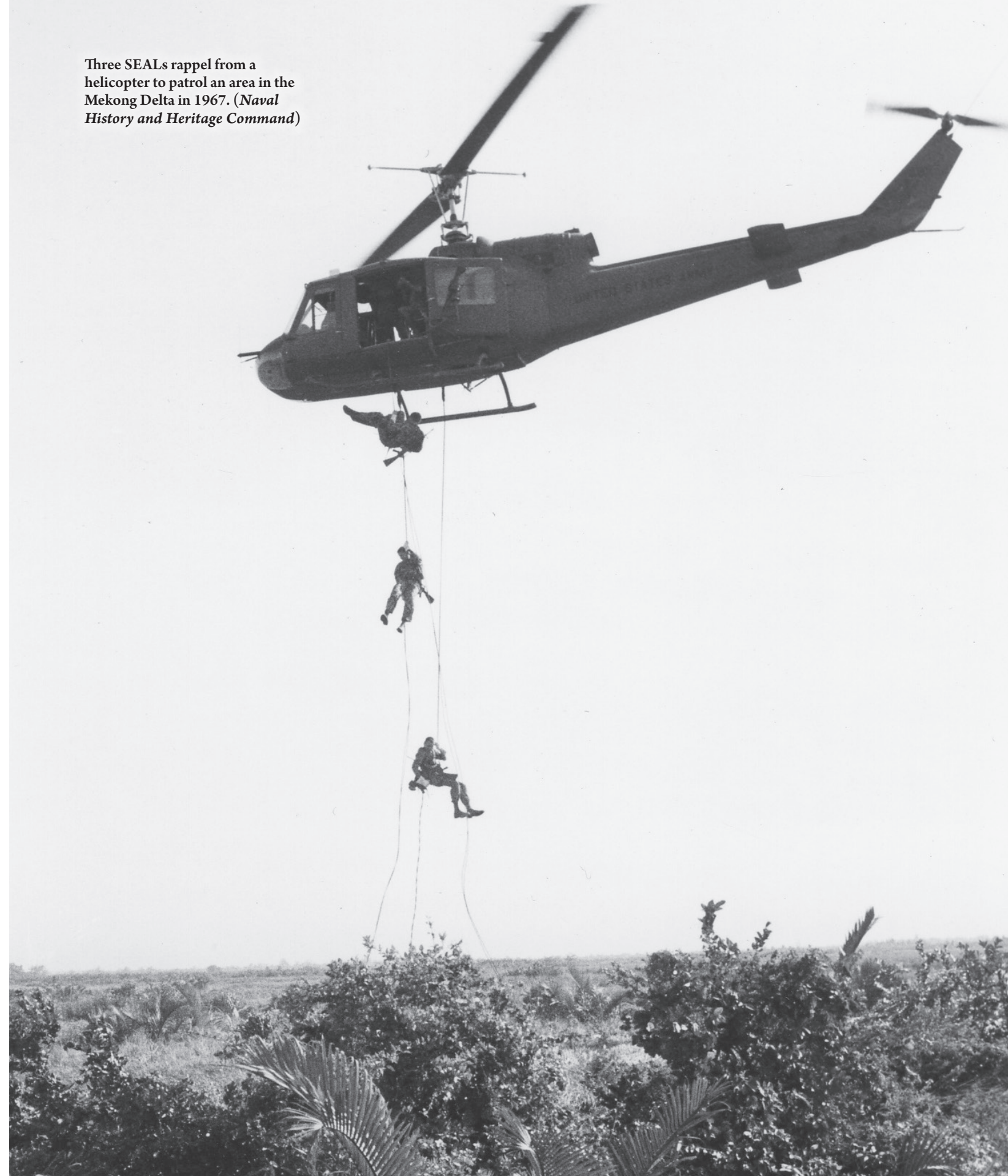
The Navy established two counterinsurgency SEAL (Sea, Air, and Land) teams in 1962. SEALs conducted covert operations to great effect in Vietnam. Often operating in small six-man squads, they carried out ambushes, reconnaissance patrols, and special intelligence operations. SEAL Teams One and Two killed or captured 4,000 enemy combatants, saved countless lives through their intelligence operations, and received five Presidential Unit Citations. Forty-eight SEALs lost their lives in Vietnam and three received the Medal of Honor.

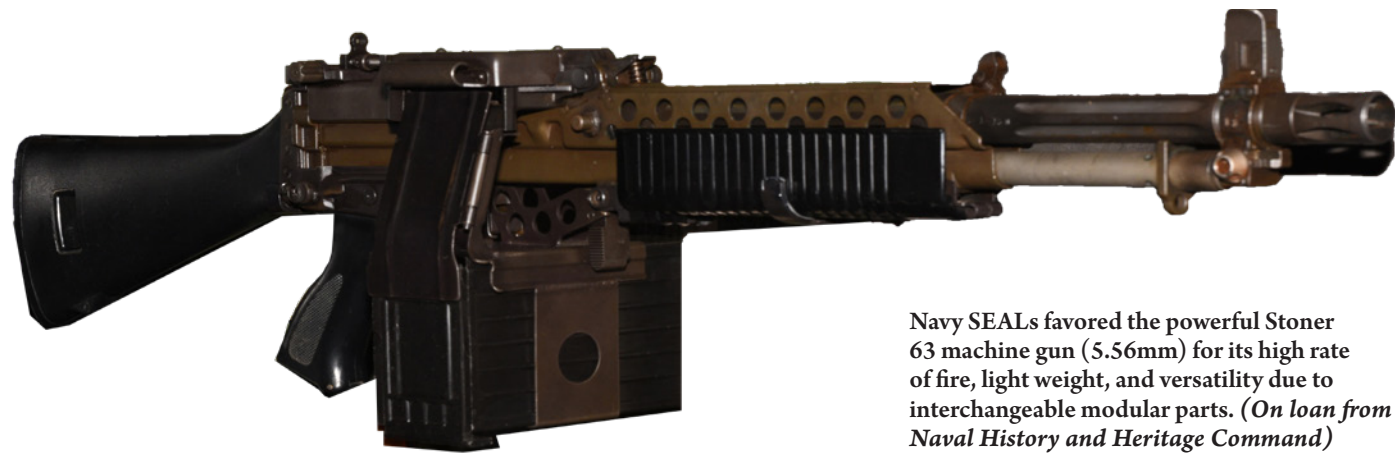


Navy SEALs used the Smith and Wesson 9mm pistol, known as the “hush puppy,” to engage targets with as little noise as possible. *(On loan from Naval History and Heritage Command)*

Petty Officer Second Class Thomas Keith of SEAL Team 2 keeps watch along a stream with his Stoner 63A assault rifle in 1968. *(National Archives and Record Administration)*

Three SEALs rappel from a helicopter to patrol an area in the Mekong Delta in 1967. *(Naval History and Heritage Command)*





Navy SEALs favored the powerful Stoner 63 machine gun (5.56mm) for its high rate of fire, light weight, and versatility due to interchangeable modular parts. (On loan from Naval History and Heritage Command)



Navy SEALs Terry Sullivan (left) and Al Ashton escort a captured enemy in 1968. (Naval History and Heritage Command)

Intelligence by Land, Sea, and Air

Naval operatives gathered intelligence throughout Southeast Asia. On shore, Naval Intelligence Liaison Officers (NILOs) and SEAL units gathered information from combat units, enemy soldiers, and local villagers. Shore-based intelligence proved crucial in support of riverine forces in the Mekong Delta.

In the skies, naval aircraft photographed enemy positions and monitored enemy activity. Their capabilities included wide-angle lenses, night vision, radar, infrared cameras, and electronic intercept. Reconnaissance aircraft such as the RA-5 Vigilante photographed supply routes, harbors, air defense sites, fuel depots, shore batteries, and troop movements. Analysts reviewed these photos to select targets and to evaluate the effectiveness of air strikes. The information they collected provided evidence of North Vietnamese infiltration into South Vietnam using the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The Navy also used maritime patrol aircraft such as the P-3 Orion to track suspicious North Vietnamese vessels moving south.

At sea, destroyers and other surface ships collected intelligence while cruising off the coast of Vietnam. In the early 1960s these vessels surveyed beaches for possible landing sites and patrolled the coast for infiltration locations. South Vietnamese naval forces landed troops to raid these sites while U.S. Navy ships with electronic intelligence gear (ELINT) recorded enemy transmissions. ELINT obtained information on North Vietnam's integrated air defense system. The data on locations, types, ranges, and frequencies of these systems allowed U.S. forces to develop countermeasures and "jam" enemy radar. As a result, U.S. aircraft could escape detection and avoid enemy surface-to-air missiles.



Boatswain's Mate First Class William Stirling, Jr., advisor to Coastal Group 25, monitors the radio during a joint US and RVN mission on Hon Heo Peninsula near Nha Trang in April 1968. (National Archives and Records Administration)



This flight jacket once belonged to NILO John "Jack" Graf. On November 15, 1969, the Viet Cong shot down the intelligence officer's observation plane and imprisoned him. According to his captors, Graf drowned during an escape attempt in February 1970. His remains were never located. (*Hampton Roads Naval Museum*)

Air-dropped motion sensors, such as the camouflaged device pictured here, detected enemy movements on supply routes by registering vibrations along roads. This valuable intelligence developed targets for attack aircraft. (*On loan from Naval History and Heritage Command*)



The Navy used maritime patrol aircraft such as the P-3 Orion to track suspicious North Vietnamese vessels moving south. In this photo, a P-3 tracks a small freighter off the coast of South Vietnam in 1971. (*Naval History and Heritage Command*)



United States and Vietnamese sailors investigate a suspicious vessel during an aerial patrol supporting Operation Market Time in 1966. (*Naval History and Heritage Command*)

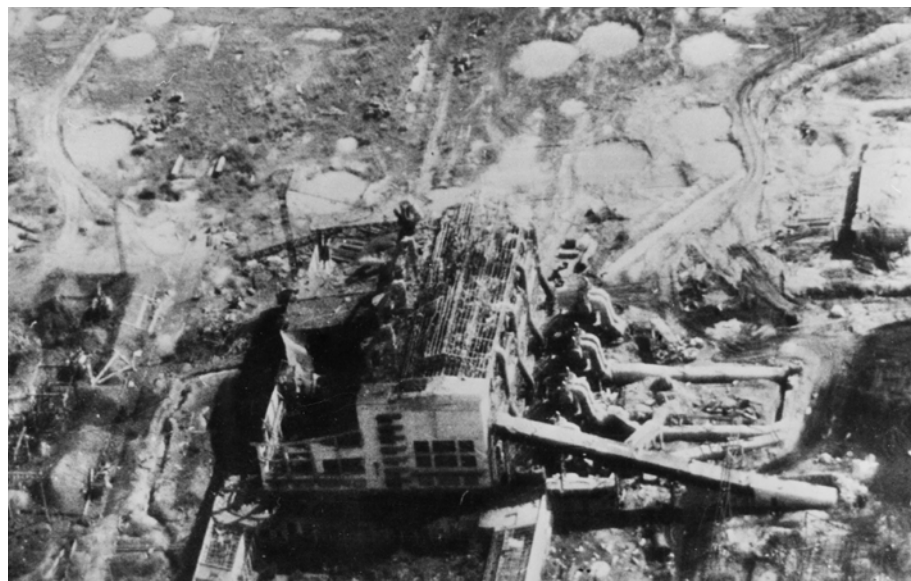


Emerson Conrad, Vigilante navigator, remembered: “We would do side-looking radar mapping. Basically, it gave us a film picture that looked like a radar image, which was used really for targeting from the A-6s and the A-7s. They could look at that and look at their radar and compare the two fairly well. We mapped most of North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia with that. We had infrared scanners which we would pick up underground POL [Petroleum, Oil, and Lubricants], or camouflaged equipment. If they cut the trees down and put them over the equipment, it would change color and didn’t give off the same heat signature, so we could pick it out and actually see what was underneath the camouflage. . . . We could take pictures of pretty much anything, anyplace, anytime.”



Naval aircraft played a critical role by photographing enemy positions and monitoring enemy activity. Reconnaissance aircraft such as the RA-5 Vigilante photographed supply routes, harbors, air defense sites, fuel depots, shore batteries, and troop movements. (*Naval History and Heritage Command*)

Reconnaissance planes captured the damage after attack planes from USS *Constellation* (CVA 64) nearly leveled the thermal power plant in Uong Bi, North Vietnam in August 1966. (*Naval History and Heritage Command*)



Crewmen stand by their RA-3 aircraft from reconnaissance squadron VAP-61 in 1965. Cameras and other photo equipment is lined up in front of them. (*National Archives and Records Administration*)

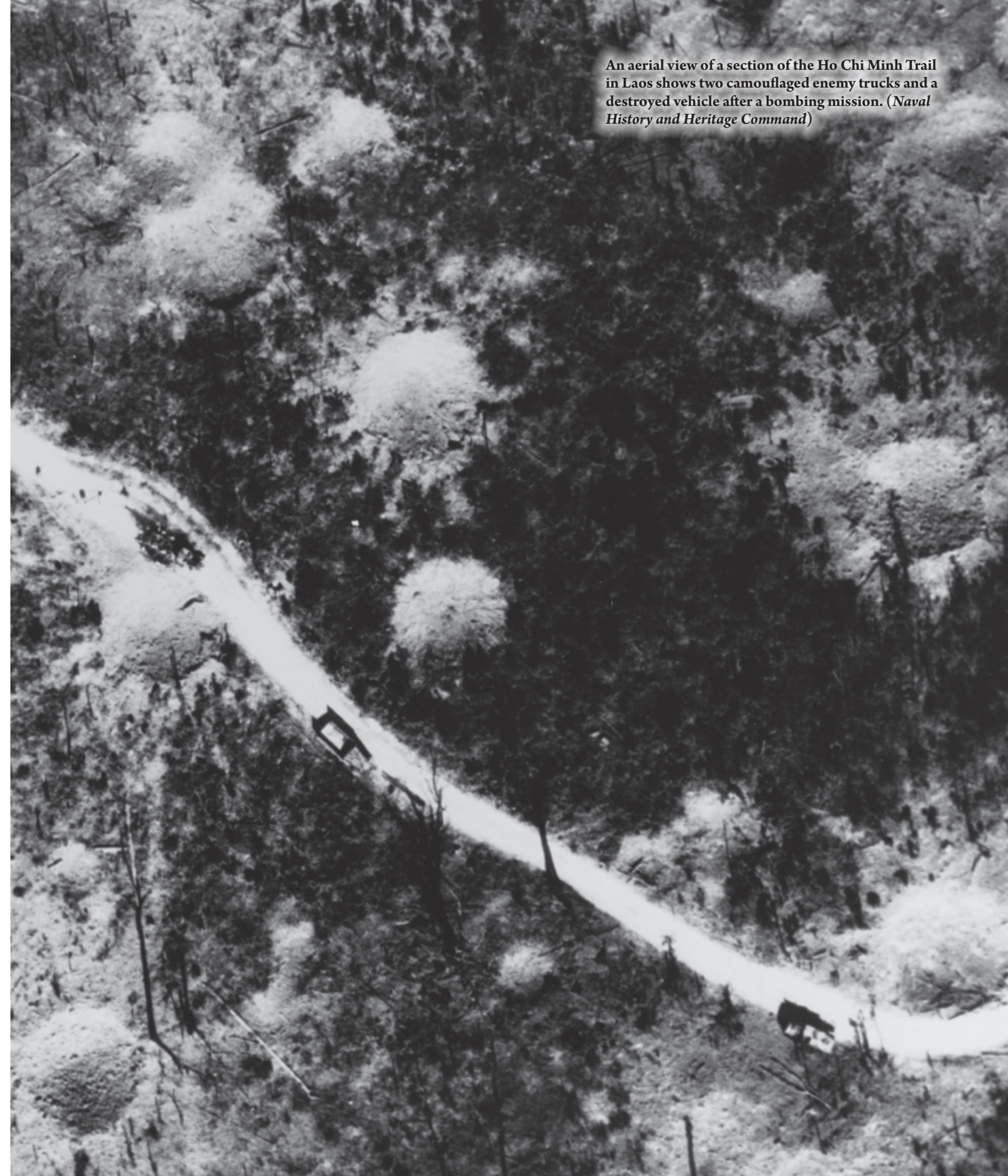




A photo interpreter examines aerial photographs aboard USS *Midway* (CVA 41) in 1968. (National Archives and Records Administration)

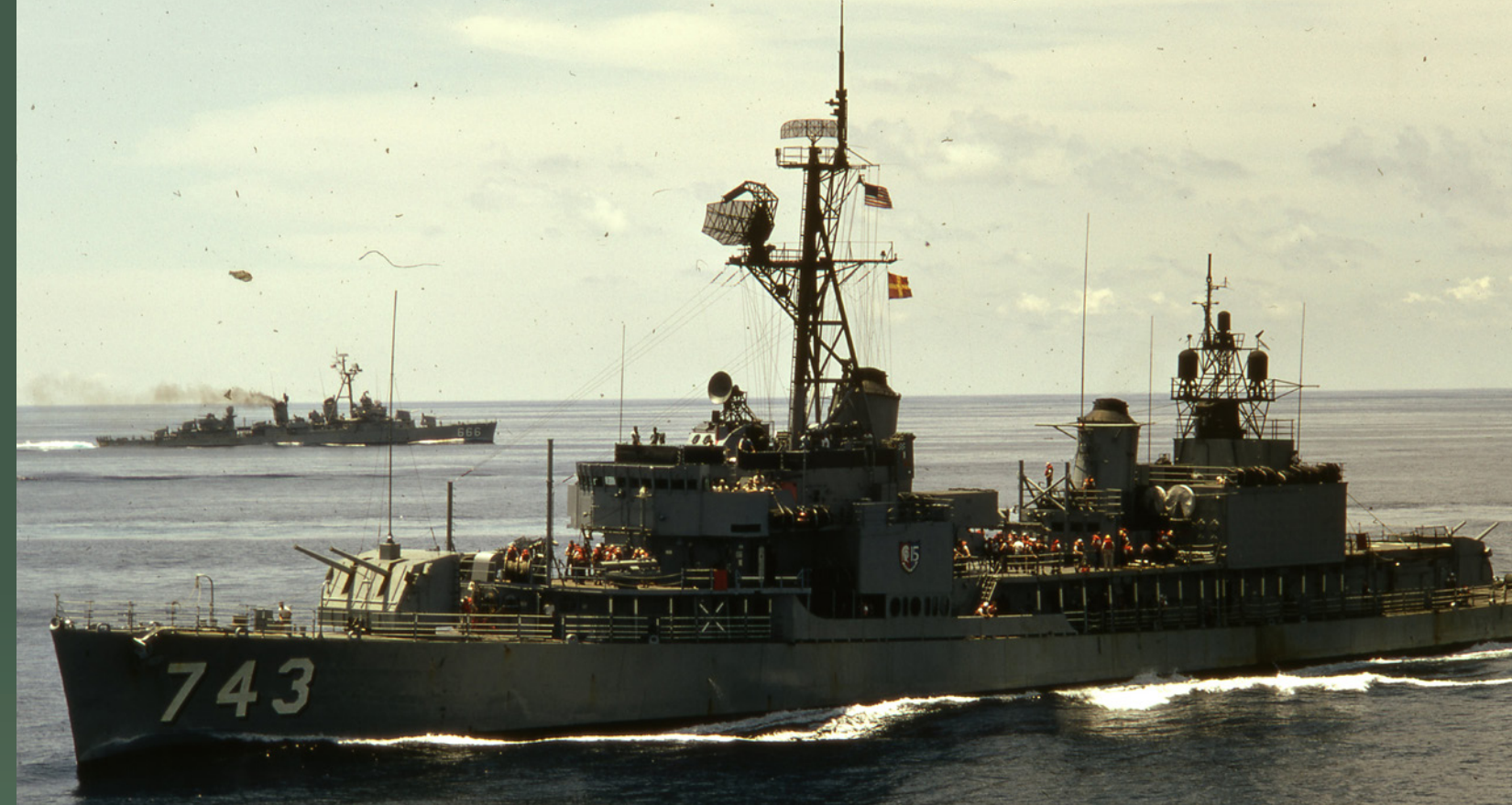


The Navy's photo interpreters scanned miles of film to locate enemy movements and to identify targets such as bridges, railroads, anti-aircraft guns, and missile sites. For this daunting task, they used tools like this polaroid lens, camera, and loupe. (Hampton Roads Naval Museum)



An aerial view of a section of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos shows two camouflaged enemy trucks and a destroyed vehicle after a bombing mission. (Naval History and Heritage Command)

SURFACE NAVY



The War at Sea

USS *Southerland* (DD 743) and USS *Black* (DD 666) escort USS *Franklin D. Roosevelt* (CVA 42) in the Gulf of Tonkin in 1966. (National Archives and Records Administration)

Ocean-going warships provided the U.S. military effort in Vietnam with vast capabilities. They monitored coastal fortifications and enemy communications. Cruisers and destroyers bombarded coastal and inland targets, often saving allied troops in imminent danger. Along with Coast Guard vessels and South Vietnamese coastal craft, U.S. Navy surface ships also successfully blockaded a 1,200-mile coastline from the 17th parallel to the Cambodian border. Other missions included search and rescue, tracking enemy aircraft, and landing U.S. Marines and other ground forces during amphibious operations.

USS *Topeka* (CLG 8) fires on Viet Cong targets in support of troops ashore. (National Archives and Records Administration)





John Uhrin, an officer aboard USS *Cone* (DD 866), remembered, “Usually, when you’re doing gunfire support you fire one or two rounds, and the spotter on the beach—Marine on the beach—will give you a spot to get you on target. This particular spotter was giving us spotting rounds of ten rounds, firing ten rounds, and then he’d give us a fairly decent spot, and fire—they were basically firing for effect instead of spotting rounds, but he was giving us big spots. The first couple we were scratching our heads and trying to figure it out. At about the third one, we listened closely to him on the radio, and he was out of breath. What we deduced from plotting where the rounds were going, he was calling in rounds on his position. When we’d go ‘shot,’ he’d run like hell. Then he’d spot to his own position—because they were being overrun. So he was calling them in, and they’d run, and try to get those coming in at ‘em. It was very interesting what the Marines had to do over there.”

Naval Gunfire Support

Stationed along the 1,200-mile coast of South Vietnam, destroyers and cruisers provided gunfire support to U.S. Army and Marine forces on shore between 1965 and 1972. With a devastating range of fire, warships could target large inland areas. The ships provided unspotted fire on pre-selected areas and also answered requests for direct fire on enemy troops, fortifications, and facilities selected by ground or aerial spotters. Naval gunfire often saved the lives of ground troops about to be overrun.

USS *St. Paul* (CA 73) duels with North Vietnamese shore defense batteries while shelling a railyard at Cong Phy in 1967. In Operation Sea Dragon (October 1966–October 1968), U.S. and Australian destroyers and cruisers patrolled the North Vietnamese coast to bombard enemy positions and prevent ammunition and supplies from flowing south. In addition to North Vietnamese supply vessels, U.S. Navy ships targeted gun emplacements, radar stations, truck convoys, bridges, and repair facilities. The largely successful operation ended as part of the U.S. drawdown in 1968. (Naval History and Heritage Command)



Sound-powered telephones allowed Sailors to talk without external power. The headsets were critical for shipboard communication. (On loan from Naval History and Heritage Command)



Ensign Lawrence Fairchild directs gunfire at North Vietnamese targets in March 1967 aboard USS *Canberra* (CAG 2). (Naval History and Heritage Command)





Tony D'Angelo, the weapons officer on USS *St. Paul*, recalled when one of his ship's guns misfired: "We fired a round, and as soon as it left the barrel, I said, 'Oh, something's wrong with that one.' Finally, I watched it, and after a few seconds or half a minute, it exploded in the air, which they're not supposed to do. They're supposed to hit the ground. Well, this one exploded in the air, and I'm saying, 'Uh oh, where did that happen?' I was concerned. We just settled down and continued firing, and about half an hour later, we got a call from the Korean Army: 'General would like to come out and pay call, visit your commanding officer.' . . . Sure enough, the Korean helo comes out, lands, they open it up. The general gets out with two of his aides, carrying these pieces of shrapnel. The Korean that spoke English said, 'This exploded over general's command post. This is part of the explosion.' So he hands them over. The general to the captain said, 'We would like you to have these.' So my captain says, 'Tony, I think he wants you to have these.' My boss gives them to me."



Although naval gunnery provided the American and allied forces with a powerful weapon with a high rate of fire, accidents sometimes occurred. In one case, USS *St. Paul* (CA 73) fired an 8-inch shell that accidentally exploded above a Republic of Korea division command post in 1967. This shell is from that accident. (On loan from Tony D'Angelo)



The Big Guns

Vietnam's long, narrow shape (especially in the North) was ideal for naval gunfire support. Cruisers and destroyers targeted inland positions throughout North and South Vietnam. Armed and ready, with the ability to refuel and resupply at sea, naval vessels maintained an impressive rate of fire. During the war's high point in 1968, Seventh Fleet ships fired 900,000 rounds at the enemy near the DMZ. In 1972, USS *Oklahoma City* (CLG 5) fired 1,000 rounds in just one night.

Brass shell casings litter the deck of USS *Newport News* (CA 148) after a gunfire support mission. Charlie Pfeifer, an officer aboard USS *Richard S. Edwards* (DD 950), remembered the incredible rate of fire maintained on gunfire support missions: "We fired so much that we re-armed probably two days out of three. So it wasn't unusual at all for us to get back on the gunline and start getting requests for fire with pallets of ammunition still sitting on the mess decks to be struck down into the magazine. You know, you do what you have to do." (Naval History and Heritage Command)



The heavy cruiser USS *Newport News* (CA 148) was built in its namesake city at the Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company. The ship made three deployments to Vietnam to take part in Operation Sea Dragon and provide gunfire support to allied forces. In 1972, *Newport News* joined a raid on Haiphong Harbor to destroy coastal defense and surface-to-air-missile (SAM) sites. Sailors dubbed the Norfolk-based cruiser “the Gray Ghost from the East Coast.”



Sailor John Sharp keeps a lookout for enemy counterbattery fire as USS *Newport News* (CA 148) fires on targets in October 1967. (*Naval History and Heritage Command*)

Operation Market Time

The Navy established Operation Market Time (March 1965–1972) to prevent North Vietnamese ships from supplying enemy forces in South Vietnam by sea. The Coastal Surveillance Force (Task Force 115) used a system of three barriers to patrol the South Vietnamese coast. Patrol aircraft covered the outermost barrier to identify, photograph, and report suspicious vessels. U.S. Navy vessels and U.S. Coast Guard cutters stopped and searched cargo vessels in the middle barrier forty miles off the coast. The South Vietnamese Navy, the Junk Force, and U.S. Navy Patrol Craft Fast (PCF) Swift boats cruised the coastal waters of the inner barrier. By 1968, these forces stopped virtually all seaborne infiltration from North Vietnam to South Vietnam. The blockade forced the North Vietnamese to rely on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Cambodian port of Sihanoukville to transport supplies to the Viet Cong.

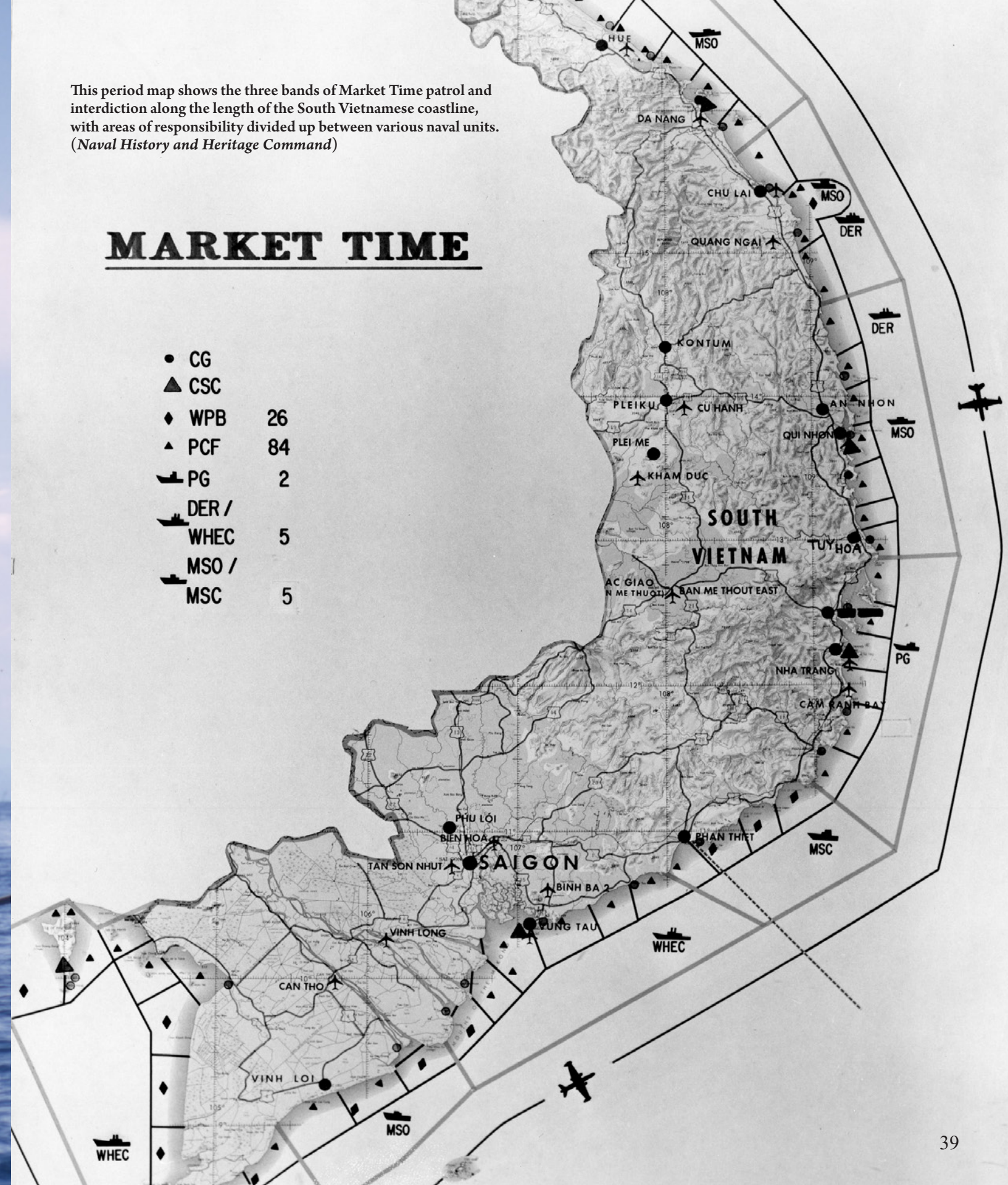


The Radar Picket Escort USS *Forster* (DER 334) stands by to board a Vietnamese junk in 1966. (National Archives and Records Administration)

This period map shows the three bands of Market Time patrol and interdiction along the length of the South Vietnamese coastline, with areas of responsibility divided up between various naval units. (Naval History and Heritage Command)

MARKET TIME

- CG
- ▲ CSC
- ◆ WPB 26
- ▲ PCF 84
- PG 2
- DER / WHEC 5
- MSO / MSC 5





Jim Keiper, a helicopter crewman aboard USS *Biddle*, remembered the attack: “The time when we got attacked by the five MiGs—that was awesome. I mean, that was real stuff—missiles going off the ship, guns shooting, you feel the vibration of the 5-inch gun every time it shoots. . . . Captain Carter swung his arms around and said, ‘Put up a World War II barrage.’ That means, everything on the left -port- side of the ship, shoot at a zero elevation, which is as low as you can, because that's where the MiGs were coming at us. So they're shooting everything. The ship's vibrating, it's turning, you're hearing the ‘doon doon doon doon doon’ with the anti-aircraft guns, and I'm told that the Marine contingent who had the security duty, they had a .50-caliber machine gun on the side. There was a lot of shooting going on. The next morning you could tell, with the expended shells and stuff like that that you saw.”

Air Defense

Surface ships tracked, identified, and attacked enemy MiG fighter planes with surface-to-air missiles. Ships such as USS *Long Beach* (CGN 9) guided Navy, Marine, and Air Force planes across North Vietnam, warned them of enemy aircraft, and also engaged fighters directly. The cruiser's RIM-8 Talos missile could hit a target one hundred miles away at altitudes up to 80,000 feet. By 1968, *Long Beach* had tracked over 500 MiG flights on radar, enabling allied aircraft to complete more missions over North Vietnam.

Five MiGs attacked USS *Biddle* (DLG 34) on the night of July 19, 1972, while the guided missile destroyer was on station to warn the fleet of enemy aircraft threats. The ship shot down at least two of the MiGs with missiles and gunfire. The destroyer's crew made this mug from the casings of shells fired at the attacking aircraft. (On loan from Jim Keiper)



Destroyers were the fleet's first line of defense. On April 17, 1972, enemy MiG fighter bombers attacked these ships, dropping a bomb on USS *Higbee*. USS *Sterett* shot down one of the MiGs with a Terrier missile. (Naval History and Heritage Command)



AIR POWER



From the Waves to the Skies

Air power was a crucial element of American strategy during the Vietnam War. U.S. pilots provided direct air support for friendly troops, attacked key supply routes such as the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and bombed North Vietnam's infrastructure to weaken the enemy's campaign against South Vietnam. During the course of the war, American planes dropped over twice as many bombs in Southeast Asia as they used in all of World War II. The Navy's planes delivered 25% of American ordnance (1.5 million tons) during the war. Task Force 77, the aircraft carrier group of the U.S. Seventh Fleet, generally operated from an area off North Vietnam called "Yankee Station," allowing for round-the-clock strikes against the enemy in coordination with the U.S. Air Force and Marine Corps. These aircraft carriers provided the U.S. military with one of its most important capabilities: the projection of power ashore.



An ordnanceman wheels three 250-pound bombs across the deck of USS *Hancock* (CVA 19) during operations in April 1967. (Naval History and Heritage Command)

Pilots cross the deck in front of various aircraft on USS *Coral Sea* (CVA 43) in 1968. (National Archives and Records Administration)



USS *Hancock* (CVA 19) underway in the Gulf of Tonkin during Operation Linebacker in 1972. (National Archives and Records Administration)





An F-4 from VF-111 "Sundowners" drops bombs over North Vietnam in 1972. (National Naval Aviation Museum)



A flight deck crew positions an A-4 on a catapult aboard USS *Ranger* (CVA 61). (Naval History and Heritage Command)

Operation Rolling Thunder

During Operation Rolling Thunder, the first major air campaign of the Vietnam War, the Navy and Air Force aimed to limit North Vietnam's ability to support the Viet Cong and other Communist groups in Southeast Asia. From March 1965 through October 1968, naval aviators flew over 140,000 sorties from Yankee Station. Target areas, often selected by senior officials in Washington instead of operational commanders, included power plants, fuel and supply depots, rail yards, bridges, and airfields. The campaign reduced the flow of supplies on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and damaged the country's military and economic resources.

A pilot walks in front of an F-4 Phantom on USS *Ranger* (CVA 61) after a mission over North Vietnam in December 1967. (National Archives and Records Administration)

Flight deck crewmembers direct an A-1 Skyraider taxiing to a catapult aboard USS Coral Sea (CVA 43) in January 1968. (National Archives and Records Administration)



A-4 Skyhawk pilot Lieutenant Commander Jim Reid carried this knife during his missions over Vietnam. Knives like this one could cut parachute rigging or jungle growth. Jim Reid remembered that he wanted a knife "that wasn't too long, because I'm a relatively short man," and he wanted his knife to be sharp enough to cut through his parachute harness if he ever had to eject from his aircraft. With a slightly curved blade that was razor sharp, Reid referred to this knife as the "short man's machete." (Gift of Jim Reid)



Lieutenant Bob Ponton served as a bombardier/navigator. His flight log contains records of the type of aircraft flown, mission times, and the "traps" (landings). Ponton used green ink to mark combat missions. (Gift of Bob Ponton)



Two A-6 Intruders from VA-196, off USS Constellation (CVA 64), fly toward enemy targets in July 1968. (National Archives and Records Administration)

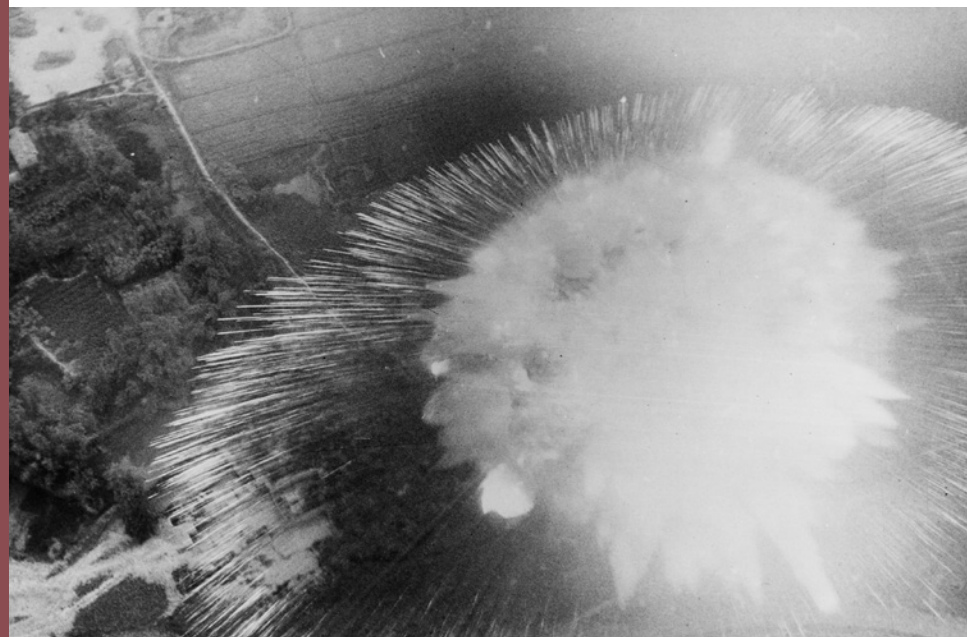


A-4 pilot Joe Schaedel remembered one encounter with a SAM site: “I looked around, and down on the little island just off of Haiphong Harbor, we could see smoke, flames, and great piles of dust coming, and all of a sudden, a missile coming out of that disturbance. Then a second one. . . . I said, ‘I have just changed the target. We’re going for that SAM site that is down below. Heads up, they’re coming up at us.’ It [SAM-2] has been described as looking like a telephone pole, but it’s a much fatter and longer telephone pole. And it’s moving relatively slowly as it starts taking off, but it’s streaking up there very quickly. You can easily see it, and you can maneuver away from it. So we did, rejoined the flight, and then proceeded to dive in on the target, and we obliterated the SAM site.”



Danger for Navy pilots flying over North Vietnam came from the air as well as the ground. North Vietnamese MiG fighter planes (supplied by the Soviet Union and China) often tried to attack American planes during bombing runs. While not as prevalent as anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) or surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), MiGs were a constant threat to aviators. In 1969, the Navy established the famous “Top Gun” school to improve air-to-air combat skills. In this image, ordnancemen arm an F-8 Crusader with AIM-9 Sidewinder missiles. These heat-seeking missiles were the primary weapon against enemy fighters. (*Naval History and Heritage Command*)

An SA-2 SAM explodes under an American plane. The North Vietnamese countered U.S. air superiority by positioning surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) and anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) around high value targets. For propaganda purposes, the North Vietnamese often moved SAM sites to areas that risked collateral damage, near dikes, villages, and stadiums. Although the U.S. developed technology to jam North Vietnamese radar, SAMs and AAA remained a constant danger throughout the war. (*Naval History and Heritage Command*)



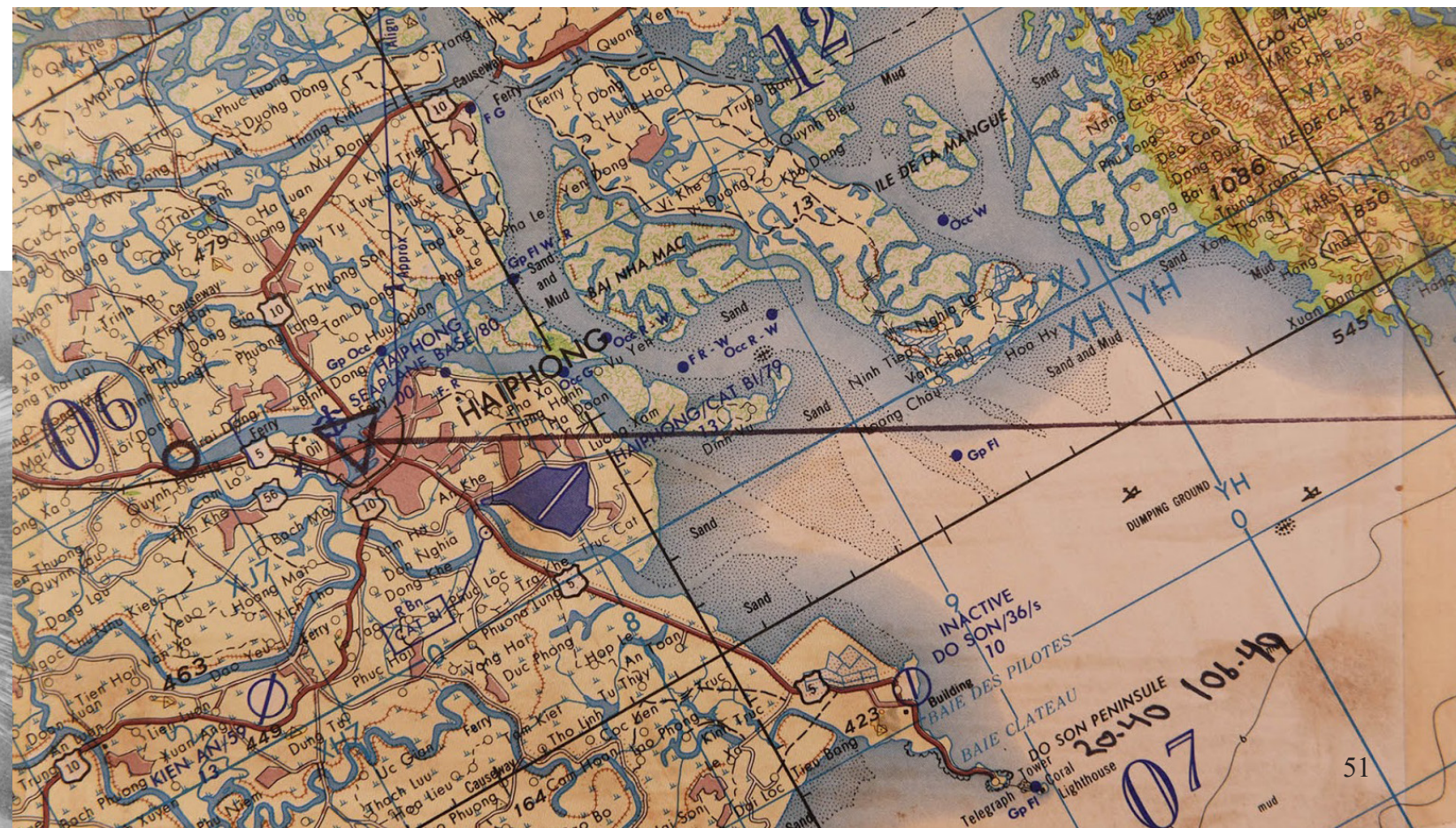
Operation Linebacker I & II

In 1972, Operation Linebacker broke the North Vietnamese Easter Offensive and convinced Hanoi to negotiate for peace. Unlike Rolling Thunder, U.S. Air Force and Navy commanders chose the targets and tactics without geographic restrictions. When peace talks halted in December, Operation Linebacker II focused bombing efforts on the capital city of Hanoi and the main port at Haiphong. In less than two weeks, North Vietnam resumed peace talks in earnest.

A-6 Intruder Bombardier/Navigator Bob Ponton used this chart to navigate during bombing missions. He remembered the details of one specific mission: “Our target was Haiphong Harbor. . . . On the way in, we could see a burning ship at the pier, which was our target. We got down low, we released the ordnance. At the time we were carrying sixteen MK-20 rokeyes, which are cluster bombs. We wanted to put holes in their trucks and stuff, and we released. But oh my God...the AAA was solid hoses of light—just streams of solid lines of light going over us. . . . We finished that mission and got back aboard, and that’s the time that I honest-to-God said, ‘I don’t know if I can do that again tomorrow night.’” (*Gift of Bob Ponton*)



F-4 Phantoms from USS *Midway* (CVA 41) and A-7 Corsair IIs from USS *America* (CVA 66) attack a target in a coordinated LORAN bomb strike. During Operation Linebacker, aviators flew an average of 4,000 sorties per month. (*National Archives and Records Administration*)





Jonnie Allen, a Marine aboard USS Forrestal, remembered: “It was like carnage. I’m amazed. The deck itself, as thick as that steel is, to witness that thing folded in, folded down, and that bomb went off—that was a heck of a power. That was a focal point of everybody when they went up on the flight deck, to see the damage that that bomb made when it went off. To see the deck the way it was at the time told the story of how bad it was. . . . It just sucked the wind out of everybody. It was a big loss. You come on line to do a mission, you think you’re gonna go over there and do your job, the ship’s gonna do its job, and we’re gonna come back home. Everything’ll be fine and dandy. But when that happened, the tone and the atmosphere of the ship was heartbreaking. The first few days were really painful. It was bringing in some bodies initially, and then they got evacuated. Every time they were taking the bodies off, we had a ceremony. Then another day you’d have the same thing. The smell was awful. I’ll always remember that. The smell was awful.”

A Navy in Flames: Carrier Fires in Vietnam

Fire is a constant threat on warships, and the Navy suffered three costly fires aboard aircraft carriers during the conflict. On October 26, 1966, ordnance explosions on USS *Oriskany* (CVA 34), sparked by a mishandled flare, soon engulfed the whole forward half of the carrier. On July 29, 1967, a fire broke out on USS *Forrestal* (CVA 59) when a Zuni rocket on one plane misfired and hit the fuel tank of an A-4 on deck. Chaos followed as bombs on the flight deck started exploding and burning fuel ignited the lower decks. On January 14, 1969, USS *Enterprise* (CVAN 65) was training off Hawaii in preparation for deployment. As with *Forrestal*, a Zuni rocket accidentally fired and engulfed the flight deck in flames.



A chaplain gives a blessing as bodies of USS *Oriskany* (CVA 34) crewmen are taken off the ship after the disastrous fire on October 26, 1966. (National Archives and Records Administration)



USS *Rupertus* (DD 851) comes alongside the fiercely burning USS *Forrestal* (CVA 59) to give assistance on July 29, 1967. (National Archives and Records Administration)

Crews continue to fight the 1967 fire on the flight deck of USS *Forrestal*. (National Archives and Records Administration)



The Seawolves

The Navy formed Helicopter Light Attack Squadron 3 (HAL-3) to support naval riverine forces in the Mekong Delta. Like the riverine vessels, the squadron

was a unique product of the war. Known as the “Seawolves,” HAL-3 provided close fire support to Navy river boats, SEALs, Army troops, and South Vietnamese forces using heavily armed UH-1 “Huey” helicopters.



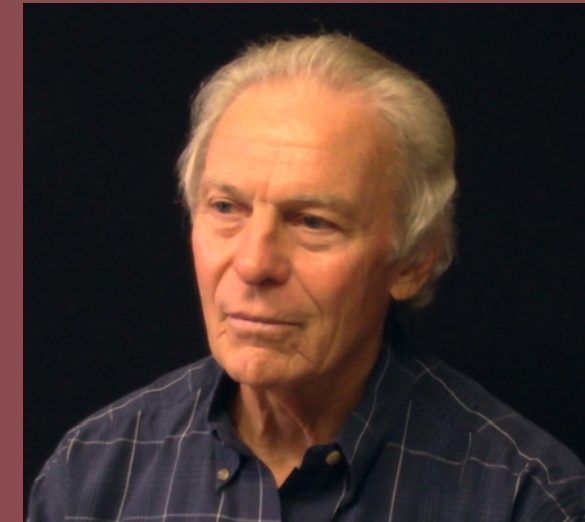
A HAL-3 UH-1 gunship flies low in front of a column of PBRs in the Mekong Delta in April 1968. (*Naval History and Heritage Command*)

Helicopter Support

An icon of the Vietnam War, the helicopter was used by every branch of the U.S. Armed Forces. Helicopters supported intelligence gathering, amphibious landings, search and rescue, riverine operations, medical evacuations, and underway replenishment.



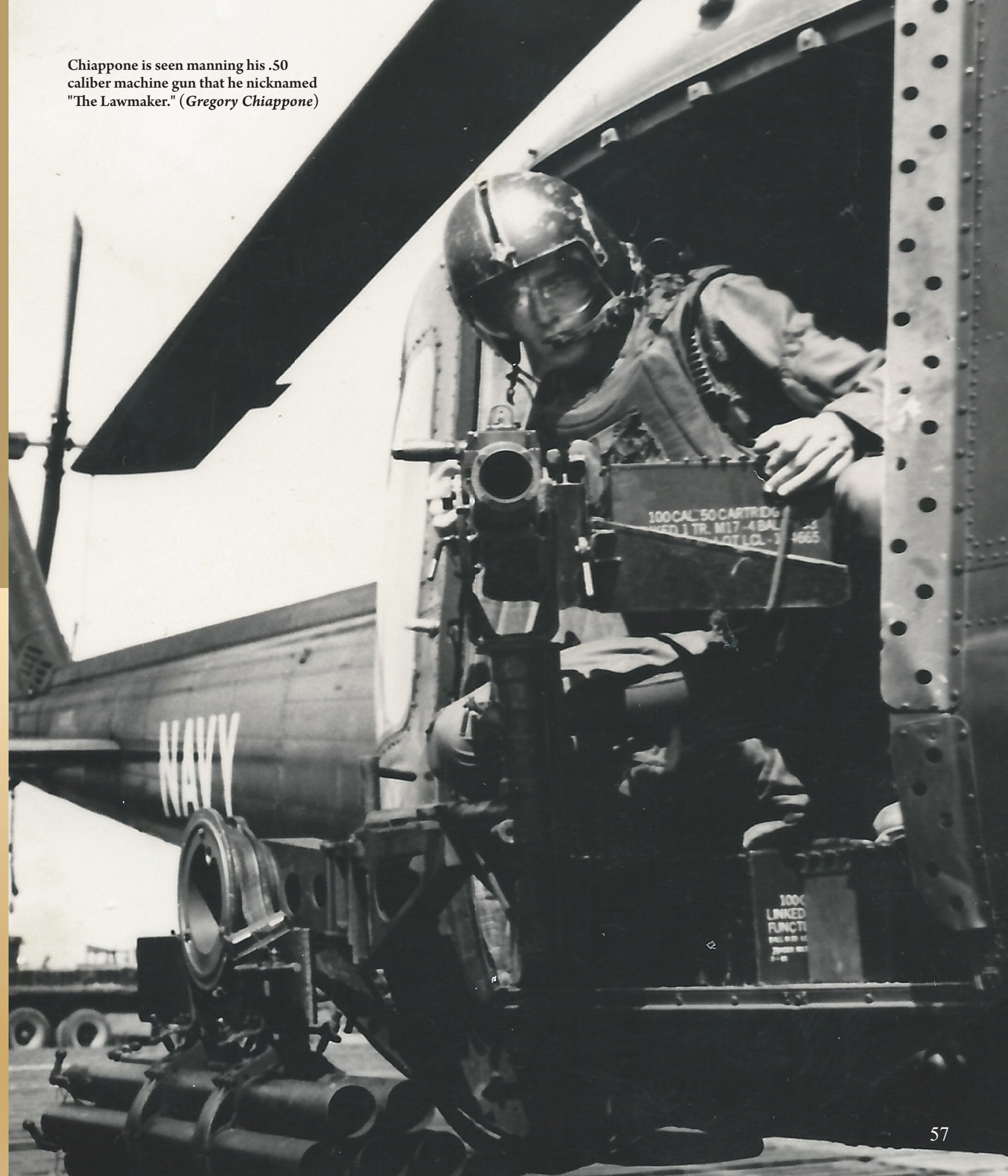
Search and Rescue (SAR) teams were critical to support Task Force 77's daily routine of flight sorties. Whether a pilot was shot down by enemy fire or a Sailor fell overboard, these crews stood ready to respond. SAR teams recovered over 50% of the 912 naval personnel downed between June 1964 and November 1968. During Operation Linebacker, fleet SAR units rescued another thirty naval air crew members. In this photo, a helicopter picks up Aviation Jet Mechanic Third Class Joseph Keola after he was blown overboard by a jet blast on USS *Constellation* (CVA 64) in September 1966. (*Naval History and Heritage Command*)



HAL-3 pilots took their job seriously, as pilot Lee Duckworth remembered: “We were out to put in a strike, and the other aircraft said they thought they saw something down on the ground. They said, ‘No, we saw people down there in blue uniforms; let’s go ahead and put in a strike.’ Tom [my co-pilot] and I kind of looked at each other, and it’s one of those—we’re both Lieutenant JGs. We’ve been in the Navy a little over two years, and that’s a lot of confidence people put in someone very early on to make the right decision. . . . I flew it down so he could look out and see who was down there. And as it turned out, they were bad guys and we came back and put in a strike. But to me, the most meaningful part of that was—you didn’t have to do that [double check]. You could have gotten away without doing it, but it was one of those things—one of those moral decisions you have to make, a dilemma early on, as a real young, probably pretty green pilot—decisions that you have to make on your own, obviously the right decisions. The more I thought about that over the years, that was a tough call, a gutsy move, but it was the right thing to do.”



Seawolf crews, on near constant standby, would respond to any requests within fifty miles of their base. The Huey helicopters, along with the Navy's OV-10 Bronco aircraft, provided life-saving close-air support to the riverine Sailors who often battled with larger enemy forces. HAL-3 door gunner Gregory Chiappone (pictured here) wore this helmet and Army flight suit top during some of his 450 combat missions. *(On loan from Gregory Chiappone)*



Chiappone is seen manning his .50 caliber machine gun that he nicknamed "The Lawmaker." *(Gregory Chiappone)*

Prisoners of War

Navy personnel (mostly aviators shot down over North Vietnam) accounted for 154 of the 600 Americans taken prisoner during the war. American POWs experienced torture, harsh interrogation, insufficient food, and poor or non-existent medical care while in captivity. While some prisoners died, all suffered horrific treatment in prisons such as the infamous "Hanoi Hilton." The North Vietnamese released 138 Navy POWs in 1973. Jim Mulligan reflected on his seven years as a POW, recalling, "You have to learn to be able to forgive yourself for what you had to do while there. . . but you never get over [being a prisoner of war]."

Lieutenant David Rehmann was paraded for North Vietnamese propaganda purposes shortly after his capture in 1966. (*Naval History and Heritage Command*)



Lieutenant Commander Kay Russell's F-8E aircraft was shot down over North Vietnam on May 19, 1967. For the next six years, he was held in various POW camps, including the infamous "Hanoi Hilton." Russell was released in 1973. (*On loan from Naval War College Foundation*)



Lieutenant (junior grade) Porter Halyburton's plane was shot down sixty miles north of Hanoi in 1965. While imprisoned, Halyburton received a pair of red socks in the first care package from his wife in 1969. They were used as socks, gloves, and even Christmas stockings before Porter finally made them into a "dickie," or a fake turtleneck, to keep his neck warm. (*On loan from Naval War College Foundation*)



This diorama shows two POWs communicating via a "tap code." Communication was essential to surviving years of captivity. Forbidden to speak, prisoners communicated by knocking, tapping a tin cup, or even coughing a set number of times for each letter of the alphabet. Prisoners communicated secretly with one another at great risk to coordinate resistance, overcome isolation, maintain the chain of command, and strengthen morale.



RIVERINE OPERATIONS

Brown Water Navy

In the 1960s the Mekong Delta was home to 40% of South Vietnam's population and produced most of the country's rice. North Vietnam and the Viet Cong relied on inland roads and waterways for supply and transportation. Control of both land and river routes was vital to the war effort. In Operation Game Warden, river patrol boats (PBRs) and other vessels of the River Patrol Force (Task Force 116) fought to deny

the enemy's use of South Vietnam's rivers. The Navy supplied special vessels for the Mobile Riverine Force (Task Force 117) to carry troops and support Army operations. Later in the war, Operation SEALORDS increased security in the delta until American forces withdrew in the early 1970s. During the war, the brown water navy patrolled 3,000 nautical miles of inland waters. It helped doom the Tet Offensive and defended the Mekong Delta.

An armored troop carrier (ATC) of the Mobile Riverine Force navigates a waterway in 1967. (Naval History and Heritage Command)





The Navy's Patrol Boat River (PBR) earned fame as the principal fighting vessel of the River Patrol Force. The PBR was thirty-one feet long with a lightweight fiberglass hull. The boat's 2' 2" draft and diesel engine-powered Jacuzzi water jet propulsion provided speed and maneuverability. The four-man crew defended the boat with .50-caliber and M60 machine guns, grenade launchers, rifles, and shotguns. More than 250 PBRs patrolled the rivers and canals of Vietnam. In this photo, two PBRs patrol the Long Tau River, the main supply route to the port of Saigon in 1966. (*Naval History and Heritage Command*)



Navy PBR crew members from River Section 535 inspect identification papers of a Vietnamese boatman while patrolling a narrow canal off the Bassac River in January 1968. (*National Archives and Records Administration*)

PBR Sailors check identification papers and search a Vietnamese craft on the Perfume River in 1968. (*National Archives and Records Administration*)



Operation Game Warden: Keeping Shipping Channels Open

In 1965, the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) recognized that the enemy was supplying Viet Cong units via the Ho Chi Minh Trail and Cambodia. In December of that year, the Navy established the River Patrol Force (Task Force 116) to keep shipping channels open, search river craft, disrupt enemy troop movements, and support special operations and ground forces. Operation Game Warden limited the enemy's use of South Vietnam's larger rivers.

During Operation Flankspeed, Sailors of River Section 542 captured this sampan twenty miles from Saigon on August 14, 1968. Navy personnel searched for Viet Cong activity using small boats, calling in PBRs when needed. Two other sampans were destroyed and six enemies were killed on the day this boat was captured. (On loan from Naval History and Heritage Command)



Sailors prepare a mine-damaged Assault Support Patrol Boat (ASPB) for salvage. (United States Navy)



Heavy traffic on waterways, especially near cities like Saigon, made Viet Cong explosive mines a constant threat. U.S. minesweepers patrolled the waters to remove mines. The Viet Cong responded by ambushing U.S. and South Vietnamese forces with rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), recoilless rifles, machine guns, and landmines. The Viet Cong even swam up to vessels and attached magnetic mines to their hulls. One such mine caused devastating explosions on USS *Westchester County* (LST 1167) in 1968, killing twenty-five Sailors and Soldiers. This photo shows a Navy minesweeping boat (MSB) on the Long Tau River in 1966. (Naval History and Heritage Command)

Weapons

Vietnam abounds with hundreds of rivers, canals, and swamps, which provided the enemy with protection and the ability to surprise American and South Vietnamese forces. The Viet Cong used a variety of weapons and equipment to fight in this environment.

The Viet Cong modified Chinese Type 50 submachine guns to create a short, lightweight weapon suitable for close firefights. (On loan from Naval History and Heritage Command)



As the Navy limited the flow of supplies, the Viet Cong often turned any available material into deadly weapons. The VC made this soda can into a homemade hand grenade. (On loan from Naval History and Heritage Command)

This armor-piercing B-40 rocket, fired from a shoulder-held anti-tank weapon, was extremely effective against the Navy's riverine forces. The weapon was lightweight and required minimal training. This fragment is what remains of the B-40 rocket that hit Ron Wolin's patrol boat during the Tet Offensive. He remembered, "Everyone on the boat was wounded from small arms fire and the rocket. . . I had shrapnel in my legs and a concussion." (On loan from Ronald Wolin)



The PCF or Swift boat's high speed and shallow draft made it highly effective for coastal and riverine patrols. In this photo, PCF 43 gains speed for a firing run in 1969 as part of Operation Slingshot. (*Naval History and Heritage Command*)

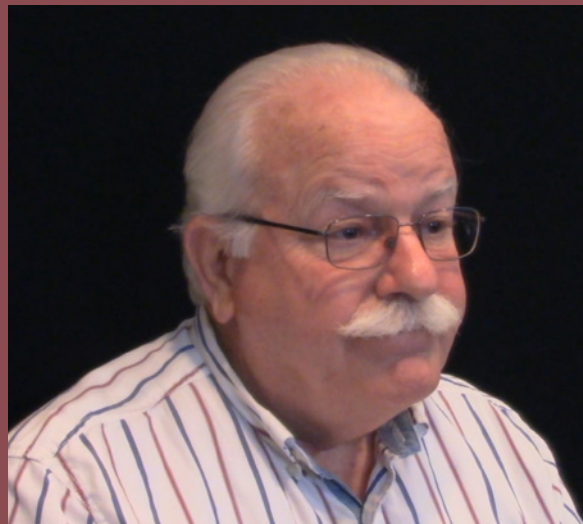
SEALORDS

Vice Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr., Commander, U.S. Naval Forces in Vietnam, decided to blockade waterways from the Gulf of Siam to north of Saigon. The U.S. launched Operation SEALORDS (Southeast Asia Lake, Ocean, River, Delta Strategy) in November 1968 to keep the enemy on the defensive after their heavy losses from the Tet Offensive. The Navy took the lead to cut off supply routes from Cambodia and to take out enemy bases in the Mekong Delta. Patrol Craft Fast (PCF), also known as Swift boats, conducted fast raids into coastal waterways and took over patrol duties on the larger rivers in the delta, allowing PBRs to patrol canals and smaller rivers. Ending in 1971, SEALORDS' success helped prepare Vietnamese allies for the eventual turnover of operations as U.S. forces withdrew.

A Swift boat passes the city of Ca Mau in 1969. (*National Archives and Records Administration*)



Charlie Hunt, Swift boat crewman, described the vessel's armament in detail: "A Swift boat has twin .50-caliber machine guns in a gun tub up top in front. On the fantail there's a 81-mm mortar with a .50-caliber machine gun piggy-backed on top. It had two M60 machine guns, and we usually had one of those up on the very front of the bow and one on the fantail with me. In addition to that, we also had five M16s, two M79 grenade launchers, M72 LAWs, the portable rocket launcher. We had smoke grenades. The only thing we didn't—we didn't have frag grenades. For some reason they didn't think we were safe with frag grenades, we'd blow our boat up or something. So we had every other kind of grenade."



Gary Grahn, ASPB crewman, remembered the dangers on the water for these boats, and how they were dispatched to help one another: “A monitor and a troop carrier were out patrolling together at night, and they both took four rocket hits. . . . When it hit the monitor it hit the 40mm mount [front turret], which started a fire. They were also a napalm thrower, so it got the napalm burning, and the bottom line was, it set the whole monitor ablaze. They had to abandon the boat. They beached it so it wouldn’t sink. My boat and a sister boat were dispatched to lend fire support and/or any rescue that was necessary. By the time we got there, we were calling in Seawolf fire support because it was pretty hot in more ways than one. The monitor ended up sinking. It just rolled over and sank.”

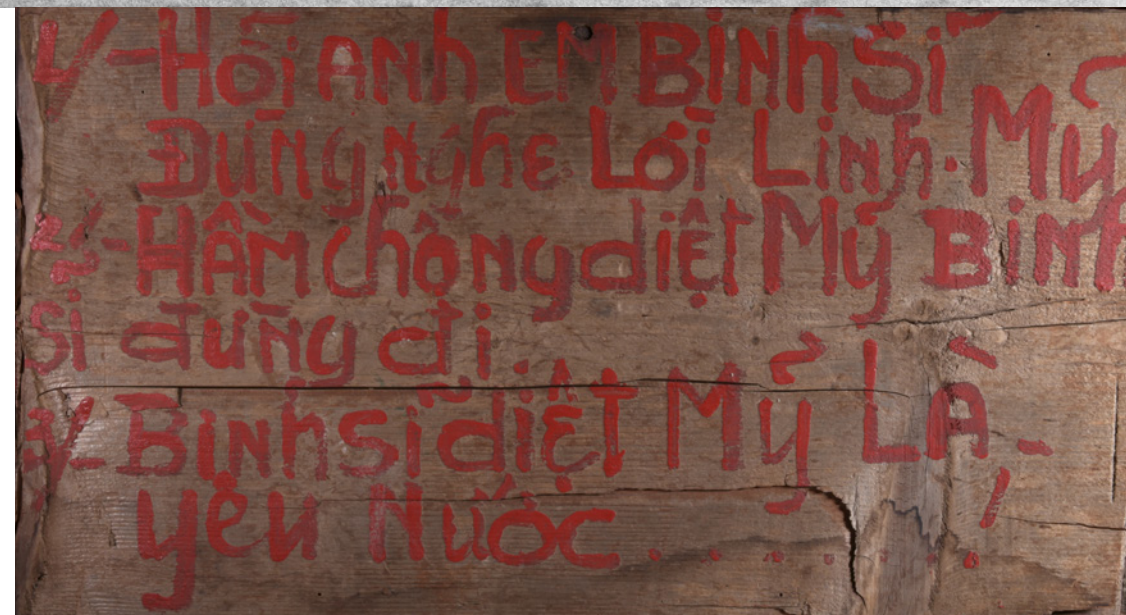


Three Assault Support Patrol Boats (ASPBs) and a Monitor of the Mobile Riverine Force scan for danger as they lead a convoy of Armored Troop Carriers (ATCs) up a Mekong Delta river in 1968. (Naval History and Heritage Command)

Riverine Tactics

Riverine Sailors used ever-evolving tactics to counter the Viet Cong while operating in Vietnam’s waterways. Mobile Riverine Force Sailors used convoy tactics and coordinated with the Army. PBRs worked in pairs to search vessels. Swift boats and other craft operated together to patrol and set up ambushes in support of SEALORDS.

This propaganda sign was captured by Sailors in the Mobile Riverine Force. It translates: “(1) to the military brothers, don’t listen to the American soldiers. (2) Punji sticks* are for the Americans, don’t go in. (3) The military who kills the Americans is patriotic.” *Punji sticks are sharpened spears of bamboo planted in the ground. (On loan from Naval History and Heritage Command)

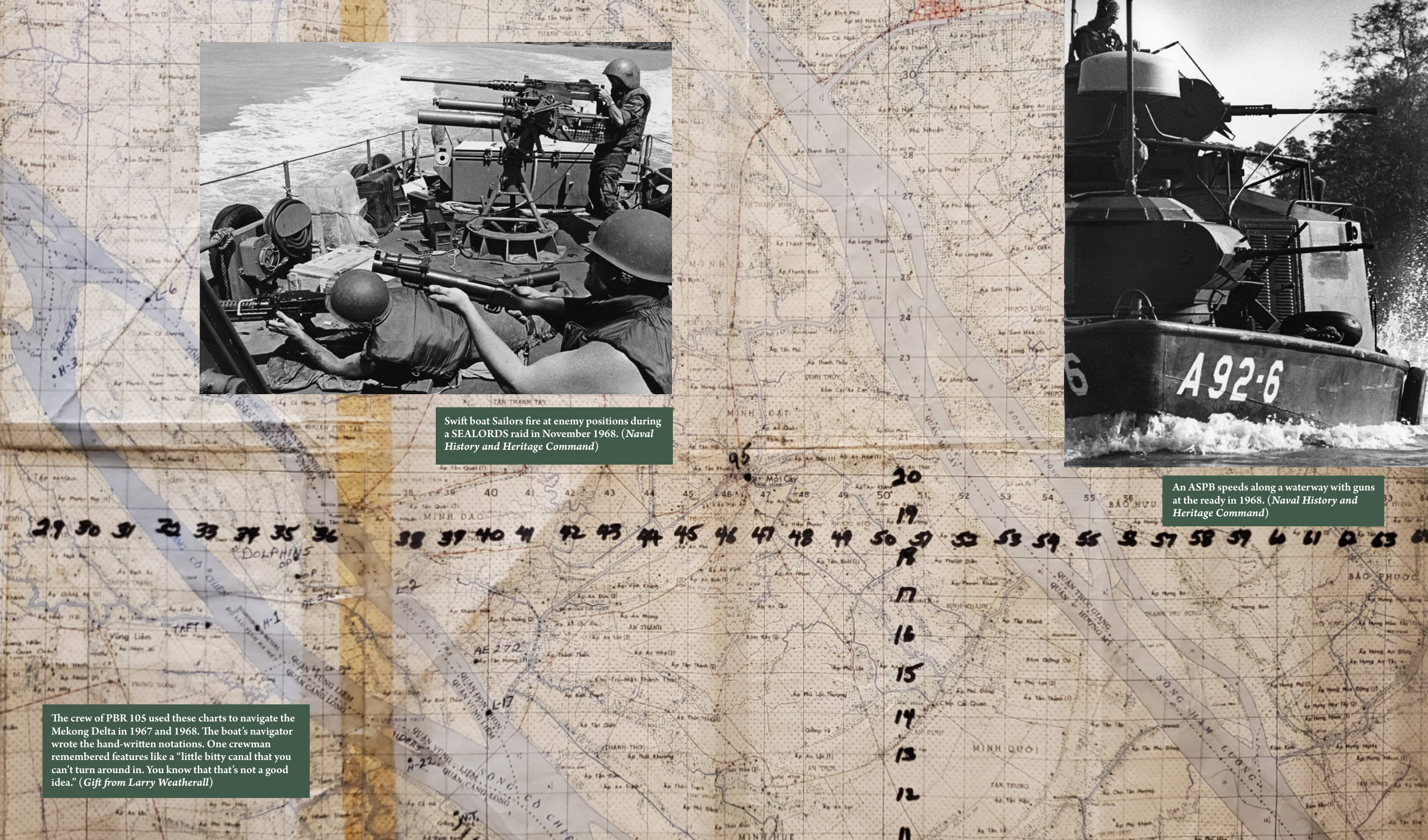




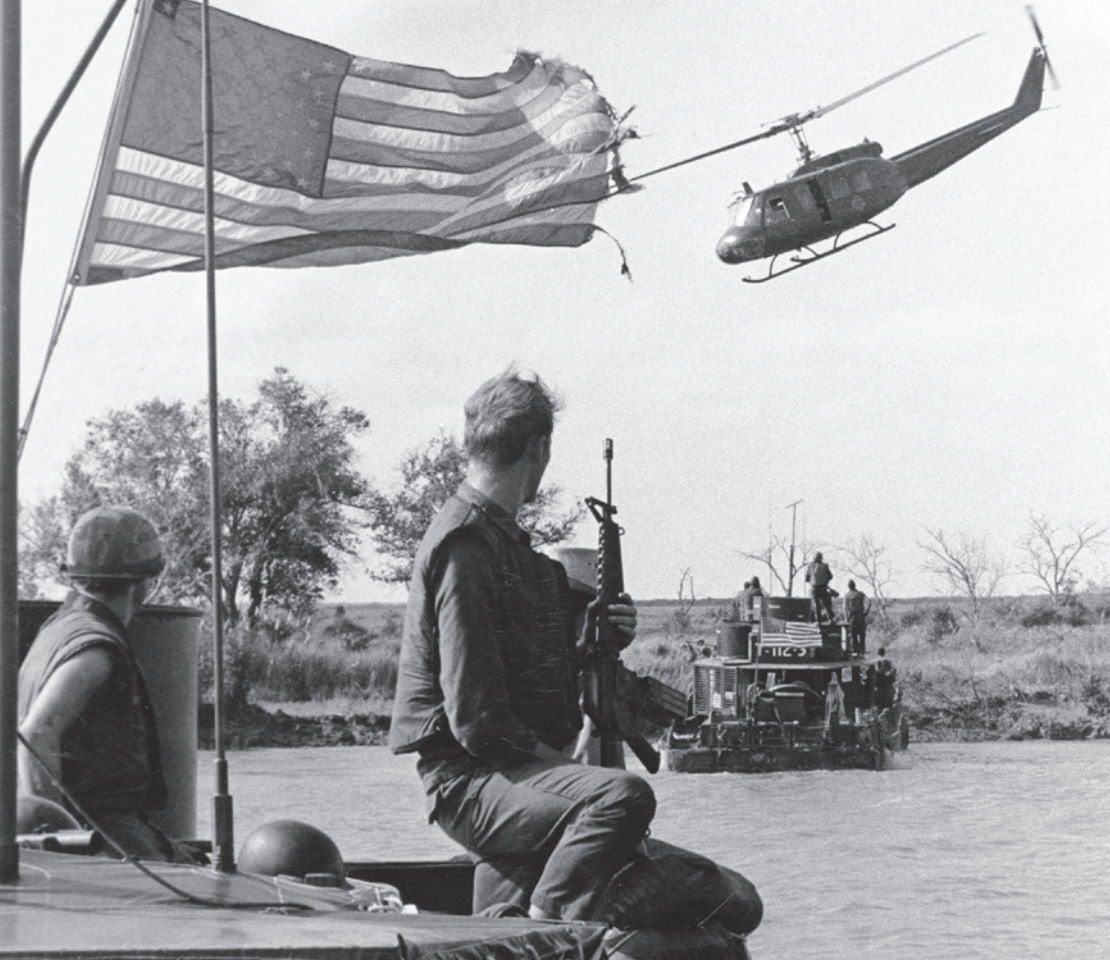
Swift boat Sailors fire at enemy positions during a SEALORDS raid in November 1968. (Naval History and Heritage Command)



An ASPB speeds along a waterway with guns at the ready in 1968. (Naval History and Heritage Command)



The crew of PBR 105 used these charts to navigate the Mekong Delta in 1967 and 1968. The boat's navigator wrote the hand-written notations. One crewman remembered features like a "little bitty canal that you can't turn around in. You know that that's not a good idea." (Gift from Larry Weatherall)



Sailors and Soldiers of the Mobile Riverine Force watch an Army medevac helicopter lift off with a wounded Soldier along the Vam Co Tay River in 1969. (*Naval History and Heritage Command*)

USS *Garrett County* (LST 786) serves as a mobile base for PBRs and HAL-3 Seawolves while at anchor in the Co Chien River in June 1968. (*National Archives and Records Administration*)



PBR crewmembers man their weapons during a mission on the rivers in 1969. Engineman Larry Weatherall remembered life on a PBR: “Combat is different when you’re out on the river. You’re out on patrol, looking for contraband on the boats, when all of a sudden POW! Somebody’s shooting at you. You have no idea where it’s coming from. All you can hear was the crack, and the bullet going by and the boom! What else can you do? You can’t hit the deck; you’re on a fiberglass boat. It’s not going to stop anything! Your first firefight, if you don’t know it’s coming, you cannot prepare for it. All you do is react. Your reaction hopefully follows the training at that point.” (*National Archives and Records Administration*)



The advent of divisional shoulder sleeve insignia in World War I made uniform patches a popular item for military personnel to collect and add to their own uniforms. During the Vietnam War, military personnel could sketch a design on paper and drop it off at one of the Vietnamese shops, which would create and print the patch in just a few days. Lieutenant Ron Wolin, the first commanding officer of River Section 534, designed this uniform patch himself, remembering, “A tailor shop made about 300 and I gave three to four to every Sailor.” (*On loan from Ronald Wolin*)

LOGISTICS



Ready for Battle: Supporting the War

The U.S. Navy was the backbone of the logistics effort in Vietnam. The United States transported 99% of ammunition and 95% of supplies (including vehicles) by sea. By mid-1967, the Military Sea Transportation Service (MSTS) ran a fleet of 527 ships to keep the ammunition and equipment moving. The MSTS also transported tens of thousands of U.S. and allied troops to South Vietnam. The Seabees (Navy Construction Battalions) built, repaired, and maintained base and port facilities, hangars, helicopter pads, runways, piers, and offshore fuel lines. The Navy established Headquarters Support Activity, Saigon on July 1, 1962. Naval Support Activity, Da Nang later served as the Navy's largest overseas logistics command. Naval personnel provided spiritual and physical support as well. Navy doctors and nurses treated the wounded on hospital ships and in-country while chaplains and corpsmen served with Marines fighting on the front lines.

Ships unload supplies at the deep water port at Da Nang in 1966. (*National Archives and Records Administration*)



A UH-46 Sea Knight helicopter from Helicopter Support Squadron Three picks up a pallet of 5-inch rounds from USS *Camden* (AOE 2) to deliver to nearby destroyers in 1968. (*National Archives and Records Administration*)

Build, Repair, Defend: The Seabees in Vietnam

Navy Construction Battalions (CBs or Seabees) built, repaired, and maintained military facilities throughout Vietnam. They worked on boat ramps, hangars, helicopter pads, runways, piers, fuel storage tanks, and more. To win the support of local people, they built houses, schools, hospitals, and wells. True to the motto, “We build, We fight,” one Seabee remembered: “If you didn’t get a rocket at least once or twice a week, you felt left out. They were always shooting at us.” From 1965 to mid-1968, over 10,000 Seabees served in-country.

Seabees of Mobile Construction Battalion 62 survey the approach to the new Dong Ha Bridge under construction in the Quang Tri Province in 1969. (National Archives and Records Administration)



Seabee Bill Murray was working at a Marine Corps base when a 122mm Viet Cong rocket struck. Murray remembered: “The big piece came tearing through the roof of my hut, and I jumped out of my rack to look at it. . . When I got back, I saw that the smaller piece had torn through my rack. I call the big one the one that saved me, and the small one the one that tried to kill me.” (On loan from Bill Murray)



This detail from a plaque represents Seabee Team 7108. The worker bee symbolizes the Seabees, whose motto is, “We build, We fight.” The bee is entwined with a map of Vietnam. (On loan from U.S. Navy Seabee Museum)

These unfired 122mm rockets were found by U.S. Marines several miles from Da Nang, aimed at American targets in Da Nang. (Naval History and Heritage Command)



Seaborne Supplies

America's naval and merchant ships mounted a monumental oceangoing logistics effort from 1965 to 1973. The MSTS (renamed the Military Sealift Command in 1970) enabled the United States to sustain an eight-year conflict, 7,000 miles from American shores. Forming a "steel bridge" across the vast Pacific Ocean, the U.S. Merchant Marine transported 99% of the ammunition and fuel and 95% of the supplies, vehicles, and construction materials employed by allied forces in the war. The effort came with a cost: the enemy sank eleven U.S. merchant ships during the war.

Seaman John Dahlgren unhooks shroud lines from crates while Seaman Phillip Rasnake records their arrival on his clipboard in 1969. (*Naval History and Heritage Command*)



Mineman Second Class Franklin Marshall conducts a search for mines near merchant ships in Da Nang Harbor in 1966. (*National Archives and Records Administration*)



From Bullets to Beans: Underway Replenishment

With dozens of ships off Vietnam at any time, U.S. naval forces needed a constant flow of supplies. Ammunition ships provided much-needed ordnance to ships on the gun line and the carriers on Yankee and Dixie Stations. Oilers fueled ships so they could remain on constant patrol. Stores ships provided food and other resources to strengthen Sailors' bodies and morale. During underway replenishment, ships transferred fuel or supplies by shooting lines across to other ships while maintaining speed and course. The Navy also used helicopters for vertical replenishment.

A CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter delivers supplies from the fast combat support ship USS Sacramento (AOE 1) to USS Hancock (CVA 19) in 1966. (*National Archives and Records Administration*)



The ammunition ship USS Pyro (AE 24) transfers 5-inch powder cartridges to USS Turner Joy (DD 951) in 1970. (*National Archives and Records Administration*)



Ministry in War

Navy chaplains in Vietnam represented different religions and denominations. By 1965, Headquarters Support Activity, Saigon included chaplains who attended to religious activities, improved morale, and ministered to Vietnamese civilians. Chaplains served in hospitals, on ships, and in-country with U.S. Marine combat units. They provided aid and comfort to the troubled, the wounded, and the dying.

Navy chaplains served on larger ships, and were also attached to Marine units and hospitals. Portable kits like these allowed them to conduct their ministry in the field. The kit on the left is used for Jewish services, while the kit on the right is for Protestant/Catholic services. (*Hampton Roads Naval Museum*)



A chaplain conducts a church service for Marines from the 9th and 12th Marine Regiments in 1969. (*Naval History and Heritage Command*)



A Navy chaplain, Lieutenant (junior grade) Harry Jones, baptizes two Marines and one Airman in the Seng Bo Dien River in 1967. (*Naval History and Heritage Command*)



Navy chaplain Gordon Paulson remembered, “All you can do is talk to them, be there, be present for them, and be available. I think the most significant thing in a hospital situation is simply a ‘ministry of presence,’ to see the chaplain. I remember one young fellow came in—he had one of his legs taken off in battle—and because he looked the more serious of them, I went straight to him. He said, ‘Chaplain, don’t worry about me. I’m a Christian.’ But he said, ‘My buddy over there isn’t. Please go talk to him first.’ And you had those kinds of what I would consider uplifting experiences.”

Saving Lives

Medical battalions staffed hospitals in Saigon, Da Nang, and elsewhere in South Vietnam. By 1968, Naval Support Activity Hospital, Da Nang, the largest land-based medical facility in Vietnam, served 24,273 patients. Casualties who arrived at a medical facility within an hour of being wounded had a 98% percent survival rate. The Navy's hospital ships provided medical treatment for thousands of personnel. Each unarmed, air-conditioned ship had two major operating rooms and a frozen blood supply.



USS *Repose* (AH 16) carried twenty-four doctors, twenty-nine nurses, and 250 corpsmen. The hospital ship served over 62,000 patients between 1966 and 1970. (*National Archives and Records Administration*)



A Navy nurse on USS *Repose* (AH 16) offers encouragement to a patient being prepared for transport to the United States in 1967. (*Naval History and Heritage Command*)



Medical technician Carmen Adams remembered one particularly difficult day aboard the *Repose*: “We were on the line when Khe Sanh [1968] was going on. When the battle was over, basically, our ship was off the coast there and they were bringing the wounded to us. After it was pretty much over, Chief. . . said, ‘They’re bringing bodies aboard, and we’re going to have to store them. . . in our space.’ I said, ‘Okay, I can handle that.’ Well, what I didn’t realize at the time was those bodies had been laying out for a while, and so the odor was—it permeated the ship. . . . That was probably the worst day that I ever spent.”



Navy corpsman Danny Lliteras remembered his job as a corpsman with the Marines in the jungles of Vietnam: “There’s a sort of priesthood to the corpsman rate in the Marine Corps. That’s the only way I can put it. You’re not only a medical man, but you’re also the spirit and the moral elements to those guys. When I went over there as a 20-year-old, I thought to myself, ‘When I go over there, I’m not going to do anything that I can’t live with. I’m not going to do anything wrong that I can’t live with.’ That was the extent of my spiritual inner self at the time. I just kept it real simple. I think most of the guys felt that way, too. My job also was to be a rifleman. I was as much a rifleman as I was a medical man, but the medical side of me was always there. They would consult with me. . . . Mostly, I listened. I just listened.”

Corpsman Up!

Hospital corpsmen served with Navy personnel in hospitals, on ships, on bases, and attached to Marine units. They provided routine medical care for cases of tropical ulcers known as “jungle rot” and heat exhaustion. Armed with a medical kit (and often a weapon) while on patrol with rifle companies, the “Docs” treated combat wounds caused by small arms, explosives, and booby traps. Acting quickly under fire, they worked to stop bleeding, keep airways open, dress wounds, and prevent shock. Aided by helicopter evacuations, corpsmen saved countless lives during the war.

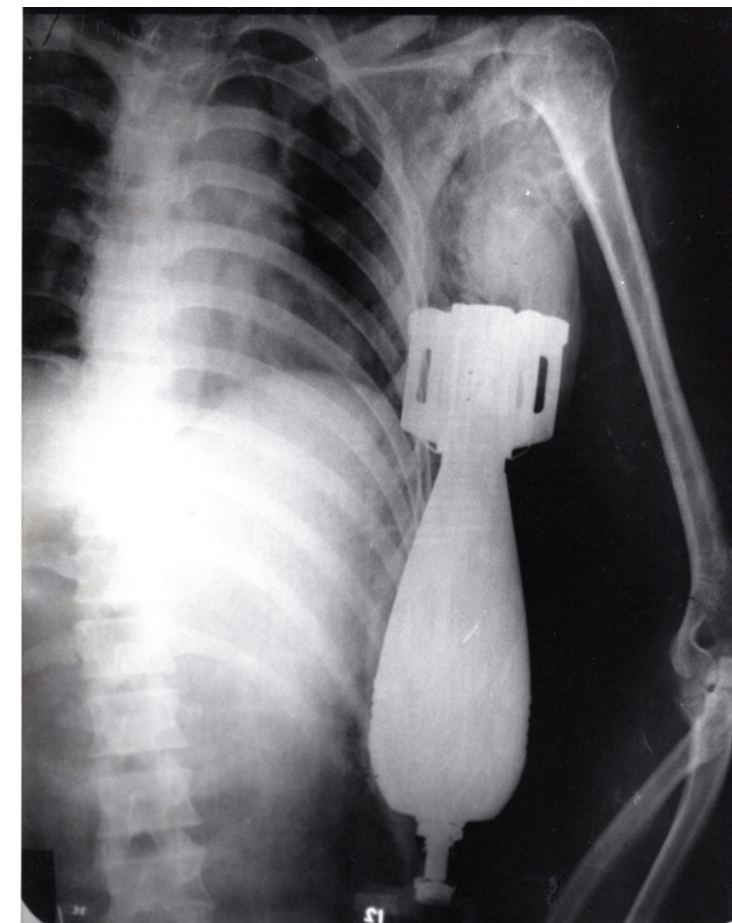


U.S. Navy corpsman Ervin Bostick bandages the leg of a wounded Marine during a sweep and destroy mission near An Hoa in 1966. (*National Archives and Records Administration*)



Navy doctor Captain Harry Dinsmore removed this live 60mm mortar round from South Vietnamese soldier Pfc. Nguyen Van Luong at the naval hospital in Da Nang in October 1966. He immediately handed it to an explosives expert from EOD Unit One, Engineman First Class John Lyons, who disarmed it. Lyons then presented Dinsmore with the shell as a souvenir. For their actions, the Navy awarded Dinsmore with the Navy Cross, and Lyons with the Silver Star. (*On loan from Dr. Harry Dinsmore, Jr.*)

This X-ray shows the mortar still in the soldier’s body. (*Courtesy of Dr. Harry Dinsmore, Jr.*)



Captain Dinsmore and Engineman First Class John Lyons pose with the mortar and their patient after they removed and disarmed the round. (*Courtesy of Dr. Harry Dinsmore, Jr.*)





YFU crewman Ray Weber discussed the items his boat delivered: “We carried everything that you need to sustain a war. I often say that we carried everything from beer to bullets. We carried field artillery rounds; we carried new and used 155mm cannons for the Marines and Army up north that were firing across the DMZ at the caves where the enemy was; we carried retrograde; we carried tanks, trucks, jeeps, tank retrievers; we carried food. We carried big refrigerator cargo that had pallets and pallets of steaks and vegetables and canned food to the troops. We carried troops themselves, especially during the monsoons when track vehicles and trucks couldn’t get around the country because it was so wet. . . . Basically, we carried anything that sustains war up and down the rivers.”

Delivering Supplies and Troops



Navy forces were crucial to Army and Marine supply lines. World War II-era Landing Ship, Tanks (LSTs) and Harbor Utility Craft (YFUs) moved much of the war materiel up and down the rivers of Vietnam. In this image, YFUs deliver Army self-propelled howitzers to the battlefield in 1967. (*Naval History and Heritage Command*)



Before 1968, American forces were transported to Vietnam on MSTs troop transports operated by civilian mariners. Ships such as the 523-foot USNS *General LeRoy Eltinge* carried nearly 3,000 troops across the Pacific Ocean on each trip. The three-week voyage afforded Soldiers and Marines the opportunity for recreation and preparation for the trials and dangers they would face on their year-long tours of duty. In this image, Soldiers of the 101st Airborne Division arrive in Cam Ranh aboard the troop transport *General LeRoy Eltinge* in 1965. (*Naval History and Heritage Command*)



YFU-72 transports high-explosive ammunition up the Perfume River to Hue in 1968. (*Naval History and Heritage Command*)



Larry Weatherall, PBR crewman, remembers his experience during the Tet Offensive: "Tet of '68 was big. When that happened we were back at our main base in a town called My Tho, which was the district capital. It was one of the areas that the Viet Cong really wanted to overrun. . . . The Viet Cong never got into our compound because the SEALs were there. As Viet Cong tried to get close to our area, the SEALs just picked them off, so they learned to stay away from that area. They never got on to our base down by the river because that was also very heavily defended. But they did get close to some of the admin buildings. They took over some medical facilities that the Vietnamese were using, and another town that was close to where we were was called Ben Tre. One of the stories about Tet is that somebody said, 'We had to destroy the town to save it.' That was pretty much true, because the Vietnamese took it over with the exception of one very small area. There was a canal from My Tho, the town that we were at, over to Ben Tre. We would run that canal, supporting the Vietnamese and American forces that were in Ben Tre. We got shot at a lot then, because there were Viet Cong everywhere until the end."

Turning Point: The Tet Offensive of 1968

The Tet Offensive, initiated at the start of the Vietnamese New Year holiday called Tet, was a turning point in the war. The surprise assault began on January 31, 1968, when North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces attacked cities and towns throughout South Vietnam. The U.S. and South Vietnamese troops defeated the enemy on all fronts. Lasting several months, the offensive failed in its attempt to cause a massive Communist uprising and severely weakened Viet Cong forces in the last seven years of the war. Despite these victories, the American people saw the assault and the military's request for additional troops afterward as confirmation of the war's futility. The following years saw the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Southeast Asia.

The Navy countered the offensive on land, at sea, and in the skies. On land, the SEALs provided a rapid response capability during the initial attacks. From the ocean, surface ships supported ground troops, reduced the North Vietnamese resupply capability, and provided direct fire on North Vietnamese forces. Their heavy rates of fire (some averaging 800 rounds per day) inflicted over 2,000 casualties. In February, ships such as the cruisers USS *Canberra* (CAG 2) and USS

Seabees from Mobile Construction Battalion 128 provide mortar illumination for Marine patrols and perimeter defense near Da Nang on February 3, 1968. (Naval History and Heritage Command)



Providence (CLG 6) destroyed targets in Hue City, enabling the recapture of this important objective. Additionally, amphibious task forces participated in nine operations in I Corps that defeated enemy forces near Hue.

In the skies over Vietnam, naval aviators flew more than 3,000 attack sorties supporting the besieged and outnumbered Marines at Khe Sanh during February and March 1968. Navy planes also targeted various choke points in enemy supply routes to disrupt the flow of forces and equipment into the South. These continuous strikes wreaked havoc on North Vietnamese troops and slowed the flow of enemy supplies to a trickle.

The Navy's logistics capability also made a difference. Naval Support Activity (NSA), Da Nang and outlying NSA detachments sustained U.S. and South Vietnamese allies during the offensive. Units pushed supplies and ammunition through to Marines holding

the DMZ, to troops fighting at Hue, and to Marines and Army troops near Duc Pho. While the battle for Hue raged, Seabees repaired two concrete bridges into the city. They even organized their own combat teams to silence enemy snipers.

Perhaps most well-known was Army-Navy Mobile Riverine Force's (MRF) use of mobility and firepower against the Viet Cong in the fight for control of the Mekong Delta. One of the fiercest fights occurred at Ben Tre on January 31, 1968. PBRs and other forces counterattacked the Viet Cong with heavy fire. By February 5, Soldiers helicoptered in, fought house-to-house, and secured the city. The battle resulted in 500 civilian deaths and 30,000 refugees. The MRF also helped to break the siege of Saigon, helping earn the nickname "the Fire Brigade of the Delta."

A Navy Armored Troop Carrier (ATC) lands Army 9th Division Soldiers to battle the Viet Cong in the Mekong Delta. (National Archives and Records Administration)



CONCLUSION



Vietnamization

In the wake of the Tet Offensive, a new presidential administration, and anti-war protests at home, American policy moved toward withdrawal from Vietnam. In 1969, the Nixon administration's program of Vietnamization transferred responsibility for the war to South Vietnam. Under ACTOV (Accelerated Turnover to the Vietnamese), the Navy turned over its river force, coastal combatant fleet, and logistic support establishment. When sufficiently trained, the South Vietnamese sailors and officers relieved their American counterparts, who then rotated back to the United States. The ACTOV program gave the Vietnamese Navy control of the inshore blockade, the high seas surface patrol, and the coastal radar network.



Members of Task Force 117 face the future Vietnamese crewmen during a ceremony transferring riverine craft to the Republic of Vietnam at Dong Tam in June 1969. (*National Archives and Records Administration*)

South Vietnamese Coastal Force Beret. The South Vietnamese Navy became the fifth largest Navy in the world by the end of the war. (*Hampton Roads Naval Museum*)



Naval Advisor Robert Deegan remembered, “[My job] was to help with a systematic approach to using the information being picked up by the 16 coastal radar stations on hilltops all along the 1200-mile coastline of Vietnam. . . . Before I arrived there, the coastal radar stations had been turned over to the South Vietnamese Navy, and they were struggling to get organized, to keep it running right. So it was a big challenge for the South Vietnamese Navy to undertake. I guess my bottom line at the end was a lot of respect for how the South Vietnamese Navy came along on it, and I left with a lot of respect for both the South Vietnamese Navy and, frankly, for the Vietnamese people in general.”





Radioman Third Class L M Bahm instructs South Vietnamese sailors on the maintenance of an Assault Support Patrol Boat's 20mm gun in 1969. (*National Archives and Records Administration*)

The War Goes On

Despite the draw-down of U.S. forces, the U.S. Navy fought hard to stem the Communist Easter Offensive that began on March 30, 1972. U.S. surface ships fired on North Vietnamese divisions attacking Hue. Flying an average of 4,000 attack sorties each month, naval aircraft helped halt the North Vietnamese advance. As part of Operation Linebacker, Navy and Air Force pilots bombed North Vietnamese targets and provided close-air support to South Vietnamese troops. In Operation Pocket Money, Navy planes also dropped magnetic-acoustic sea mines to block approaches to Haiphong, North Vietnam's chief port.



Aviation Ordnancemen Roblee and Williams from VA-94 load Mk 52 sea mines onto an A-7 Corsair II aboard USS *Coral Sea* (CVA 43). They are preparing the aircraft to take part in the Operation Pocket Money mining of Haiphong on May 9, 1972. (*National Archives and Records Administration*)



A-6 Intruders from VA-145 off USS *Ranger* (CVA 61) on one of the last bombing missions of the war in 1975. (*National Archives and Records Administration*)



F-4 pilot Mick Sumnick participated in Operation Pocket Money, remembering: “A neat [mission] we did was the re-mine of Haiphong Harbor. . . . There were a few A-6s and three F-4s. We ducked down to water level. We were down there at 100 feet or whatever. As we’re going along this island, we were looking up at the guns. They’re sitting up there pointed up. They had no idea we were there. . . . We got in there, did our thing, pickling off our mines, and then got out of there except for a SAM site that was on that Do Son Peninsula. That’s when they started shooting SAMs at us to no avail, thank God—because we were too low and too fast.”



Louise Mulligan’s husband, Jim, was a POW in Vietnam for seven years. She remembered his return and all the changes he experienced: “At first I made pretty much all the decisions because you have to realize, when they came home, so many things had changed tremendously. People had landed on the moon. When he left they were driving 45 miles an hour, and when he came back they were driving 55 and 60. He had to learn to drive again. . . . So it was an adjustment, but little things. You know, we’d go to the commissary—now, he never went in the commissary before, and when he came home he loved to go to the commissary and look at all the food. . . . He noticed little things, like, he said, ‘When did they start putting bread in bags?’ Well, you know, these things just evolve and you see them. . . . When he landed at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines, they asked him to go and speak, and he thought he was just speaking to the group of people that were there. He didn’t realize they had television all over the world, and we saw him. So there were a lot of things—a lot of changes.”

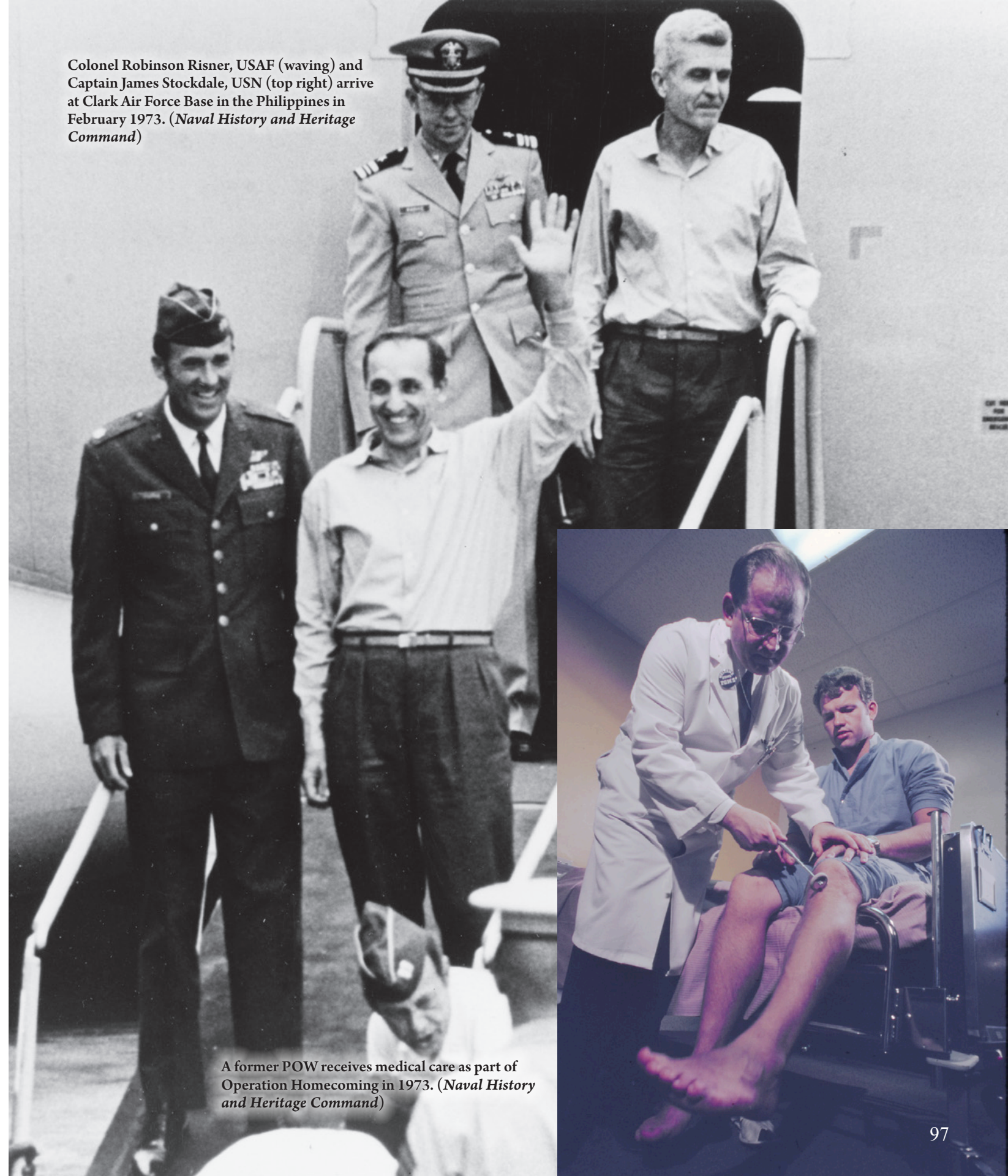
Operation Homecoming

On January 27, 1973, the combatants signed a cease-fire agreement in Paris. North Vietnam agreed to release all American prisoners of war in exchange for U.S. military withdrawal from South Vietnam and the U.S. Navy’s clearance of mines from North Vietnamese waters. During February and March, the U.S. repatriated 138 naval aviators. The men received a joyous welcome from families and friends at reception centers in the Pacific and the United States. Operation Homecoming provided extensive medical, psychological, and emotional support for the prisoners’ transition from captivity.



Rear Admiral James Bond Stockdale was a senior officer in the Prisoner of War camps of North Vietnam. He was singled out for torture and solitary confinement after leading the resistance to enemy captors. Stockdale’s motto for himself and his fellow POWs was, “Unity over self.” For his actions, he received the Medal of Honor in 1976. (*On loan from Naval History and Heritage Command*)

Colonel Robinson Risner, USAF (waving) and Captain James Stockdale, USN (top right) arrive at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines in February 1973. (*Naval History and Heritage Command*)



A former POW receives medical care as part of Operation Homecoming in 1973. (*Naval History and Heritage Command*)



Dave Meister, a crewman on the aircraft carrier USS *Midway* (CVA 41), remembered his part in Operation Frequent Wind fondly: “We had over 3,000 [evacuees aboard ship]. Who knows how getting those people out of Saigon affected the rest of their lives and their children’s lives, and their grandchildren’s lives. Certainly, some of them would have been in harm’s way, some of them may have been imprisoned by the North Vietnamese. We certainly got them to freedom, if nothing else, so I feel really great about that.”

South Vietnamese refugees fleeing by boat approach USS *Durham* (LKA 114) in 1975. Refugees would continue to flee Vietnam for years to come. (Naval History and Heritage Command)

Operation Frequent Wind

On March 10, 1975, Communist forces attacked and routed South Vietnamese troops. With the imminent loss of Saigon, the Navy prepared ships for the final evacuation of American and allied personnel from South Vietnam. On May 2, Task Force 76 and Military Sealift Command vessels headed for the Philippines and Guam with 50,000 seaborne refugees. The effort, called Operation Frequent Wind, ended the U.S. Navy’s role in the conflict. The ultimate North Vietnamese victory generated nearly 800,000 refugees, half of whom settled in the United States.



Boatswain's Mate Second Class Truman Elsbree cares for two small Vietnamese children aboard USS *Durham* (LKA 114) after they got separated from their mother during the evacuation in April 1975. (National Archives and Records Administration)

Vietnamese refugees pack the decks of the U.S. merchant ship *Pioneer Contender* in 1975. (Naval History and Heritage Command)





Wallace Green, a Sailor aboard *Kitty Hawk* during the riot, remembered his experience: “All of the African Americans were directed to the chow hall, and at that time, I didn’t know what was happening, what was going on, why that was happening or anything. Once we got there, you heard a lot of different stories. Things just kind of ballooned from that point. . . . I mean, it was almost like lighting a match, it just happened that fast. The next thing you know, they were going through the ship, and it was really terrible. It went from rioting to looting, and they were busting the stores that they had aboard the ship, they were going to the rack areas and taking the pipes off the walls and, you know, sticking them in the racks. Things got really bad, and the captain had called again for everyone to report off.”

Unrest at Sea

During the closing stages of the conflict, the U.S. Armed Forces experienced severe social unrest. Drug and alcohol usage in Southeast Asia attracted such attention that the Navy screened Sailors and Marines. Although fewer than 0.5% tested positive, anecdotal evidence suggested the true figure was much higher. In 1971, anti-war sentiment surfaced in the Navy with protests among crews of USS *Coral Sea* (CVA 43) and USS *Constellation* (CVA 64). In the fall of 1972, racial tensions led to violence on several ships including riots aboard the aircraft carrier USS *Kitty Hawk* (CVA 63) and the fleet oiler USS *Hassayampa* (AO 145).



Admiral Elmo Zumwalt speaks with the Human Relations Council in the Pacific in 1971. (*Naval History and Heritage Command*)



This is a Navy recruiting poster from 1972. As the draft declined and racial tensions rose, the U.S. Navy worked to recruit more African Americans into the service. (*Naval History and Heritage Command*)



On January 28, 1973, one day after the Paris Peace Accords were signed, ships of the Seventh Fleet cruise together in the South China Sea. (*National Archives and Records Administration*)

War’s End

U.S. and allied operational successes were undermined by shifting U.S. military and political strategic aims, the unstable South Vietnamese government, and the erosion of support in American society. Out of over 58,000 American deaths, the U.S. Navy suffered the loss of 1,631 men killed and 4,178 wounded during the course of the war. The South Vietnamese military suffered four times the number of American losses during the same period. South and North Vietnamese civilian losses may have been over half a million—a clear reflection of the uncompromising nature of this conflict. U.S. Navy Sailors demonstrated professional skill and dedication during the Vietnam War. Their service, part of a legacy dating from the creation of the Continental Navy on October 13, 1775, resonates with over 330,000 active duty Sailors serving today.

President Johnson established the Vietnam Service Medal in July 1965. The medal was awarded to all members of the armed forces who served in Vietnam between July 3, 1965, and March 28, 1973. (*Gift of Bob Ponton*)



Navy corpsman Danny Lliteras tried to make sense of his service in Vietnam, recalling: “I really believe in the great heart of the American military, you know: Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, Army. I think we try to do good when we’re there. . . . I know that everything I did over there—the guys that I knew—there were no atrocities that occurred. We tried to do the good things. We tried to remember that we were fighting *for* a people as much as we were fighting *against* the people, and how that was going to turn out, who was to know at the time?”



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