

Beverly Ann Deepe  
38, Vo Tanh  
Saigon, Vietnam.

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Mobile--page 1

(The U. S. Navy is again engaged in river warfare--for the first time since the American Civil War. This three-part report examines America's Rice Paddy Navy in Vietnam. This second article discusses the miniaturized ~~amphibious~~ amphibious operations conducted by the U. S. Mobile Riverine Force, including its Monitors of the Mekong Delta.).

ABOARD USS BENEWAH, SOUTH VIETNAM.

The upcoming American buildup of forces in the Mekong Delta is considered a matter of controversy in Washington; here it is considered a matter of fact.

Part of this American buildup--the details of which are <sup>Highly</sup> still classified--is known to include increasing the once-experimental U. S. Mobile Riverine Force--~~the first joint Navy Army river campaign since the American Civil War.~~ the first American river force since the defeat of the Confederacy.

<sup>itself</sup> ~~Com~~ Commissioned in September, 1966, this riverine force, notable for its once-in-a-century uniqueness, is also the ~~first time since the American Civil War~~ the first joint Navy-Army river <sup>Campaign</sup> ~~campaign~~ since the American Civil War. The Mobile Riverine Force has two

separate, but coordinated components: two "floating" battalions of the U. S. 9th Infantry Division (2000 soldiers) and the Navy's River Assault Flotilla One (1800 men), <sup>the mini-armada</sup> which taxis the Army troops into their amphibious assaults.

<sup>The USS Benewah is the</sup> flogship for ~~the~~ <sup>(USS)</sup> the Navy and Army Command. <sup>Had. Stagg</sup> ~~Had. Stagg~~ <sup>Subs</sup> ~~Subs~~ <sup>the</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>floating</sup> ~~floating~~ <sup>Home</sup> ~~Home~~ <sup>"F"</sup> ~~"F"~~ <sup>these</sup> ~~these~~ <sup>pieces</sup> ~~pieces~~ and ~~some~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~river~~ ~~crews~~ ~~had~~ ~~a~~ ~~dozen~~ ~~mobile~~ ~~berth~~ ~~for~~ ~~the~~ ~~river~~ ~~boats~~

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The USS Benewah is the flagship for the Navy and Army commands and staff sections, the "floating home" for 1,100 of these ~~for~~ officers and enlisted men, and a mobile berth for more than a dozen of the river assault boats. ~~Six~~ Besides the Benewah, the Navy has also provided four other ships, two to serve as floating barracks, one for repair work and one as a floating supply warehouse. ~~The next ship~~ One of the ~~barrack~~ barrack ships, for example, is ~~named~~ APL-27 26, an ~~ax~~ auxiliary ~~pero~~ personnel lighter without self-propulsion, which is affectionately named by its 800 ~~inhabi~~ residents as "the Green Apple." These ships, the only ones in the U. S. Navy painted "marine green" <sup>not</sup> ~~the only ones in the U.S. Navy painted "marine green" instead of "haze gray"~~ are praised for keeping the American troops "out of the hair" of the Vietnamese civilians and for preventing economic dislocation, inflation and political unrest that has worried land-based <sup>S</sup> commanders. This self-contained complex of ships is a mobile base area and moves from river to ~~if~~ river depending on where amphibious troops operations are being conducted.

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The future expansion of the Mobile Riverine Force ~~rests~~  
~~minimum~~ ~~is~~ ~~bei~~ has been assured by the ~~the~~ effectiveness of the units  
~~in a~~ ~~xi~~ past six-month experimental period of systematic operations  
in both the Mekong Delta and the Rung Sat ~~Speic~~ Special Zone, which  
lines the ocean-going shipping channel into Saigon. In this six-month  
period, 1847 Viet Cong have been killed compared to 184 American sailors  
and Army infantrymen. This 10 to 1 kill-ratio ~~is~~ is higher than any other  
American unit in Vietnam. During this period, the Navy's mobile base

~~mobile base has~~ moved and dropped anchor in seven different places  
from which the Army sprang off for ~~their~~ search-and-destroy raids.  
Fifteen major contacts with the Viet Cong have ~~been~~ made; more than  
2000 enemy bunkers and fortifications have ~~been~~ destroyed. Captured  
items include 450 weapons, 80,000 rounds of ammunition and 43 tons  
of supplies; ~~1847 Viet Cong have been killed compared to 184 American~~  
~~sailors and infantrymen. This 10 to 1 kill-ratio is~~ ~~has~~ higher  
~~than any other American unit in Vietnam. Captured enemy documents~~  
documents indicate some battered Viet Cong battalions, once 700-men  
strong, have been rendered 45 per cent effective. With supplies and  
morale running low, Viet Cong commanders have ordered their units  
to avoid contact with the Mobile Riverine Force. American officials,  
from Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara down to Vietnam commanders,  
are pleased with the results of the Mobile Riverine Force. ~~And,~~  
~~plans are underway to expand it dramatically.~~

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The tactical purpose of the Mobile Riverine Force is to conduct <sup>at River - borne, yet</sup> classical search-and-destroy infantry operation, of three or four <sup>Hard Hat</sup> days duration, in an attempt to crush the 37,000 Viet Cong <sup>organized in "Hard Hat"</sup> main-force ~~units~~ battalions in the Mekong Delta. These Viet Cong <sup>and beefed-up</sup> units, now being ~~repl~~ replenished with North Vietnamese ~~units~~ troopers, ~~of battalions and regiments. These units hibernated in fort-like base~~ areas, generally the low, wet ground of remote mangrove swamps or along isolated rivers. They maintained training centers for new recruits, recreation parks for battle-weary ones, combat hospitals built under dense foliage, sewing factories for making uniforms and even PX's filled with hair tonic and candy. Well-armed and <sup>ing</sup> overpower ~~front~~ for the meagre Vietnamese government units, ~~By~~ the Viet Cong ~~stream~~ ~~strengthen~~ caused military commanders to seek an elite American aqua-borne strike force to carry the war to the Communist's flooded backyard. If these Viet Cong hard-hat units could be smashed, the Viet C Vietnamese government troops could weck out the remaining guerrillas infesting the villages. Then, the <sup>recently</sup> ~~newly~~-elected government in Saigon could pacify the villages, bringing the people peace and a new standard of living by ~~a~~ building schools, bridges, irrigation projects and dispensaries.

By September, 1966, American commanders had the answer with the commissioning of the Mobile Riverine Force--~~the~~ first American river force since the ~~d4~~ defeat of the Confederacy. The force has two

Unlike the helicopter

The Navy, instead of supporting a traditional Iwo Jima-styled operation with titanic battleships and destroyers, <sup>initiated</sup> ~~was committed~~ in the Mekong Delta ~~to~~ amphibious warfare ~~■~~ whittled down to a Tom Thumb scale.

"Our amphibious operations are a miniature in time and scale," one officer explained. "The Navy carries in a strike force which assaults and searches for several days and then leaves. The force doesn't stay to occupy territory as ~~■~~ was done in Iwo Jima."

The Army troops in the Delta use the same classical infantry tactics on land, whether they are positioned there by boats, helicopters or trucks; with troops and boats they construct a box around a pocket of Viet Cong and then attempt to shrink the sides of the box until the enemy is caught.

However, without roads in the Delta, trucks were <sup>in the</sup> ~~advisable.~~ <sup>important</sup>

~~The advantage of using boats, instead of helicopters, is from the~~  
Army standpoint, assault boats and are more useful than helicopters, <sup>in the Swamps, Fuldin</sup>  
first because helicopters can not land troops in some of the mangrove swamps, second because the boats remain with the infantry troops throughout the operation and provide minute-to-minute ~~ground~~ firesupport, even at night, ~~from the ground, rather than from the a~~ <sup>vertically overhead.</sup> close-in <sup>horizontally</sup> near the ground troops, instead of ~~of overhead~~ from helicopters.

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20<sup>th</sup> Century river operations. The Navy designed a new mini-armored, ~~the~~ <sup>to conduct such operations. Its first</sup> ~~new kind of~~ <sup>in France</sup> ~~Salmon~~

The Navy, however, did not have to consult its Civil War  
history books to re-learn river doctrine and to revamp its equipment;  
it simply consulted the Vietnamese Navy. By a quirk of history, the  
Vietnamese sailors became the advisors to the world's most powerful  
Navy. shortly after World War II, ~~the U.S.~~ <sup>America</sup> left ~~to~~ <sup>in France</sup> the French  
a number of naval landing craft ~~among~~ amongst other war surplus goods.  
The French modified and armored them, then shipped them to Vietnam  
during the French Indo-China War nearly two decades ago. These armored  
vessels, some called Monitors, were organized into Naval Assault  
Divisions, similar to the American organization now. They were the only  
tactical innovation the French made in conducting the unconventional war.  
When the French lost the war, the flotilla was turned over to the fledging  
Vietnamese Navy, which kept them running for  $\frac{1}{2}$  years more by ingenuity  
than an adequacy of spare parts. When the American advisory effort began  
in earnest in 1962, the American sailors started to learn the secrets  
of inland water war from the Vietnamese.

~~(More)~~

Copying the Vietnamese river gunboats, American naval experts designed their "vest pocket navy." Their task force in miniature consisted of bantam battleships, ~~called Monitors~~, dwarfed destroyers, baby flagships and the armored troop transports. Most of the vessels were modifications of LCM's (Landing Craft, Mechanized), the workhorse of World War II invasions, which makes the vessels older than the majority of the sailors and soldiers who ride it. One World War II veteran sailor explained, "You remember the pictures of Iwo Jima with the big boats steaming in the distance and the little boats carrying troops from the big boats to the ~~beacher~~ beaches. Well, in the Delta we're fighting with only those little boats."

The gunfire of the boats in River Flotilla One squa quadruples the ~~organic~~ organic, minute-to-minute firepower of the two infantry battalions they carry into battle. The heavy gunboat of the flotilla is called the Monitor. The Civil War Monitor--the "cheesebox on a raft"--would hardly compare with its smaller latter-day version. The original flat-decked ironclad weighed 900 tons, was 172 feet long and carried a crew of 58. The 20th-century version weighs 85 tons, is 60 feet, 6 inches long and carries a crew of 11. The famed turret a century ago revolutionized warfare by turning its two eleven-inch guns, rather than having the entire boat be maneuvered; the 20th-century version has four turrets, containing a .40 mm. forward cannon, a .20 mm. cannon, a twin .50 and one .30 calibre machineguns. An .81 mm. mortar is housed in the bowels of the boat.✓

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A ~~six~~ communications module replaces the Monitor's ~~mortar~~ mortar pit in the baby flagship. For the armored troop carriers, a 40-man troop compartment replaces the mortar pit and the forward gun turret. Several troop carriers have added a small helicopter pad, ~~to~~ the size of two ping-pong tables, above the troop level; sailors refer to this craft as the smallest aircraft carrier in the world. The newest boat in the flotilla—built especially for Vietnam—is the Assault Support Patrol Boat (ASPB), a 50-foot dwarfed destroyer designed to escort the slower troop-carriers and to provide counter-measures against enemy mines.

Unlike the Vietnamese gunboats, the American versions have a grating of trigger armor—like bars on a jail window—over the vulnerable portions of the boat. This causes the Viet Cong ~~recoil~~ recoilless rifles <sup>Rounds</sup> to point-detonate harmlessly on the outside of the vessel rather than piercing the armor and throwing pellets over the troops inside. A four-inch ring of ~~styrofoam~~ styrofoam was also added along the waterline to absorb the heat and pellets of Viet Cong weaponry. Other innovations for the Mobile Riverine Force includes the only waterborne <sup>artillery</sup> ~~battl~~ battalion in the world, which the Army invented when it has yet to find any solid river bank on which to drive ~~their~~ <sup>its two six-gun batteries & truck-</sup> truck-towed batteries.

*towed. 105-mm. Howitzer.*  
*(Here)*



The Navy relied heavily on Vietnamese experience, not only in boat design, but also in river tactics and lessons learned. In the United States, a ~~Tiet~~ <sup>H. S. H</sup> Vietnamese lecturer taught the sailors about the expected problems of the muddy water war. Before the American boats arrived in Vietnam, the Vietnamese loaned the U. S. Navy their own vessels—a sort of lend-lease in reverse. In Vietnam, American sailors fought, lived and worked with Vietnamese river crews for two weeks, before starting to operate separately.

"I got a world of information from the Vietnamese commander I accompanied," one American officer explained. "He told me how the Viet Cong ambush and where they ambush; how and where they may mine you. I learned that sometimes the Viet Cong let you pass by three or a four times on the river, but they zap you the fifth time. I learned to expect the unexpected everywhere."

Another senior Naval commander explained, "The American sailors, who had never sailed rivers in wartime, learned from the Vietnamese how to make the rivers work for them, not against them, how to handle the boats, learned the seamanship of tides and currents, the ways of the ~~roads, ~~roads~~ waterways~~ waterways and the lore of the rivers."

~~(None)~~

The Mobile Riverine Force is as coordinated as during the American Civil War when the Army and Navy were working together "like <sup>two</sup> blades of a pair of shears."

"Everything we do the Army is coordinated and enmeshed," one senior Naval officer explained. "The Army wouldn't exist here without the Navy and the Navy would have no purpose without the Army."

Or, in the more earthy language of a young seaman, which the soldiers call "swabbies": "The Doggies (Army) are happy with the good food, clean sheets and hot showers the Navy supplies. And we sailors watch the Army marching up to its neck in mud and think 'Thank God, ~~we~~ we're in the Navy'."

Yet, the Mobile Riverine Force breaks one cardinal 20th century military principle--unity of command. No one ~~is~~ o commander calls the shots throughout the operations.

"The unity of command principle is completely violated," one senior Army officer explained. "There are two commands in this force. There's no operational control for the whole force. ~~The Army plans the~~ ~~operation and then we ask the Navy if they will support~~ ~~us. So far, the Navy has always said yes. I don't know what will happen if it ever says no--then something has to give."~~ The Army plans the sceme o scheme of maneuver for the operation and then we ask the Navy if they will support us. So far, the Navy has always said yes. I don't know what will happen if it ever says no--then something has to give."

This 20th-century Army-Navy marriage produced some of the zaniest mad-ventures in recent military history. While all American ~~si~~ sailors and soldiers spoke English, they spoke different technical dialects. Ship signs had to re-painted in both vocabularies and terminologies defined: bow (front of the ship), passageway (hall), galley (mess hall), scuttlebutt (water fountain), overhead (ceiling), bulkhead (wall). Incoming Army officers were given orientation briefings on Naval wardroom etiquette: no discussion of women or politics and don't sit down before the ship's ~~at~~ captain. Considering itself a "gentleman's service," the Navy quietly persuaded the infantrymen to "hose down" the mud from their fatigues and boots before boarding the ships. This ~~was~~ ~~gar~~ gradually extended to include an Army officer searching the infantrymen for live ammunition before ~~floating~~ boarding the ~~barracks,~~ ships, a necessity dramatized when a shock-up startled sailor found an Army grenade in the ship's washing machine. A common complaint among the Army troopers was they could not drink beer on the Navy ships--a traditional regulation on commissioned vessels. An inter-service compromise~~ed~~, however, lead to a monthly beer party on the off-ship, non-commissioned Navy pontoons--with the Army soldiers being issued Army beer and the sailors, in a separate line, receiving Navy-issued beer.

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Humorous incidents and surprises were often the order of the day. One Naval vessel was thrown into a turmoil when the crew discovered a cobra aboard — and it survived for two days as the Navy attempted to freeze it, gas it and smoke it out with a fire extinguisher. At least one Army ground commander was heard to request over the radio: "Request permission to kill a V.C. crocodile." The reply: "Permission granted if you can determine it's V.C." (It wasn't killed.) Soldiers began to respect skin-piercing red ants, which they reported to be "Viet Cong indoctrinated." The Army troopers started carrying cigarettes, pipes, Bibles and maps in their helmets in order to keep them dry as they foraged swamps and streams. Some soldiers, when rivertops covered their helmets, learned to hold their breath and walk along the river bottom until they rose on the other side. Non-swimmers blew up their rubber air mattresses <sup>And</sup> ~~had~~ paddled themselves across the river, along with the squad's ammunition. Frequently, soldiers had to use ropes or sticks to pull their buddies out of the chest-deep rice paddies; one G.I. had to be retrieved by grabbing hold of a helicopter skid.

~~(more)~~

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January 31, 1968

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(The U. S. Navy is again involved in river warfare--  
for the first time since the American Civil War. This three-part  
report examines America's Rice Paddy Navy in South Vietnam. This  
last article describes the ~~unparalleled~~ unparalleled patrolling operation,  
called Game Warden, conducted ~~xxx~~ by the crews of the "Unsinkable  
River ~~Dragones~~ Dragons").

Binh Thuy, South Vietnam

~~The remarkably successful operation Game W~~

American "little boat" patrolling along the major fingers  
of the Mekong River is unprecedented in the annals of U. S. Navy Naval  
history.

For the first time in the ~~41~~<sup>193</sup>-year ~~it's~~ its 193-year  
history, American Naval forces are conducting inland "muddy-water"  
patrolling in nose-to-nose combat with its enemy forces.

The operation, codenamed Game Warden, is designed  
to block Viet Cong movement of men and supplies across the major  
branches of the Mekong Re River. The operation ~~conduce~~ conducted

for the past 21 months by 120 rivercraft has been  
deemed successful enough to expand its size to include  
hand the clock.  
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*The operation Game Warden is conducted by U.S. Navy's ~~task~~ 1,500-man Task Force 116 with Headquarters at Benh Thuy on the outskirts of Cu Tzu, the Capital of the Mekong Delta and South Vietnam's second most populous city.*

Even America's last river war, in the conflict between the States conflict, during the Civil War a century ago, did not see river patrolli inland patrolling of such magnitude and energy. The battle of the Mississippi River involved conventional naval tactics of overpowering Confederate forts and ~~defeating Confederate forts also~~ and installations along the river banks, and once ~~this~~ these were defeated, to control ~~the~~ ~~die~~ wide ~~es~~ expanses of the river until the next fort could be over-run. This Mississippi River operation, comparable to the tactical innovation of the Mobile Riverine Force in Vietnam, ~~was~~ thus conventional in nature. Operation Game Warden, is, however, more counter-insurgency in nature, with emphasis on "un-spinning" Viet Cong supplies ~~for the local population.~~ from the local population.

66-7  
 The story of America's muddy water war in Vietnam began in 1965. When American ground troops marched into the jungled areas north of Saigon, the Navy was ordered to survey the problems of operating in the riverine environment south of Saigon--the second battleground. Here, in the famed Mekong Delta, was a new world for the Navy as well as for American ground-pounding Army troops.

But, there was more water than ground in the Delta. The mighty Mekong River, one of the longest rivers in the world, rises 2800 miles away along the mountain slopes of Tibet, flounders through or between the countries of South Asia, until, in South Vietnam, it fans out into a lacework of tributaries, estuaries, <sup>And</sup> riverlets and empties into the South China Sea. It forms en route one of the richest ricebowls in the world, producing livelihood for half of South Vietnam's population. American sailors call this brown lifeline "the Mississippi of South East Asia;" the Vietnamese call it Cuu Long--the nine-headed dragon. Waterways rather than roads are the chief means of transport; 5000 miles of navigable inland waterways ~~is~~ finger through the area, compared to 1200 miles of once-upon-a-time roads, now mostly cut, mined or excavated by the Viet Cong.

(More)

*Handwritten notes in red ink:*  
 Right line -  
 Cuu Long  
 A dragon boat  
 Mekong  
 Phnom Penh  
 Saigon  
 Hanoi  
 The Mekong

The Delta was a nightmare for military tacticians. Trucking troops to battle was rarely possible. The high rice dikes hindered the use of ~~the~~ the "swimming tank"<sup>S</sup>--the black, squat M-113 armored personnel carriers. Helicopters could ferry troops to the battlefield, but could not provide day-and-night heavy fire support. Artillery had to be placed on solid high ground--often too far away to cover troops on the march. Even worse, some military camps simply floated away during the flood times, when the snows of Tibet melted and gushed southward. American Special Forces and their Vietnamese counterparts had to perform drastic engineering feats to save their base camps sprinkled throughout the Delta. Thousands of empty oil drums were dumped from low-flying aircraft and the Special Forces built their radio shacks and barracks to float on the bobbing containers. In some camps, the buildings floated, so that as the water rose, so did the buildings. But, this required too many oil drums. In other camps, they constructed their buildings so that only the floors floated; as the water rose, the furniture, men and rats all moved closer and closer to the ceiling. Their mortar pits and artillery needed more stable platforms, so these were placed inside giant upright cement cylinders. <sup>its</sup> One Green Beret team built two-story thatch homes for the dependents of their Vietnamese irregulars. But, because Vietnamese babies do not wear diapers, the families living on the first floor became increasingly damp and angry. So, the Americans built more houses, letting one family live on the first floor most of the year, but moving them up to the second floor when the floods arrived.

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*Candy*  
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"I was born in the Louisiana bayoux," one Special Forces commander, a Negro captain, told me as he stared at his triangular island-camp surrounded by marshland. "But I left there twelve years ago. I had to come to Vietnam to find Louisiana again."

*PBR: Nightmare unit # new dreamboat, The Sailors*  
*of pitomately call the "Kram-Kable River Dragon." These are the*  
By April, 1966, the Navy had <sup>*partially*</sup> answered ~~part of this~~ <sup>*part*</sup> enormous Delta problem. The answer was the PBR -- patrol boat, river. The 31-foot fiberglass boat, heavily armed and carrying a four-man crew, is a souped-up carbon copy of the \$16,000 cabin cruisers which have delighted water skiing enthusiasts in Puget Sound and Miami Bay. But, the vessel costs the Navy \$85,000, with twin 220-horsepower diesel engines, armor along the steering apparatus and special twin water jet pumps, replacing a propeller which would get tangled in river debris. As the American Civil War startled naval warriors with the advent of ironclads, tin-clads and even cotton-clads, the PBR revolutionized today's muddy water Navy with two common household products: fiberglass and styrofoam.

The fiberglass makes the boat half as heavy and expensive as steel -- and the sailors are delighted there is no rust to scrape off. The honeycombed styrofoam, commonly used for Christmas decorations, acts as flotation inside the boat. Both ingredients mean the boat is difficult to sink.

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"Here's the world's most powerful Navy fighting a war with 31-foot fiberglass boats," one sailor mused, as though the fact astonished even him. "But, I love this boat. The Viet Cong can shoot it to shreds, but the pieces will still float. It's a giant ping-pong ball."

Other sailors frequently recalled, "In the days of John Paul Jones, we said the Navy was made of wooden ships and iron men. Then we got iron ships and iron men. Now we've added plastic boats and steel men."

*Almost two years ago #*  
*initiated*  
~~started~~ 24-hour patrolling along 250 miles of the four main Mekong channels--the Ham Luong, Co Chien, Bassac and My Tho. The operation is officially named Game Warden, but some sailors refer to it as real-life Terry and the Pirates. The operation was designed to stabilize the four major fingers of the ~~the~~ Mekong, to erase Viet Cong tax collection and smuggling of war goods and to re-establish Vietnamese government control. ~~Navy officials believe they are succeeding and plan to increase soon the number of patrol boats to 200.~~ *its first* In 19 months of operation, the Game Warden crews have inspected 250,408 watercraft, *And* detained 9,460 persons for improper identification; the Viet Cong have suffered 1,226 boats destroyed or captured, 1254 guerrillas killed and 308 fortifications ~~damage~~ damaged or destroyed.

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Initially, the Navy crews suffered nautical headaches galore. Viet Cong river barricades, made of coconut tree logs and mud, had to be blown up. The crews inherited old French charts and Army ground maps, neither of which showed sandbars <sup>that</sup> ~~which~~ could mysteriously appear in the middle of the main channel one day but be gone the next. One officer grounded his boat—"there was enough land on all sides of the vessel to play football"—one enlisted man laughed; the boat had to wait ten hours for the tide to carry it out again. Many of the smaller streams of the Mekong had never been charted, or even named. So ~~Island No. 10,~~ <sup>And Island No. 10.</sup> Juliet Canal, Route 66, Highway 101, Purple Heart Alley, and Meiss's Mine were plotted on official charts, named after major firefights, humorous incidents, radio call signs or the first patrol officer to transit the stream.

\* Americans in Vietnam often use the Vietnamese expression "Number 10" to describe something bad, as distinct from "Number 1," which is a top. In this case, Island No. 10 is the nickname of Dung Island at the mouth of the Bassac River, where the PBR's have had numerous firefights with the Viet Cong. The nickname is unrelated to the American Civil War island-battleground of the same name, which was a key Confederate defense in the Mississippi River. After weeks of siege and bombardment, Island No. 10 fell on April 7, 1862, and led to the fall of New Orleans 18 days later. The Mississippi River has since washed Island No. 10 into oblivion.)

At first, the Vietnamese river people were terrified of the PBR's, calling them "Little Green Monsters," or the "River Dragon." Intelligence information gleaned from the people was scarce. But the 1500 sailors, who proudly wear the black berets, had been taught two weeks of Vietnamese language before leaving the United States. Gradually, they struck up "how's the fishing" conversations with the river villagers.

"We started handing out little plastic buckets painted in the yellow-and-red Vietnamese government colors," EN2 Charles Cox, Sr., of Los Angeles recalled. "Each bucket contained soap, ~~two~~ towels, fish hooks, needles, thread and aspirins. ~~Soon~~ Suddenly, the sampans came running up and down the river swarming all over to get the buckets."

EN2 Cox, a 42-year-old<sup>d</sup> veteran of World War II and Korea, explained, "Soon we were making friends on the river. I could pick the day the old gray-bearded farmer from the island would be going to market. In four months, we knew most of the water taxi drivers on the river. I remember one guy we kept asking if he'd seen any V. C.; we knew his neighborhood was loaded with them, but he'd say nothing. Then, one day he took his wife to the hospital with grenade fragments sprayed over her back. The V. C. had stored a hand grenade in their garden and as his wife was hoeing, the grenade exploded. Not only did it injure his wife—but the V. C. wanted to charge him 700 piastres (\$7) for the grenade. He was furious and after that, he started to tell us alot."

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As the PBR's were often the only contact with the outside world for many river hamlets, the sailors began taking flares, grenades and ammo to the isolated outposts and to rush to their rescue when under Viet Cong attack. (A favorite Communist tactic was not only to stomp a defeated outpost into the ground, but also to add insult to injury by digging up the outpost and dumping the dirt into the river, leaving only a water-filled crater. Sometimes the Viet Cong would string the heads of government soldiers on the barbed wire perimeter in full view of all boat-passers.) Then, the river people began to ask the PBR's for medical evacuations (one baby was born on one boat) and the sailors started to transport a medical corpsman to the villages. They also supplied blackboards, books and cement for schools that had fallen into disrepair. Some "adopted" children in outposts, giving them dolls sent by families in the United States. Children with hairlips were sent to American plastic surgeons and were mended. C-rations (called Sea-Rats by the sailors) were liberally distributed to mal-nourished fishermen. Within months, the PBR's had made friends along the Mekong.

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Systematically, the combat sailors, aided by Vietnamese policemen, began searching for Viet Cong contraband and smuggled war materials. Under the false floor boards of sampans, they found weapons and large quantities of rice. (One sailor also found a shark). Under the U-shaped, palm-leaf roofs of sampans they found rifles. One woman was found ~~sterri~~ steering a barge-ful of 1000 nuoc nam jars; 975 were filled with the evil-smelling fish sauce; 25 contained assorted antibiotics. Other medicines were found in babies diapers or inside loaves of bread. Hand grenades in waterproofed sacks were found attached to the underside of barges; the sailors began using effective metal detectors. They requested a Vietnamese police-woman to accompany them to search the ~~2~~ female passengers, who hid medicines in their blouses. Viet Cong tax receipts, reading, "Your money is helping to kill Americans," were found in youngsters' coloring books. The ~~2~~ sailors destroyed and disproved ~~Viet Cong~~ <sup>Communist</sup> signs along the river banks reading, "The Viet Cong cross the river here and the patrol boats can not stop us."

(More)

Each bloody firefight with the Viet Cong gradually shrank the coffers of Communist tax collectors. Along the Ham Luong River, villagers no longer had to ~~pay~~ pay 2 100,000 ~~piate~~ piastres (\$1000) in Viet Cong taxes, but as one sailor observed, "we had a firefight every day ~~for~~ for four months to stop that." In appreciation, the river people began to stop the PBR's and give the sailors bananas, pineapples and other exotic tropical fruit. Motorized sampan owners wrote the U. S. Naval commander a letter saying, "Since the day the PBR's arrived on the Ham Luong river River, the heartless V. C. actions were put to an end. For example, before the PBR's arrived, the owner of the Hung Phat motorized sampan was captured and ~~liquidated~~ liquidated by the V. C. and a number of other owners were forced to witness the execution. Now these ~~atrocious~~ atrocities have ceased."

Firefights between PBR's and Viet Cong hidden on the river banks were common; often, initially, one occurred every hour. During <sup>18</sup> ~~a 18~~-month period, one sailor was <sup>17</sup> 289 firefights. Last year the boat crews suffered 23 per cent casualties; some sailors were wounded three times, but refused to leave the war zone as they could have. In the trees, the Viet Cong hung claymore mines, which splattered ~~the~~ the crews with king-size shotgun pellets. One ~~recoil~~ recoilless rifle round squarely hit one boat in the engine, killing two ~~crew~~ crew members and <sup>4</sup> flipping the remaining two into the air. Intelligence reports indicate the two landed in the water, swam ashore and were captured by the Viet Cong, who paraded them around the remote villages like cattle.

(More)

EN2 Cox, who has extended in Vietnam to serve 18 months, explained the increasing measure of success of the black-beret sailors:

"When our patrols first started in 1966, the Viet Cong had wide open control of the main rivers. At first they would fight us from their sampans, but they soon found the PBR's could run and shoot faster. Then they started to signal across the rivers with lights when the PBR's weren't around, but we picked up the movement on our radar. After that, they moved in a security company on each side of the river to protect their crossings and to divert the PBR's attention with a firefight. That also failed. Now they just sneak across in one or two sampans and move like the underground railroad did in the Civil War. That's the stage things are now. We're just patrolmen on a highway."

During the past 18 months, the boat captained by EN2 Cox, a husky Negro, took 60 hits--a near-record in the Delta. He captained PBR-109,

~~the historic H James "Little Boat" number used in World War.~~

a "Little Boat" number, which James ~~for World War~~ James ~~when~~ John F. Kennedy become President &



Vietnam ~~is~~ ~~the~~

branches of the Mekong River.

Now ~~there~~ more and more  
under their control, the

"Unsinkable River Dragons"  
are beginning to operate

increasingly along the smaller  
streams and canals. This success

for more difficult and

dangerous area of operation  
will in part determine ~~the~~

if the South Vietnamese government  
can re-establish its control over  
its citizenry in the Mekong  
Delta, where half the population

lives.

As more and more American troops enter Vietnam's Delta  
war, they will follow the river-borne concept laid down by America's  
Rice Paddy Navy. This mini-Navy, alongside the world's gigantic  
nuclear-powered ships, has already proved <sup>Dominicant</sup> worthy of the words written  
by President Lincoln during <sup>America's</sup> the last river war:

"Nor must Uncle Sam's web feet be forgotten. At all the  
watery margins they have been present. Not only on the deep sea,  
the broad bay, the rapid river, but also up the narrow muddy bayou, and  
wherever the ground was a little damp, they have been and made their  
tracks."