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By April, 1966, the Navy had solved part of the delta problem-- the problem of Viet Cong tax collection and free movement of men, weapons and ~~xx~~ rice across the major fingers of the Mekong River. The answer was the PBR--patrol boat, river. The 31-foot fiberglass boat is a carbon copy of a \$16,000 cabin cruiser used by water skiing enthusiasts in Pudget Sound or Miana Bay. With a zoomed up 220-hp diesel engine, special armament, special water jet pumps (a propeller would get stuck in the mud or tangle in debris), the vessel is worth \$85,000 to the Navy. As the Monitor and Merrimac revolutionized naval warfare with the iron hull, the PBR has revolutionized the new navy with two common 20th century household products: fiberglass and styrofoam. The fiberglass makes the boat ~~lighter than aluminum~~ half as heavy and expensive as steel--and the sailors are delighted they don't have to scrape off rust. The honeycombed styrofoam, commonly used for Christmas decorations, is used for ballast and flotation; both ingredients mean the boat can not be sunk. A Viet Cong recoilless rifle round will go straight through the styrofoam--in one side and out the other, leaving a 18 inch tunnel--but the material is so soft the shell will not blast off.

"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. It's a giant ping pong ball. No matter what happens, it won't sink. The Viet Cong can shoot it to shreds, but the pieces will still float." (One inquisitive sailor, in fact, thought he would experiment by replacing styrofoam in the boats with ping pong balls. He ordered the balls and they arrived in Saigon--one million of them--but the experiment was never carried out.

Like Indians on a cloverleaf warpath, the Navy launched 150 of these fast, heavily armed boats for 24-hour patrolling along 250 miles of the main Mekong channels. The Operation, called Game Warden, was planned to stabilize the four major fingers of the Mekong, to erase the Viet Cong tax collection and smuggling of troops and war goods and to re-establish the Vietnamese government control. Navy officials believe they have succeeded, and plan ~~xx~~ to increase soon the number of patrol boats to 200.

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At first the Vietnamese river population was terrified of the boats, calling them the "Little Green Monsters," or the "River Dragon." Intelligence information from the people was scarce. The Navy was using old French charts and Army maps--and they soon learned a sandbar could mysteriously appear in the middle of the main channel one day, but be gone the next. (One officer grounded his boat on a sandbar--"there was enough sand on all sides of the boat to play football"--one enlisted man laughed. The boat waited ten hours for the tide to carry it out again). Many of the smaller streams off the Mekong had never been charted, or even named, or else named with titles the sailors couldn't pronounce. So, the Juliet Canal, Route 66, Highway 101, Purple Heart Alley and Meiss's Mine were plotted on official charts, ~~nicknamed xxxxxxxxx~~ named after major firefights, humorous incidents, codecalls or the first patrol officer to transit the stream.

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The 1500 sailors in Operation Game Warden, who proudly wear the black berets, have been taught two weeks of Vietnamese language before leaving the U. S. They struck up "how's the fishgng" conversations with the river people. "We started handing out little plastic buckets painted in the yellow and red Vietnamese government colors," EN2 Charles Cox, Sr., of Los Angles recalled. "Each bucket contained soap, towels, fish hocks, meedles, thread and aspirins. Soon the same pans came running up and down the river swarming all over to get the buckets."

EN2 Cox, a 42-year-old veteran of World War II and Korea, continued: "Soon, we were making friends on the river. I could pick the day the old grey-bearded farmer would be going to market. In four months we knew most of the water taxi drivers on the river. I remember one day we kept asking if he had seen any Viet Cong; 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 all over her thighs. The VietCong had stored a hand grenade in their garden and as his wife was hoeing the grenade exploded. No only did it injury his wife—but the V. C. wanted to charge him 700 piastres (\$7) for the grenade. After that, he started to tell us alot."

As the PBR's were often the only contact with the outside world for many of the river villages people, the sailors began taking flares, grenandes and ammo to isolated outposts and to rush to its resuce when ~~it~~ ~~under~~ the V. C. attack. (A afvor favorite V. C. act was only to stomp the overrun outpost into the ground, but to add insult to injury by digging up the outposts and dumping the dirt into the canal, thus leaving only a water-filled crater. Sometimes they would string dead government soldiers the barbed wire perimeter of the post).

Automatically, the river people began to ask the PBR'd for medical evacuations (one baby was born on one boat) and the sailors began to transport and organize and transport a medical corpsman to the river villages. They supplied blackboards, books, cement for schools that had fallen into disrepair. Some "adopted" children in outposts and gave them dolls sent by their families in America; children when hairlips were to American plastic surgeons and mended; C-rations (called Sea Rats) were liberally distributed to mal-nourished fishermen.

The combat sailors began search for Viet Cong contraband and smuggled war materials. Under the false floor boards of sampans, they found weapons and large hidden quantities of rice (one sailor also found a shark). Under the U-shaped, palm-leaf roofs of a sampan they found rifles. One woman was found steering a barge with 1000 clay ~~jars~~ jars; 975 were filled with the evil smelling fish sauce; 25 contained assorted antibiotics. Other medicines were found in babies' diapers or loaves of bread. Hand grenades in waterproofed sacks were found attached to the underside of barges; the sailors began using effective metal detectors and they requested a Vietnamese policewoman (instead of man) to accompany them to search the female passengers. Viet Cong tax receipts, \$49 Receipts of Viet Cong taxes, reading \$50 for a barge of sugar, reading "Your money is helping kill Americans" were found in youngster's coloring books. The sailors destroyed Viet Cong signs ~~xxx~~ along the river banks, reading, for example, "The Viet Cong cross the river here and the patrol boats can not stop us."

But, after easy bloody firefight with the Viet Cong, the Communist taxes were reduced. Along one river, within one mile, the V. C. had set up two tax collection points; the first one took 60 per cent of the

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produce, the second also took 60 per cent of the remainder. Along the Ham Lon river, the river people no longer had to pay 1000 100,000 piastres (\$10,000) in Viet Cong taxes, but as one sailor observed, "We had a firefight every day 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 tropical fruit the Americans had never seen before.

The sailors had their frustrations too. One intelligence report indicated a junkload of pumpkins was carrying enough plastic explosive to blow up the leading delta city of Can Tho. All boats went into action--detained the junk and steered it into the regional Vietnamese political headquarters. The Vietnamese police unloaded the cargo--pumpkin by pumpkin. The task took them 5½ days--not one ounce of explosive was found.

Firefights between PBR's and Viet Cong on the river banks were common; often, initially, one occurred every hour. During an 18-month period, one sailor was in 289 firefights. Last year, the boat crews suffered 23 per cent casualties; some sailors were wounded three times, but refused their third Purple Heart to avoid being ordered out of the war zone. The Viet Cong hung claymore mines--which belch pellets like a shotgun--which splattered the boat crews. One recoilless rifle round squarely hit a boat engine, killing two of the crew and flipping the remaining two into the air. The two landed in the water, swam ashore and were captured by the Viet Cong, who paraded them barbarically through remote villages.

EN2 Cox, who had extended in Vietnam to 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 and could move across en masse in 15 or 20 sampans. They would fight us from the sampans, but they soon found the PBR's could run and shoot faster. Then they started to signal across the river with lights when the PBR's weren't around--but we picked them up on our radar. After that, they moved in a security company to protect the crossing and to divert the PBR's attention. That failed too; now they just sneak across ~~in~~ in 12- 1-2 sampans, and move like the underground railroad in the Civil War. That's the stage things are now. We're just patrolmen on a highway now.

"This isn't much like the American Civil War, where you had stand-off battles. The Viet Cong aren't standing and fighting now; they're firing and running."

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

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